

A Sport to Steer By

I've told this story before. I wove it as a personal embellishment, something to fit the mold of my mood at that time. It wasn't a lie then. But now, when I feel my tongue up against the truth, I know it's better the second time around. It stretches out beyond the light and shade of fiction. Right into life, right into sport. Better, like left-overs. Marinated fact.

We had stepped outside into the clear night, leaving behind the sterile bank of fluorescent light and the cyber-smell of Pentium processors. Several students lit cigarettes, chatted in muted tones trying to sound worldly. It was the fall of 1999, less than ninety days before the new millennium when the world was supposed to end and Jesus would return, ivory white I-Pod earphones dangling below His golden crown. There wasn't much time, everyone said. Store up water and batteries and ammo and pray like the winged-one.

Of course, all that ensued was a 200 point gain on the Dow.

What did I care, though? I was trying to reinvent myself, regardless if there would be a world to inhabit.

Our professor had said ten minute break only, please, there's much to do. Fair enough, I thought, wooden desks were a lot more comfortable than a weight-saving carbon fiber seat post and five hour bike rides had oddly trained me well for three hour classes. I was back in grad school because that's where I had left off, I told myself, before going off to sport as if I had gone off to war. There were similarities. More than I knew. And if the Second Coming was going to happen, as a writer and a believer, I was sure that the Man wouldn't use this clichéd date to download his return.

Some guy, dressed mostly in black, his sideburns straining for youthful style, working overtime toward coolness, tapped his cigarettes deftly so that only one would protrude, phallically, and pushed it in my direction. I must've looked at him queerly, like people stare at a pimple and will themselves to move their eyes away.

What's wrong, this kid asked me, don't smoke this brand?

No, that's not it at all. I watched my foot tap and fell into the poignancy of the moment. It's just that I don't think anyone has ever offered me a cigarette before. He must've thought I was lying but I'd never been speaking the truth more clearly. It wasn't my fault that the kid couldn't see I was quietly, desperately trying to connect the life of an athlete to, well, to

everyone else. In hindsight, I wish I would've taken the protruding tobacco even if to put it behind my ear, James Dean with an air-bag, so that I could validate my act of remembrance and admit the I'd been welcomed into the diasporic netherworld.

It was an innocent and benevolent gesture by someone younger than me, someone trying to get old quick because a certain *hardening* was en vogue. He had no idea of my background in sport. I had no idea of his in, well, whatever it was that formed him in the time before then. He could've been a great jockey or a ranked boxer, a dancer or a poet.

The anonymity felt liberating, felt like the world didn't need to be framed around end zones and baselines and it was okay because life had its own start and finish lines. I used to think that sport existed as one great metaphor for everything else, that life could be studied by living a sporting existence, a pen and paper in my back pocket. And then for awhile, I thought I might've had it backwards, the sport and life part. Maybe things like education and work and relationships were more than allegorical preparation for a world that began with a playground ball, a pair of running shoes and a coach saying, c'mon out here and play, kid.

In hindsight, I realized that the lines became blurred because I allowed them to, even willed them to fuzz in some self-serving vehicle of personal justification for the time and effort and ultimate identification of all that sport had been to me. I wasn't playing some game of swim, bike and run; wasn't a soft child stuck in a man's hardening body—my sport was my life, they didn't happen in different dimensions, there was no schizophrenia, no fifty yard split of ethos and ethic. I hadn't been to the Crossroads to deal for my skill and fortune; I was doing what came natural—living a physical life.

I was happy.

But now, regardless of what I study or teach my own students, I embrace that truer truth on the cusp where sport and life are a kind of reciprocal, a semiotic and symbiotic bathroom mirror. And when you go beyond what cultural clarity resides in the language, they don't share anything huge and permanent and fixed, they are just subsets of each other—sport is kind of life that people choose and life is a kind of game that people play.

The action-hero philosophers will tell us that life is about experiences, feelings, successes and failures. It is the sum of smoke and deception, purpose and direction, love and hate, yingiditty-yang and you fill in the gaps. Being born is a cool thing but we can't make the dead become undead. For the layperson on that arcing continuum, a trophy would be nice, something simple and validating, something to show their grandkids.

These are not unattainable concepts for people who are drawn to a raw and pure form of sport rather than the other mine fields of life; that Halliburton zeitgeist, the new tyranny of datasphere. But you could also live a sedate and vicarious existence and if it's your truth and you're happy, who can argue? You don't need a championship ring to live fulfilled. A pop-top from an old cola will do if it has significance.

In our naivete of youth, our halcyon days before the weight of age tries to pull down our dreams with our waistlines, we circle the track and feel the soft rubber under our feet and smell the fresh cut grass as we temporarily enslave ourselves to the stopwatch. Each lap has meaning, we tell ourselves, each lap is quicker, deeper into our goal. But what do we really know at 14, or 18 or 24? What we have been conditioned to believe? Is it something tangible, alluring, 30 days same as cash, operators are standing by? Or something still fresh and unnamable? Something cerebral or somatic that requires an investment?

In my own freshman fame, in that time when I wanted things I would never get and got things that I never wanted, I must've known that I was both a passenger and pilot, that while I was building a body and building a life, there were things beyond my control--my life flying IFR.

As athletes we develop these skills, these tendencies to draw up psychological barriers that rise up beyond the biological. And even if they are smoke signals harboring things to come, we don't read them, just go around the track one more time, harder now because the guru-jock-of-the-month with a new book says that fitness is more than health, and if we must have an addiction, than what better habit to be enslaved to? This sporting life, we are convinced, is the only life.

I remember the exact moment when I had crossed the line between training for performance sake and training for training sake, when sport had become my life but also a kind of slow dance with death at the same time. Oh, there was balance, but it came as two junk yard dogs circling each other.

It was during the birth of our first child, my wife in the jaws of a protracted but not entirely uncomfortable labor. I pulled the doc aside and asked him if I had time to sneak outside for a quick five-miler. I would stay on the hospital grounds. I promised. That memory haunts me still, how I had folded myself tightly into sport and that part so far away from life itself that the only satisfaction is the audience of one and the cackling laughter you hear in the background can only be the devil's.

No athlete can hide forever behind the thinly veiled excuse of ignorance. At least we should know when too much is too much. Still, if we

see sport and life as one, it is a great task to distinguish the map from the territory, to differentiate a training program from a training lifestyle, to know a chance to determine if we can still hit the outside jump shot, that Vahallie-playground where we meet up with some old buddies. And for the moment, the clock is stopped.

Sport is a drug. But so is life. The needle slips in when you slip out of your mother's womb. There is a terrifying excitement where part of you wants to go back into the shade and the other wants to jump into the light. You tell yourself that you just don't know, man. How could you? So you follow your instinct to move because somehow it's born with you, this knowledge that something possessed never has the same value or pull as it does in pursuit.

We're all hooked to some degree. It's certainly not hard to extol the virtue in sport. Simple, really. Bang away at the keys, chat up a stranger on a plane or convince a relative over for Christmas dinner that sport is good, that it's different; it allows us a chance to stand out.

From where, they ask.

From here, silly. Anywhere but right here, doing nothing.

With your sport, you tell them, you can glow in the dark. And you'd be right.

That's the bad part of the drug—it can bend a reality, squiggly lines on a desert horizon. Mirage goes from noun to verb. You glow when you're supposed to fade.

But statistics are our ammo and the media is our ally. Numbers never lie and neither do heroes. It's all so believable because we want to believe it. Sportsmanship, camaraderie, physical health, goal attainment, self-knowledge—they're all there inside of sport, neatly packaged sometimes, raw and unwieldy at others. Sport provides a constellation of possibilities, and we could be a star in our own galaxy. Oh God, it's so easy--twinkle, twinkle and I won my age group and another twinkle and if only I didn't have this job I could've made *The Show*, could've stepped right into that aristocracy of fame: a fat house, a skinny wife, the UPS driver calling me by my first name.

Go for it, *IT* says, grab the brass ring and find yourself separated from life and don't worry about separating from your self. If we can square away the boys who were in-country in '68, who survived Tet, you're just a post-traumatic game show away from the normalcy of a remote control and sixer of plain wrap.

Athletes and athletics have become a fixture in our culture, socializing our youth, teaching them valuable lessons not so easily taught at home or in the classroom. They also clog up Sunday afternoons when the commentary clones are clogging our minds with flashy media dribble poured out *up close and personal*. As fan-atics, sport thrills us like few institutions can, often over-shadowing theater, the arts, music and war-for-profit as the chosen form of entertainment. Not since the Roman Empire has sport played such a roll in how we live our lives. Is it because commercial sport remains the last form in which the ending is still a mystery?

What role and what mystery though? Chomsky has said that sport keeps people from worrying about things that matter to their lives. Indeed we are acculturated through sport in ways we must wary of; dominate powers slipping bourgeoisie ideology into Super Bowl half time shows. And not a journalist in the house willing to point out that Janet's exposed breast was itself manufactured.

I may have began this song as the naïve troubadour many years ago but now, even after the wounds of re-entry have healed, I wonder if I had subversively and in sequence convinced myself that it is the game that gives us life? That play comes before players, events before eventuality and sport before spirit? Yes, there is no situational ethos riding shotgun in arrears when I say that my life of sport had become bigger than a life of life.

The Native American belief that dreams are wiser than men, it can't be denied. Though I never dreamed of becoming a champion, of winning races around the world, traveling on the corporate meal ticket of sponsors, I sometimes lie awake deciphering the chasm code between a grainy, idealized recollection of sport's virtues and the dreams I had of being happily married with happy kids and happy dinners together.

Balancing meant the ability to hold my line around a tight corner at 30 mph. Fulfillment referred to race results and frequent flyer miles. But I cannot take back what I gave any more than I can return what was given me. And I cannot put sunscreen on retroactively. Sport was life at the time, which made it true, if only for that time. To deny the Cambellian call would've put me in a zero-sum suburb, breathing shallow stucco, drinking month-old chardonnay from a box.

I suppose that it's like the pitcher who's ahead by one run in the seventh inning and the crowd, the manager, hell everybody still thinks he still has the stuff to bring it. And then he takes himself out of the game; just doesn't show up at the top of the eighth. Nobody can really know what he's thinking or why he handed the ball over. But you have to know that he's

looking at the game, *his* game, from a new perspective, a place that has its own form of irony attached. A place you can't really describe to someone who hasn't earned it but loves and hates you more than you will know in that moment.

My mistake was that I took myself out of the game after it was over and the stadium was dark and quiet. Sometimes though, you do your best thinking in the dark, with ghosts guiding your thoughts.

But sport must be studied beyond the convenience of mutual *détente* where one is big and the other small and you have to hold them up to a mirror to figure out which is which. Any formal discourse would include an analysis of its conflict as well as its charisma.

Either way, sport can become a way of looking at life, a way both to filter and objectify your own experience; a reference point by which to judge your headway or rate of decline, a lifeline to hold on to as the earth swallows everything else around you or a golden calf that you chase into the promise of the abyss. Joe-bag-of-donuts or Joe DiMaggio, sport is your lighthouse or your barrier reef.

Long before advanced global positioning systems allowed satellites to tell us where we are, there was a simple form of seaman's navigation called deduced reckoning. It required a chart of the local waters, a reliable compass and an accurate timepiece. All that you needed to know was where you'd started, what your direction of travel was and how long it was taking you as you plotted your position on a line drawn on the chart. Simple stuff, unless you changed direction or speed and then you started a new line from a new point on the chart. If you became distracted by a pretty sunset, a prettier face or a frosty boat drink, you had to go below decks and start a new line every time. It's tedious, not entirely accurate and reliant on things that are easily confused; things like where did you *really* start and what time *is* it, anyway?

The average person will create these markers on the yardstick of their existence out of significant events; life-changing occurrences like births and new jobs and graduations and weddings and then deaths. Every section of the greeting card rack is covered. But if you look beyond the event itself then you will notice that attains its import due to the significance of someone entering or exiting your life.

But that happens all the time; you don't need a 40th birthday party to feel the pleasure or the pain, the love or the loss of connection to others.

The same is true for sport. Yeah, it's more than a game, maybe a passion or a career but it's a heavily-peopled marker. And that's significant.

As athletes we have the advantage of looking at sport as a continuous series of markers that include the people in our journey who bore witness to major events. Take away the people and the events still exist, but not really. These social constructs serve as cornerstones: our first soccer goal, making the high school track team, a 10k personal record, the first and the most recent of everything physical. Nobody wants to think about the last of anything. Athletes like to think only of going forward, sometimes sideways but never back and never, ever stop. Because forward means more people, deeper relationships, better understanding. We must know that, even if we don't know it.

And I suppose that each time we pause, not stopping but slowing down enough to take new bearings, we must also ponder our direction, our means and our purpose. The decisions from there are based on what we know about our place in sport and our place in life. And the people who make the events valid. They flow together like water, one no different from the other.

I should've taken the cigarette and put it in my pocket. I should've put out my hand, said thanks but I don't smoke. I should've asked him if he was a painter and where he'd had his nose pierced. I just didn't know.