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Sports in the World Today

Is the idea of sport running off the track? It would often seem so in an age of nationalism, of television viewing, and of the new breed of athletic prima donna. It looks like time to put the sportsmanship back in sports, and to rediscover the value of playing for pleasure. In this way people may ignite the team spirit of all mankind . . .

□ Sport has been defined as a game or physical exercise pursued for amusement or diversion; in other words, something one does just for fun.

Dr. Roger Bannister, the first man to run a mile in less than four minutes, recalls in his book *The First Four Minutes* the moment in his youth when he discovered "a new source of power and beauty" in running. This exhilarating moment comes to all athletically-inclined youths as they find that the human body has an energy and skill of its own which makes physical exertion a pleasure. At this stage competition is secondary. It may be assumed that Dr. Bannister would have continued to run even if he had never become a competitive athlete because of the delight he took in doing so.

The notion of sport for the sheer satisfaction of it was given full expression in the first Olympic Games in ancient Greece. But competition also entered into the picture. The Greeks placed a high value on competition, whether in music or drama, art or poetry, believing that it brought out the best in man.

So it was with sport. They believed that sporting contests should be used as a preparation for life in general. They held that man should learn to take pleasure in toil and struggle. To them there was a certain magic in victory which raised not only the victor but the defeated to a higher spiritual plane.

Like all Greek games, the original Olympics were an intrinsic part of a religious festival. The contestants were obliged to undergo a period of rigorous supervised physical and mental training. They competed for their own spiritual advancement. The only prizes were wreaths and garlands; these were truly amateur games.

In the course of time, however, professionalism crept in. Handsome prizes in money or kind were offered. The Olympic champion learned to put a price on his prowess. He received adulation and extraordinary benefits from the city he represented in the games.

As a result the idea of sport for its own sake gave way to an over-emphasis on competition. The all-round athlete was displaced by the specialist who concentrated all his faculties on one activity. The competitors became out-and-out professionals with no other occupation. The amateur who played for fun had no place in the games.

When he revived the Olympics in 1896, Baron de Coubertin of France also strove to revive amateurism. He opposed the emphasis on victory. "The important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part. The essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well," he said.

The Baron's guiding hope was to foster goodwill among men of various nations. Every four years his modern Olympics begin with hymns to that

hope. But they are soon drowned out by the discord of nationalism, which has become almost a religion in many parts of the world.

The whole business of huge state apparatuses, each dedicated to piling up numbers of gold medals opposite a nation's name, would have made Baron de Coubertin shudder. It is instructive to recall where it all began: in Berlin in 1936.

The story of those Olympic Games, at which Jesse Owens and other Americans destroyed Hitler's arrogant racialist dogma under his very nose, scarcely needs retelling. The significant fact of history is that it was in Hitler's Germany that the rigmarole of national flags and anthems was imposed on de Coubertin's sane, humanistic, anti-jingoist scheme of things.

The games of politics threaten to overshadow the games themselves

The Olympic Games have retained this Nazi-inspired frightfulness ever since. In such an atmosphere the games of nationalistic politics played on the periphery have come close to overshadowing the athletic events. The Soviet Union did not participate in the Olympics until 1952 for political reasons. At the very next games other teams withdrew to protest either the Soviet invasion of Hungary or the invasion of Egypt by Britain, France and Israel. Similar boycotts have plagued every succeeding Olympiad.

Another Olympiad is coming up in Moscow in 1980, and there is little chance that it will not bring more of the same. Sport has followed a predictable path in the host nation. In addition to state-supervised calisthenics to keep the workers healthy, competitive sport in the Soviet Union is organized as a state venture. The government is intent on developing athletes of international calibre who will win victories, set records and collect trophies for the greater glory of the Soviet system, as if this would somehow prove its superiority over the other political beliefs.

The Russians are not, of course, the only ones to equate success in sport with local or national pride. Sometimes this can be healthy. When the city of Washington's professional basketball team won the Eastern championship of the National Basketball Association a few months ago, James Reston wrote in the *New York Times* that it was a sociological and psychological "happening" which restored a sense of worth to the community.

Success in sports often means more to the average citizen than success in international politics. The results of political policies are vague and slow in coming; in sporting events the outcome is final and definite at the end of the game. In politics these days there are plenty of fights but no heroes. Sports still produce heroes, even if they are surrounded by lawyers clamouring for greater rewards.

Sports have a way of strengthening local identity, and thus local pride, particularly when a community has a team that is winning. In Montreal, for example, people of different origins never feel closer together than when their mutual heroes, the Canadiens, are on their way to capturing another Stanley Cup.

As the cheering died, the country went back to the same problems

But what if the home team doesn't win? In this case the spirit of sporting competition can become badly distorted. Italy, in the midst of its worst economic and political crisis up to that time since World War II, suffered a grievous blow when its soccer team was eliminated from World Cup play in 1974. "What is there left?" a Rome bartender lamented. "The country is in a complete mess. The only thing we had to take our minds off it was the World Cup. And now that's finished."

Sports indeed may provide a distraction from life's woes, but that is all. After the latest World Cup the people of the host and winning nation, Argentina, embarked on a week-long binge in celebration, but when the cheering died, Argentina faced the same problems as before. It is unrealistic to attach national importance to winning games that should rightly be played and watched for fun.

What *is* important about sports on an international scale is that they provide an opportunity to promote understanding among the people of the competing nations. This brings us back to de Coubertin's lost ideal. It has been suggested that the International Olympic Committee exorcise Hitler's ghost and throw out all those flags and anthems; that it tell the world bluntly that playing up national medal scores in the media is an "un-Olympic" activity of which all concerned should be ashamed.

Such a system might help to put the sportsmanship back in sports. At the moment the sportsman or sportswoman appears to be on the list of endangered species. Indeed many athletes today do not seem to know what sportsmanship means.

The concept of sportsmanship was explicated by the famous nineteenth century English educator, Dr. Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby. Arnold said that a sportsman should be bound by a code of gentlemanly behaviour which transcended winning or losing; that players should never take unfair advantage of an opponent; that they must abide by the rules at all times.

Television has transformed the athlete into a mass entertainer

The British humourist Stephen Potter lightheartedly turned Arnold's theory of sportsmanship inside-out to create "gamesmanship", which the Oxford Dictionary defines as the "art or practice of winning games or other contests by psychological means rather than skill". Unfortunately Potter's clever jests are now being applied in all seriousness. Stratagems which represent the very opposite of fair play have become common practice. It would seem hard to argue that the uncivilized usages of gamesmanship are an improvement on sportsmanship. But some do make this argument on the grounds that any kind of behaviour whatever on the part of an athlete is justified by a desire to win.

A curious cult belief has grown up to the effect that the competitive spirit must necessarily override other human characteristics when games are played. An athlete may be childish, destructive, or positively savage, but his actions are popularly excused because he "wants so badly to win".

One sees this most vividly at present in professional tennis, in which some of the most gifted players display court-side manners which would have been judged aberrant behaviour a few years ago. They violate the standards of courtesy which have always been an essential element in the elegant style of the game.

The British journalist and historian Alistair Cooke summed up current trends in sports very neatly when he said that this was the age of the prima donna. One of the main effects of television on sport has been to give rise to the temperamental athlete-celebrity whose antics appeal to the lowest instincts of the crowd.

That crowd is inconceivably vast and growing. As work weeks shorten in the western world, more and more leisure time is spent watching sports on television. More than a billion people spread around the world saw the final game of this year's World Cup tournament. According to a recent report, the amount spent by television networks in the United States for rights to broadcast sports will rise by 1980 to over $1 billion a year.

A sizeable proportion of the bonanza from televised sports finds its way into the pockets of professional athletes. The wealth thus obtained has made them into a highly visible segment of the affluent society, in which success is measured not only by achievement, but by how much money one makes. Television has transformed competitive athletes into entertainers, as widely recognized as movie stars. Some of the more cynical (or perhaps merely the more realistic) athletes list their occupation as "entertainer". If the provision of entertainment calls for bizarre or antisocial behaviour, many players are only too glad to oblige.

Televised sports have also raised the threat that all but a relatively small elite of professionals will become spectators rather than participants in sporting activities. The word "sportsman" has come to mean someone who pays high prices for tickets to events. There is no more harm in watch-

ing paid athletes than there is in going to a play or a movie; in fact one may learn a great deal about a sport by observing the stars in action. But it should be clear that sport is not watching and watching is not sport.

The distinction between watchers and doers is vital to any attempt to raise the general standard of physical fitness in the television age. The sedentary habits of North Americans have become a matter of real social concern.

Lately, however, Canadians have taken it upon themselves to avert becoming "a nation of spectators" by adopting such activities as jogging, cycling, tennis and cross-country skiing. The best thing about this movement is that they are doing so because the exercise makes them feel better — and because it is fun.

Yet there is still a lack of adult participation in amateur team sports, compared with the time before television when every small town in Canada had a senior hockey team. Dr. Arnold of Rugby declared that team sports were a moral advance on individual sports since to play the former well is to co-operate fully with other members of the team.

His point was dramatized in a play by David Story called *The Changing Room* produced in London in the early 1970s. The play is an enthralling look at the pain and exultation of 22 men brought together for a rugby match. The lives of the characters revolve around the team. Why does it mean so much to them? Because the world outside the changing room is a cruel and incomprehensible place where life is difficult and pleasures are minimal. In the outside world every man is alone.

But not when he is with the team. On the field the players are never alone; they experience triumph and defeat together. These rugby players, with their muddied, cracked bodies, their snapping towels and their mutual jubilation, are struggling to hold on to a sense of humanity. They are struggling to bring a few hours of ordered innocence to their lives, and the great value of this feeling is that they share it with other human beings.

On the field you get to know how the other fellow feels

That is the essence of team sports at its best. The players put the team ahead of themselves. The game may be only to move a ball forward on a dirt field, but the task is accomplished together with unshackled joy.

The message of *The Changing Room* is one of harmony among men. And the message which sport can bring to the world is identical. We are constantly being reminded that the small planet on which we live is a global village. The problems which people of all nations face as the sum of mankind outweigh the problems they face in local or national groups.

Anyone who has played a sport knows how the other fellow feels, regardless of whether the other fellow is of a different race or creed or political persuasion. In playing a game one comes to realize the commonality of sweat and toil, of defeat and victory, and of the exhilaration of physical strain.

Nationalistic politics do violence to the spirit of sport in that they emphasize the differences between human beings of different national groups rather than what they have in common. It is one thing to take pride in one's countrymen; it is quite another to attempt to assert the superiority of one's countrymen over anybody else. The Olympic Games and other international sporting occasions have too long been used for the latter purpose. They should be used instead to promote the spirit of shared struggle, shared enjoyment and shared pride in human abilities. A realization of how much we all share would do much to build goodwill among mankind.

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