

Adversity

As we strive to feel better about ourselves, most of us, from time to time, will practice the ancient art of looking down on others. Whenever things aren't going well or on those occasions when the rest of the world forgets what a grand and important job we're doing, it's time to heap a little scorn on someone else to confirm our superiority and prop ourselves up a bit. And it's not confined to religious and ethnic circles but can occur anywhere people gather in groups. I understand for example that skate boarders look down on roller bladers. Fly fishermen hold bait fishermen in such contempt that entire sections of rivers are kept off limits to those anglers who want to entice a trout with some real food. Picture a New-York-nightclub doorman standing streamside with red velvet ropes and big, fat fish frolicking behind him. In the billiards world, a lot of 3-cushion players scoff at pool's lack of elegance and the players who go with it. So where can pool players go for a downward peek at others? For me, the bar-table scene, with its herds of league players, had always provided an easy target and a nice dumping ground for a little derision.

My aversion to bar tables goes back pretty far but sprang less from snobbery than from a desire to be an obedient son after my father, an old-time snooker and straight-pool champ, advised me never to play for money on bar tables since they can make the worst players look good and thus even things up too much. Once I was old enough to go into bars and put my quarter up, he was vindicated as I saw how easy it is to lose on those little tables, regardless of the other player's skill. My later disrespect for leagues and their players developed unthinkingly from association.

Fortunately my elitist ways were finally changed as I recently enjoyed my first bar-table, league experience. And although its culmination with a very gratifying national team title may grab all the attention, the whole journey was an education with lessons learned every step of the way. My first surprise came on our opening night of weekly, league play when I saw how persistently bar-table 8 ball in the realm of skilled players can test one's nerves. Put simply, miss a shot and you lose. We should note that Slightly Competitive, the Women's Masters Champions, also played in our same Thursday-night league, where, after 18 weeks, we emerged on top by a whopping half a point. But, having to work so hard every week against the best local competition provided the necessary training for Las Vegas and almost 700 teams from around the world.

Naturally I learned a lot about collaboration and the dynamics at work among five individuals moving as one toward a goal. Since it was all new to me and I was pretty busy while it was happening, I cannot speak with authority on a recipe for a successful team. But I can share a couple of insights into the team game. The first difference I observed about team play is the added pressure that comes with each match. There's a kind of sympathetic pressure from immersing oneself in teammates' games on top of the extra pressure associated with visions of dogging it and letting down the team. Strangely, instead of mounting as the Vegas tournament progressed, both distinct pressures shrank continually with each successive match. Once I realized that my teammates would handle whatever they faced and that, if I screwed up, they would pick up any slack I might leave,

a great weight was lifted. In conversation afterwards we discovered that everyone felt much the same way. One of my teammates sums it up as a collective trust that gave each of us the freedom to take risks without worry. And from that freedom we built a tight cohesion that, according to a lot of comments from onlookers, stood out among all the teams.

On the last day of the tournament that unity was tested in a new way when we faced a team that brought more than skill to the match. Initially they seemed civilized enough until, after a neck-and-neck start, they turned surly and hit us with a salvo of sharking techniques that caught us off guard after three days in a tournament marked by consummate sportsmanship. It started small but built quickly to a crescendo that featured a chair thrown into the playing area while I was down on a shot. Puzzled by the sight of bouncing furniture, I wondered for a second how my pool match had gotten moved into Mike Tyson's living room.

Although I've written about sportsmanship and work to inspire it in students, I've never addressed the problem of how to deal with its absence. Maybe it arises too infrequently to occur as a fully formed topic. In a nutshell, when I see an opponent shift his focus from pool toward anger or juvenile tricks, I smile privately and stand confidently in the knowledge that his ultimate downfall is not far behind, an outcome that's almost a guarantee. But when I saw them pulling their crap on my friends and felt my own instant anger, I began to worry about how we would handle this as a team. I tried to assure everyone—and myself—that if those guys want to act like idiots, it's their business. Our job is to play pool. But it didn't seem like anyone heard me.

Maturity has its value and my doubts soon vanished as we all moved quietly into action, separately and calmly pouncing on their show of weakness with sharpened focus. Nobody seemed to hear my unnecessary words because everyone was already responding to the task at hand. Though I can't say for certain, I don't think the other team won another game from there. For sure we took control of a close match and turned it into a decisive rout, the usual result whenever someone expends too much energy trying to rattle an experienced player. Later I discussed the incident with a friend who has seen us compete and she offered this astute summation. She explained that the other team is also held tightly together, but not by a bond of freedom like ours. Pride and fear make up their glue and those defects are sure to eclipse talent and skill in the clutch.

Seeing the five of us move as one to take over that match confirmed for me that my method for dealing with jerks turns out to be *the* method. Once the psychological attack begins we must identify it as a last ditch effort to save a losing cause and pay it zero attention. That leaves them sitting there to wrestle with the compound problem of looking foolish on top of losing while we can tend freely to the business of running out.

