

Winning and Losing

OK, I've got to get this off my chest. It's a pet peeve of mine and has been for as long as I can remember. But rather than just jump into it I want to give you a couple of for instances that may be helpful in illustrating my point.

Imagine playing nine innings of baseball, two maybe three, hours in a tight, back and forth game. You have practiced and worked for years to get as good as you are. You're in the Major Leagues, the top of the top. You have given your best and so has the other team. You both played well and now it's done. Now suppose you had to go to your dugout and sit there until nine retirees (the judges) decide who won the game, which side played the best. Imagine that a bunch of folks who watch your sport for a living decided the outcome, not players, just watchers. In other words, what if the winner of a baseball game was determined by a vote?

It doesn't matter whether your talking about sixty minutes of football or forty eight minutes of basketball or five sets of tennis, if you had to take a seat at the finish of your game and wait for a bunch of judges (who may very well have never even played the game) to decide who was better, it would make you nuts, right? Picture the Twins standing along the edge of the infield after a game, hats off and towels around their necks, staring up at the scoreboard as it displayed 5.7, 5.8, 5.8, 5.7, 5.9 etc. etc.. Now the announcer (this is a home game) shouts "I can't believe it, the judges gave it to the Yankees, the Twins lose by three tenths of a point!" It would be preposterous wouldn't it? All that work just to find out that nine politically appointed hacks think the other team played better. Nonsense!

I guess you know where this is going. I have an issue with voting-based results in sports. Come to think of it I have an issue with voting based results in any competitive venue. Whether it's American Idol or the Uneven Bars, if the winner is determined by what the voters say, the results are bogus. Any pursuit (with the obvious exception of electoral politics which always works out for the best) in which the fate of the competitors is in the hands of voters or judges is baloney. Period. The whole concept is ridiculous.

That's why quantifiable scoring was invented. That's why humans figured out a long, long time ago to attach points, runs, distances, times and order of finish to their games. You see, when one can say with certainty that Olga ran the 400 meters one second faster than Gladys, you can safely say that Olga won. Pretty basic, huh? When Sidney jumps six centimeters further than Jan, Sidney wins. Simple! When Dale takes the checkered flag a car length ahead of Ricky guess who wins? Yup, Dale. Anything that doesn't have objective standards by which to determine a winner should not have a winner. Let me say that again. Winning and losing is for competitions that have self evident outcomes, goals, times, heights and all. If you can't measure the result in meters, minutes or points it's an exhibition not a competition.

So when Johnny is judged to have interpreted his music more lyrically than Vitaly, when Inga's is deemed to have twirled her ribbon more rhythmically than Chandra, when Nadia's floor exercise is seen as more in tune with contemporary standards than Liu's it means nothing, bupkus, nada, zilch, except for the fact that some grump from Greece likes Inga more than Chandra, John more than Vit and Nadia most of all.

But please understand, I think that figure skaters and gymnasts are some of the greatest athletes on the planet. They are in such shape and perform such feats as to be the stuff of wonder. There isn't a baseball player in either league who can compare with the best of the skaters in terms of pound for pound strength, flexibility or stamina. As for football, let me know the next time a three hundred pound lineman dies at the age of fifty and I'll tell you who was in better shape, the footballer or the gymnast. It's not that. It's not about who is the better athlete at all. It's about winning and losing.

We seem to need winning and losing in an event to tell us who was better. And what I'm saying is that we should get over it. Winning and losing is for sports with measurable outcomes, runs, times et al. The rest is show biz and exhibition. Who "won" the ice dancing tonight? Who "won" the floor exercise? We shouldn't even ask the question. We should revel in the athletes' performances and then switch to bobsledding if we want winners and losers. If you're relying on the judges to tell you who won you might as well be watching a cooking show on Bravo. The subjective opinion of a chosen elite is worth only what the show's producers or the Olympics' promoters say it is worth, nothing more. It's just show biz.

I only wish that an event could be established in the Olympics for all those marvelous athletes whose fates are in the hands of judges. The skaters and gymnasts and divers would sit in the stands and rate the performance of people who judge sports for a living. Athletes would rate judges and the judges' future employment would depend on the results. I would love to hear the judges rant about how the voting is prejudiced and nationalistic, about how they've worked for so long to get where they are only to have that jock from Japan wreck it all. And then I would remind them that winning and losing should not be a matter of opinion, of voting, it should be about who had more points on the board when the game ended. Period.

A lot of "skating experts" would be out of work but a whole bunch of ice dancers would be grinning from ear to ear.