

Creative Vision

“Some men see things as they are and say, ‘Why?’ I dream of things as they never were and say, ‘Why not?’”

For sheer self importance, it’s tough to beat sportswriters and their never-ending metaphors for life reflected in the “human drama of athletic competition.” So running across the above words in an old, Salon.com story about a hockey player was no real surprise. But when its writer, Steve Burgess, cites the Robert F. Kennedy quote and asserts, “Never mind what your teacher said—Bobby was talking about Wayne Gretzky,” attempting to describe the Great One’s vision while lamenting his retirement, he may be taking things a bit too far. For one, I’m pretty sure Kennedy was talking more in terms of moving our nation into an increasingly complex future, not scoring an overtime goal. And then perhaps more important, those famous words really belong to George Bernard Shaw, whom RFK credited whenever he ended a speech with them. So, along with the usual grandiloquence that comes with sports writing, sometimes we also get a little misinformation at no extra charge.

Maybe I shouldn’t be so harsh considering that I was a fully formed adult before learning that the music for “Dance of the Hours” comes from a 19th century, Italian opera, not Allan Sherman’s, “Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh.” Plus, the writer with the Gretzky assignment must find *something* weighty to say for the man who dominated his game in a way that nobody else in the history of team sports ever approached. When we see that it only took Gretzky slightly more than 10 seasons to set the all-time scoring record, surpassing numbers that Gordie Howe spent more than 30 pro seasons racking up, we must attribute his superiority to something beyond mere skill. And when we learn that, as a 10-year old, Gretzky led his peewee league one season with 378 goals in 60 games, squeaking past the second-place finisher in the scoring race by 338 goals, we can surmise that some people are born with mysterious talents. His admirers, who always remind us that he was not supposed to play in the NHL because he lacked speed, size and strength, talk about his ability to see what others couldn’t and be where others weren’t. On a web board that asks contributors what impressed them most about him, one fan writes, “It was like the rest of the world was on some perpetual tape delay, and Gretzky lived his whole life 4 seconds farther into the future than everyone else.” Another answers simply, “His vision.”

Pool’s answer to the Great One is Efrén Reyes, the topic of a nicely written story a few months back in the March issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, one of America’s oldest magazines. In that story, baseball writer and former pitcher, Pat Jordan, zeroes in on Reyes’s superior vision and the legendary mystique of the Magician. In addition to retelling the familiar story of his first visit to the U.S., posing as Cezar Morales in a Texas tournament, then staying for three more weeks and beating all comers, Jordan collects quotes from other professionals lauding Reyes and his game.

Johnny Archer says, “Efrén has more imagination and creativity than the rest of us. We’re more basic. He takes one glance and sees it all. He knows things we don’t.”

From Ralf Souquet, “He’s in a different league than the rest of us. He’s the greatest player who ever lived.”

When Earl Strickland weighs in with, “He’s the best I’ve ever seen,” I have to wonder if the readership of such a mainstream publication might imagine all that praise for Reyes coming from a humble group of kids quaking beneath him instead of a gang of deadly, competitive peers. In that sense it’s a little unfortunate that story appeared in such a popular magazine. Yet the writer lists the accomplishments and titles belonging to the other players, all top pros never otherwise known for humility. But their praise comes across as worship, and all points narrowly toward a unique vision that places Efen alone above the very best.

With creative vision established as the separating factor among sports’ absolute elite, one must ask why it’s so rare. And can we regular folks cultivate it to some degree? Well, I don’t believe that creativity is all that rare. But I do believe that artistry is not encouraged in the learning stages of most pursuits and is therefore not appreciated early on. Also I believe that many experienced teachers become too rigid in their methods and are no longer able to recognize the natural gifts a painter or musician can bring to a study that might appear as very empirical but in reality demands all types of thinking—a study such as pool.

Many artists say that creativity is something we must exercise, like a muscle, then practice like any skill. And we can do that on a pool table. Even though we’re trained to practice what we already know and to learn what we know we don’t know, we can spend a little time every day exploring what we don’t know we don’t know. Throw the cue ball and an object ball on the table and look at them. Now, pocket that ball in a way that you have never pocketed a ball with no worry that it’s too bizarre if you can imagine it. A two-rail-first, cross-side bank might be staring you right in the face. If you should happen to miss such an easy shot, allow the balls to stop rolling and absorb the outcome. It’s essential to experience what we do regardless of how it relates to our intentions. On one memorable occasion, after deliberately repeating a mistake made while practicing one shot, I discovered and learned a new shot, a powerful safety that I have never seen anyone else play or teach. Yet I know that I can’t be the only player on earth shooting it.

According to the stories, Gretzky and Reyes were left to themselves as young children, one skating alone for eight hours a day from the time he was three, and the other watching pool all day from the time he was five, then sleeping on a table every night for three years before taking his first shot. What crazy dreams wove through their imaginations with no grownups dictating a program? Who knows what we may find living in our own minds? And since we’re co-opting quotes, let’s remember the wisdom in Yogi Berra’s immortal words. “Baseball is ninety percent mental and the other half is physical.” Forget how it reads, he meant to say “pool.” And wasn’t it really Walt Whitman who said that?