

The Comeback

Though historic and unprecedented, Lance Armstrong's sixth straight Tour de France victory last summer was no great shakes according to the Associated Press. In fact, when it came time to pick the year's top sports story, the man who shows little but the back of his yellow jersey to the world's best racers only mustered a sorry second in the voting. And even though most champions will tell you that it's harder to stay on top than it is to get there, it appears that watching a cancer survivor conquer one of the world's most demanding tests of endurance starts to become a little passé after a half-dozen times, Sheryl Crow's presence on the scene notwithstanding.

Fans prefer surprise and so the hands-down top story, snagging 15 times more first-place votes than Lance, was the World Series, where the Boston Red Sox finally shook the "Curse of the Bambino" to go all the way for the first time since 1918. And while snapping that 86-year drought would have been enough to grab the country's attention, the big news was not the World Series itself, but rather the American League playoff where the Sox overcame a 3-0 deficit to beat the Yankees 4-3, a feat never accomplished before in major-league baseball and a comeback that had millions of Americans tuned in to take part in the historical upset. Like any great story, we are not drawn so much to the ending as we are to the way it's told. In October of 2003 I happened to be in New York watching the final game of that year's Yankees/Red Sox series in a crowded bar, where, as Yankee Aaron Boone hit the winning homer, I braced myself for a manic eruption that never occurred. In a city where pennants are business as usual, the ensuing, polite applause sounded more like a symphony crowd between movements. A year later, when the Sox put the final nail in the coffin, I watched a Denver tavern, filled with people normally uninterested in baseball, explode into a riot of strangers hugging and kissing one another as if they all shared the winning lotto ticket.

As a grossly unaware sports fan and someone who watches very little, I can speak for a segment of the populace that looks in occasionally to witness the Seabiscuit phenomenon when it pops up in various contests. While true fans watch religiously, immersing themselves in statistics and informed predictions, the rest of us tend to other matters until we learn that there's sufficient drama somewhere to pique our interest. Although every sport has its signature plays, gorgeous surprises with catchy names like the hail mary, the alley oop and my favorite, the suicide squeeze, those moves come and go in a matter of seconds; and the possibility of seeing one is not enough to keep all of us engaged for the duration of a complete contest. Capturing widespread attention requires more than a few good plays. It needs a story, the kind that plays out over time in the sustained suspense of a comeback, a phenomenon to which pool lends itself particularly well.

Because of pool's nature, the comeback is always a possibility regardless of the gap between the leader and the trailing player. Since the pool player does not have to return the ball, or table as it were, after scoring in the way that say, football and basketball require, there is no real limit to the number of points that one player can score while the opponent must sit quietly and watch. Overcoming a hundred-point deficit to

win a game of straight pool for example is not uncommon among top players. While basketball compares roughly to straight pool in points scored, one would never see a team jump out to a hundred-point lead—the Harlem Globetrotters excluded of course—let alone witness another team overcoming such a margin. And unlike timed sports, the clock will never run out on the pool player who can decide to tighten the screws with safeties while waiting for the best opportunity to launch an offensive assault. By that same token, the player who is working on a comeback does not have to close the gap in one fell swoop, but can score points when they're available and then control the opponent's offensive opportunities with safety play. Contrast that with golf where the trailing player may go on a tear of birdies but can do nothing to stop the leader from keeping his lead by doing the same.

So with all of the great opportunities that pool affords for a comeback, how do we generate one when the situation calls for it? When asked how they did it, the Red Sox, responding as self-proclaimed idiots, maintained that they were too stupid to be intimidated by the gravity of their predicament. Doubtless that remark was delivered tongue in cheek, but perhaps we can examine its spirit for useful advice. No one should aspire to stupidity, yet there may be some wisdom beneath those words in the value of refusing to dwell on the score or lend too much weight to any situation before the contest is finished. Another way to look at a bleak deficit is that the lead does not have to belong to the leader but only happens to be in that person's hands right now as something to lose. The trailing player, who has yet to touch it, can view the lead in only one way, as something out there for the taking.

There's a lot of freedom available to the trailing player who can use it to break away from any pressure to win a game where the odds seem insurmountable. Arriving at the table with that kind of freedom allows the shooter to focus more sharply on playing, wholly removed from any expectations for winning. That's the state of mind we seek, one where we can float easily into a relaxed, natural tempo to perform what we know—pocketing balls, one at a time with no regard for results. There's far more pressure on the leading player who often senses the gravity of allowing a big lead to slip away, pressure that will push harder with each ball he watches his opponent sink. For the player making the come-from-behind bid, shooting the balls in one at a time without trying to match his opponent's heroics, while patiently making smart decisions, is critical to an effective comeback. Though it may seem unremarkable, answering a hundred-ball run with three 35's and three good safeties quietly shifts the lead and momentum the other way, usually toward a very sweet victory since few things in competitive sports compare to the satisfaction we feel after a great come-from-behind win. Maybe Lance Armstrong will catch on to that and come out for the first week of this year's race with a Maytag dryer strapped to his back.

