

Power(less) in Numbers

It's been argued by any number of critical thinkers that sport is a necessary catharsis in the human species; that the competitive instinct is innate and without sport our society would run the risk of devolving as man sought other less desirable forms of conflict and test. And while I don't necessarily believe this is absolute, I know that as imperfect as sport can be, it's a hell of a lot better than war.

While there may be evidence enough to support the thesis that we are born with a competitive gene, there is ample data to deny it as well. Certainly there are cultures that are much less competitive than North America and western society. Tibetan monks living in mountain top monasteries rarely race to the dinner table in order to secure the chunkiest parts of the day's soup.

But for those of us born and raised in this breaking millennium with material comforts aplenty, we appear to be creating and then challenging unnecessary obstacles. Is it for the sake of bettering ourselves or others as we hurdle these ubiquitous gauntlets? A kind of, "do it yourself Darwinism?"

Or is it simply about having some fun?

What is a game of golf without a wager? A nice soak in the spa without seeing who can hold their breath under water the longest? Doing your nails in record time while keeping the polish off your fingers? The first to one place, the fastest to another—on it goes

So could it be that these self-imposed challenges are more than a part of this sporting life and this frenetic environment? That they are a part of how we reduce the monotony in our daily world?

It seems to me that the minor contests we invent have become a physical lexicon of sorts, something that prescribes our identity in the judgment of somatic performance—our bodies telling us who we are by what they can do.

Years ago, my brother Jeff, Mark Allen and I found ourselves in Paris for a few days near the end of a long season. Standing at the base of the Eiffel Tower one day, a gorgeous morning laying out beyond us, it had to happen—someone said let's race to the top.

At the time it seemed perfectly natural, a way to spice up our climb, to validate our fitness, to push each other simply because we could. Of course,

if that were to occur now, I'd blame it on the third espresso and lie down in the grass for nap until the madness had passed.

Sport has always given us meaning in ways we don't always recognize. Whether it's a primitive culture's form of ritualized dance, ancient Greece preparing their men for battle or modern sport's unique form of vicarious entertainment, societies large and small have used the institution of sport to create meaning, identity and purpose.

Yet in these days of promotional excess and for-profit commercial sport, it seems hard to find any meaning other than hyperbolic extravaganza and in-your-face media schlepping product for our capacious consumption. Order now, operators are standing by. For the love of the game, buy it. Thirty days same as cash.

But on the other end of the spectrum there are wire-thin runners with mangy beards and white tailed hats running 100 miles over desolate mountains *because they can*. When I see these people on the trail, a permanent glaze over their eyes, I just want to take them home and feed them. And then hit them over the head with a brick to knock some sense in them.

But certainly they could teach us all something about what purity is left in sport.

Most athletes, even those who jump into the stands on national television because a drunken fan threw a soda at them, are perfectly sane. They know exactly what they're doing and why they're doing it. At least they ought to. Athletes who commit their lives to a sport do so partly because it defines them. If the challenges of high level sport aren't enough, they will pour Wizard on the fire.

And even when emotions run roughshod over common sense, when hormones take the cerebral cortex hostage and antisocial behavior occurs, the viewing public can accept it because in our own way, we do the same thing. As athletes, we are well-versed in making things more difficult. (That must explain why manly men refuse to stop and ask for direction when lost).

But as endurance athletes we should take caution in the obstacles we either create or agree to for the sake of giving purpose and validation to our lives. Dreams and desire are good things. But a little objectivity in discerning whether we're following our true heart or our false ego will go a long way. Sir Edmund Mallory's "Because it's there," reply to why he'd climbed Everest was as much his tiring of the media's questions as it was philosophical aphorism.

It's been said that triathlon is what it is because it's not easy; it's not for everyone. But maybe that's history talking, the selective memory of

those who've had their day in the sun, like forgetting about the rain at Woodstock or that Cheech and Chong might not have gone on and finished college.

Today, anything is possible, so long as you don't expect the impossible. One woman's marathon is another man's 5k. It's all good. If you stay in the sport long enough, you'll see the light from both sides of the candle; you'll know that blisters aren't rational and no one gets out of here alive.

For the relativists among us, there are different meanings for the same thing. An Ironman distance event may not be considered healthy by either the famous physiologist or the Hall of Famer with the worn out (insert body part here). And yet, for those of us who've paid with our (insert body part here), we must be honest with our memories and not attempt dissuasion of the young and hopeful. They must be given their shot.

Sometimes I wonder if the Old Guys have a responsibility to sing the clarion call of excess or just shut up and let the aesthetic of personal exploration have its way with the hearts and minds of the seeker.

To some extent, we are all somehow labeled by what we're able to achieve. But more importantly, we are defined by what we attempt.

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