

Sportsmanship

Apart from a few anomalies like Eddie The Eagle, Anna Kournikova and that team that plays the Globetrotters every night, only winners become stars. And there's something very satisfying about watching our favorites destroy their opposition. But we want our heroes to be complete and we demand that, along with talent and prowess, they display what we call sportsmanship, which can be defined as the maturity to compete, win or lose, with grace. An athlete's overall comportment, or the lack of it, burns deep in fans' memories. Now, some eighty years after his heyday, when someone mentions Ty Cobb, one of baseball's all-time greatest players, we hear that he was a cheater and a racist, suggesting that history rates integrity above statistics.

Surely racism is not extinct but any athlete who might lean that way nowadays is well advised to keep it hidden from a public that will not tolerate it. Fuzzy Zoeller learned his lesson after cracking wise about fried chicken following Tiger Woods' '97 Masters victory. It sparked nationwide outrage and caused his biggest sponsor to dump him immediately. He thought he was making an innocent joke. We should see though that sports is a form of entertainment, a branch of show biz where appearances count for nearly everything. But, as our political standards evolve on that stage, our former regard for dignity may be washing down the drain. Though I never saw him compete, it's impossible for me to imagine Mosconi pumping his fist and shaking his booty after a victory. Ted Williams wouldn't tip his cap after hitting a home run while I would bet that most dentists these days do a touchdown dance after a routine molar extraction.

In our current, self-glorifying climate that kind of behavior is okay; otherwise we wouldn't cheer for such antics following the smallest achievements. Football games last four hours now because we have to watch the tackle dance, the interception dance and the fumble-recovery dance. It won't be long before the guy who holds the ball for the place kicker gets up to shake his groove thing after every extra point. When the American team erupted and trampled the 17th green at the '99 Ryder Cup, as the European player stood waiting to putt, it only confirmed the rest of the world's belief that we are a nation of inconsiderate slobs. Shameless gloating looks bad and that brings us to the essence of sportsmanship.

Appearances do matter; they count for quite a lot in fact. The way that we present ourselves in front of others usually leaves a stronger impact than the result of the encounter. It's the reason that we get dressed up to go to traffic court while knowing darn well that we're about to get burned. "If I'm going to take it in the shorts, at least I'll have some nice trousers around my ankles while it's happening."

When we assume sportsmanship we do something very important that's slipping rapidly from our culture. We show that our game, the institution to which we belong, is big, much bigger in fact than any one of us can ever be as an individual. And, win or lose, we demonstrate that, above all, we feel fortunate for the chance to compete in such a fine sport. We do that by acknowledging our opponents and congratulating them with

equal measures of grace and humility for either possible outcome. We don't bellyache about their good fortune and we don't rub their noses in ours. Sometimes that's a challenge.

What makes sportsmanship challenging is the way it occurs in such sharp contrast to the emotions that we summon to win. We know that winning does not proceed from going into competition with warm, fuzzy feelings for our opponents. No, we have to go in there with a selfish desire to destroy those people—in every way. I find, and I'm not the first to say this, that the right dose of good, old-fashioned hatred can be very useful. A lot of champions are known to possess a killer instinct, kind of a scary thought in literal terms, but we know what it means. For the duration of the match we suspend all empathy and play our hardest, homing in on their weaknesses, like the boxer who relentlessly dogs his opponent's bruised rib. We don't fret over the fact that the other guy will feel bad after losing in front of his wife, but feed on the knowledge that causing the loss will hurt him worse.

We have to manage the conflict between the pain that we want to inflict on opponents and the outward respect that we must show for them. Handling that effectively is not too difficult but can be a little tricky. The key is drawing a clear, intellectual division between the two ideas. The single pool match is a small, independent event that lives inside of a much larger framework called the game of pool. After the coin toss each one of us has an obligation to take ownership of the match and fight as hard as possible to win it. At the moment when the final ball falls in however, we have to release our grip because we are now back in the larger world of the game, which will never belong to any single player. When we step out of the match and into the game we must, especially in that critical first moment, assume a responsibility to honor the game and all of its players.

It's no coincidence that most champions are also great sportsmen. They understand that single matches come and go, just as they themselves will, but the game they love will always be there. Although it may be difficult sometimes to apprehend in a country that over emphasizes the individual, we always take our places in larger settings that will survive without us—our clubs, communities and society. Seeing ourselves as individual representatives of those groups works to make ourselves and the groups shine. We don't wear sweat pants to the opera; we don't murder our neighbors for their sneakers; and we don't behave as brats at pool tournaments. Nobody has more competitive mettle than Earl Strickland and, in order to chip away some of his bad rep, I want to recall something I once saw him do on TV. A few years ago in a close tournament final against Efren Reyes, Earl left a safety that Efren answered with a spectacular kick shot. When Efren pocketed the nine ball, Earl promptly jumped up, grabbed his opponent's hand and raised it over his head like a referee at the end of a boxing match. We saw a champion, too humble to raise his own hand, and the loser, another champion, rush up to do it for him. That's what we're talking about.

