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"A PANE IN THE GLASS"

The Culture of Sport

By Bill Tschirhart

I like to run. I don't go as fast, nor as far as I once did but it's clearly my favourite form of exercise. When I run, I take my iPod along to listen to podcast versions of sports talk shows. One of my favourites is "The Jim Rome Show" syndicated out of Los Angeles, CA. Jim sometimes has guest hosts and one of them who I really enjoy is *Jason Whitlock*, a columnist with the Kansas City Star. When Jason is the guest host, I know he's bringing a topic that will make me think. One such topic, on Presidents' Day in the U.S., was based upon something Mr. Whitlock had read himself in the New York Times. The author was *Bill Roden* and his topic was the title of this essay, The Culture of Sport. There were two sentences that particularly caught Mr. Whitlock's eye.

"Sport is that child we raised with money but not love, who we allowed to grow up amid privilege but no value except to win at all costs. The child is grown up, out of control in a culture of cheating, of steroids and illegal taping of embarrassing conduct off the field."

I'm old enough to have seen that child grow up. Sports, both as an athlete and as a coach, have been my life. I feel a part of what Mr. Roden wrote about and what Mr. Whitlock brought to my attention. These sentences have been sitting near my computer desk in written form for the past few months waiting for the right time. Now is that time!

Another podcast that is my constant workout companion is "Prime Time Sports" out of "the center of the universe" (that'd be Toronto). The host is Bob McCown who regularly espouses upon topics that are of interest to the programme's listeners. He surrounds himself with intelligent, thoughtful and knowledgeable colleagues. The topic of one such recent show was centered on the "acceptance" among professional athletes/teams/fans that if they could "get away" with breaking/bending a rule, they would do it and be praised by teammates/coaches for doing so and if they

didn't, the sanctions from the same groups would be noticeably negative. In other words it was accepted ***within the culture of that sport***, to "cheat if you could get away with it"!

But, the topic did not remain with professional athletics. It moved quickly to minor sports, especially ice hockey. It was noted that within the ranks of ice hockey, coaches of young people around the age of 10, in practice, were being taught how to "get away" with tactics/techniques that were clearly outside the rules of the game but which were very effective to promote the team's chances of winning the game.

The euphemisms for cheating are very creative. They include: *gaining a tactical advantage, taking advantage of the rules, winning the psychological battle, finding the loopholes, bending the rules, forcing the officials to do their job, testing the rules, stretching the rules...* In fact, I've heard it more than once that, ***"If you're not cheating or trying to cheat, you aren't trying to win."***

As I write this in early May of 2008, the Stanley Cup playoffs are at its midpoint. One player for the recently departed Rangers of New York who has been a flash point for illegal/unethical behavior is Sean Avery. In one such instance in his team's series with the New Jersey Devils, he turned to face the Devils' goalkeeper, one Martin Brodeur, and proceed to raise his stick and move in such a way as to impede Mr. Brodeur's vision in hope that a Ranger teammate might score more easily. Immediately, since this tactic was not the norm for ice hockey, the media made it the topic de jour and the story "had legs" as it carried the sports talk shows for several days following. Had Mr. Avery *faced the play* to accomplish the same goal (no pun intended), that would have been, in the culture of the NHL, acceptable. But given his chosen style, it was deemed quite the opposite. But, conspicuous by its absence in the hours upon hours that were spent debating this matter, was accountability on the part of the NYR coach, Tom Renney. I was literally bursting at the seams in anticipation that at least one media person would ask questions regarding his involvement. Did Coach Renney know that Mr. Avery was going to use that tactic? If so, did Coach Renney approve of it? Did Coach Renney actually teach Mr. Avery and others on his team, this tactic? But, those questions, and ones similar, within my earshot, where never asked.

I don't care if the athlete is a professional or amateur, if the coach does not sanction a tactic, the player will not employ it. Conversely, every action of a player reflects upon the character of the coach and if a player does do something that is illegal or unethical, the coach should be the first one to express that to the athlete and make sure there's no misunderstanding re. the tactic's unacceptability!

I've cited this example before. In the 2005 World Series between the White Sox of Chicago and the Astros of Houston, an incident occurred that at the time seemed rather benign in the eyes of many. The batter was Chicago's Jermaine Dye. The game was midway in the series. I believe there was a runner on base, two were out and the score was close, possibly tied. The Astro pitcher threw a high and tight fastball, so tight that Mr. Dye had to duck out of its way and in doing so the ball hit "something". The question was, what did it hit? Had the object struck by the ball been the bat, it would have been a foul ball and possibly a "strike" depending on the number of strikes already assigned. Had the ball stuck

Mr. Dye, he would be awarded first base moving the runner on base to the next. This is one of the most difficult calls for a home plate umpire as it happens so fast. Using his best judgment, and given baseball's reluctance to use video replay to "get it right", he ruled that the ball had struck Mr. Dye and awarded him first base. The ensuing batter hit a home run which in essence won the game, turning the series for the White Sox.

Although the officiating crew could not see a replay, the television audience did and the ball clearly hit the bat, not the player. It should have been a strike!

The only person in the stadium that knew what had happened was aforementioned Jermaine Dye. Had the culture of baseball been different, the umpire might have inquired of Mr. Dye as to the object that had been struck by the pitched baseball so the correct/fair call could be made. But not only did the home plate umpire not have that vehicle at his disposal, Mr. Dye, knowing the ball did not hit him, was happily willing to be awarded first base. And his coaches and teammates accepted it too!

It's possible, although highly and I mean HIGHLY unlikely, that the coaches of the White Sox might have instructed the players that if the umpire needs to know what actually occurred so an appropriate and fair ruling could be made, they could ask any White Sox player who would provide an honest answer even though the subsequent ruling might deter the team's chances of winning. Not a chance!

But the culture of sport does not have to be so. Consider golf. There are countless stories of professional and amateur golfers in competition who have imposed penalties on themselves for unintentionally breaching a rule, when no one saw them do so. You see the culture of that sport so dictates. Had the same Jermaine Dye been on the fifth hole at his local golf course and accidentally moved his ball he would very likely have added a stroke to his score. At least I would hope he would have done so and it's the same person, with the same essential qualities. The only difference is the culture of the sport!

We (hopefully) are finally coming out of the "steroid era" in major league baseball. I suspect that history will not look back on those years kindly. Already, players who were "users" during those seasons are finding that the doors to Cooperstown are closed to them even though they "have the numbers". Good for the Baseball Hall of Fame and its voters! They've drawn a line in the sand and my hope is that it will never be erased.

If the mores of a culture are by their very nature contrived, who then is charged with that responsibility. In my view, the group most likely to wield that kind of power is the group of coaches. No athlete will act or react in a manner not positively sanctioned by his/her coach! The coach sets the standard. The players don't, or won't. Look at various "players' associations". When a member egregiously attacks another in the context of the game, the p.a. does everything it can to protect the aggressor in the guise of jurisprudence while the victim is ignored. There is no better example of that than the Todd Bertuzzi/Steve Moore incident. The last time I checked, Todd was playing and Steve was not but have I heard anything from the NHLPA to support Steve? No! But I have heard the same

organization speak out several times in support of Mr. Bertuzzi's rights. And where was the NHL in all of this? Mr. Bertuzzi was given an indefinite suspension which turned out to be a suspension during the strike season. He was reinstated in the season following which meant that the suspension was laughable but the message the NHL sent to its fans, especially its youngest and most impressionable was anything but!

Where was Coach Marc Crawford in all of this? Did Mr. Bertuzzi have his blessing when he (Bertuzzi) made the conscious decision to attack Mr. Moore from behind basically incapacitating him (Moore) during the attack? I don't know the answers to these questions but I'm sure had Coach Crawford informed Mr. Bertuzzi that no retribution was to be levied against Mr. Moore for a perceived transgression on the part of Mr. Moore against the Canucks' captain (Markus Naslund) in a game several days earlier, nothing would have happened. As it stands, Coach Crawford has been drawn into the legal battle as Mr. Bertuzzi accuses his coach of not providing the necessary guidelines to have prevented this unfortunate incident. Did you want greater proof of the power and influence of the coach?

Coach Bill Belichick of the New England Patriots made it very clear how he feels about this issue. Even though he knew he was breaking the rules (read "cheating"), he condoned video-taping opposition coaches as they sent visual signals into the game. I'm one who does not dismiss the fact that questions now exist about their previous Super Bowl victories.

But coaches don't have the sole responsibility for this. There's another group that seemingly gets off the hook, certainly by the media, almost unscathed, the fans! To wit, when Msrs. Sosa and McGuire were sending baseballs over outfield fences at an unprecedented rate even though there were very strong suspicions that both were "juiced", the fans cheered even louder, virtually ignoring even the hint of impropriety on the part of the athletes even though there were strong assertions to the contrary. You see, professional sports is a business and lo and behold, the fans are the customers/consumers so it's a "let's-give-'em-what-they-want attitude", ethics bedamned!

Why do athletes have this attitude? It's privilege! We place athletes on such high pedestals almost from the time their athletic skills are evident that why would we be surprised when as adults they feel as though their "special status" places them above rules and regulations. We allow, no, we promote their greed. I shake my head every time a collective bargaining agreement is in negotiation between players and management and I hear that one of the "sticking points" in those negotiations is a per diem. These are millions-of-dollars-per-year athletes who want their food costs reimbursed when their job takes them on the road! And as ticket purchasers, we pay it!

Many of these same athletes will assume positions of power and influence when they leave professional sports and enter the business world. What mores and values do you think they will take with them?

As spectators/fans, we have the power. We can turn this around with our feet. If we stay away from arenas, fields, courts etc. in large enough numbers, we can change this culture. But for everyone

who would be willing to do so, there are many who will buy your seat and take your place. We're therefore, just as guilty.

Parents can be part of the culture without even realizing it. What's the most common question a parent asks when son/daughter returns home from an athletic contest? It's, "Did you win?" Rarely is it, "Did you have fun?" or "Tell me about your game." In a worst case scenario, a parent can live vicariously through his/her children. When that happens, winning and losing become paramount, with the child not only feeling great pressure but it's very likely that when that child becomes a parent, the cycle repeats. How a parent acts and reacts while witnessing an athletic event in which a child is participating is especially critical as it paints such a vivid picture for the child. A parent screaming and yelling at the official, an opponent, an opponent's supporter sends the win/lose message indelibly to the child.

Our society is obsessed with winning and losing. An excellent example is the seemingly endless parade of award shows that come across our television screens. It's not enough to recognize excellence. That's commendable! But why in the process do we have to create losers who perhaps never wanted to be in the contest in the first place? I enjoy watching the Academy Awards show each spring. It's fascinating but why can't the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences simply recognize excellence.

Another television awards show I enjoy is the NHL awards. Some of the awards recognize statistical excellence. The Maurice Richard Trophy goes to the player who scored the highest number of goals. I get that! But when it comes to subjective awards like the MVP, the P could be plural. But three get nominated, and I know it's an honour to be so recognized, I get that too, but when the evening concludes, two will "lose" and one will "win" the award. If in a given season, the august body charged with the responsibility of identifying excellence feels that two players reached the highest status in a category, then both should be so recognized. There may be only one. Great, then he's the MVP. When I suggest this to friends, I get laughed at. That's how ingrained winning and losing has become!

In slightly more than two years, across the water (I live on Vancouver Island), the world will come to Canada for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. Athletes who compete on ice and snow will demonstrate unbelievable skills in seven sports and many disciplines. Some will achieve excellence and be recognized for it by winning gold, silver and bronze medals. I hope I'm wrong but I suspect there will be some whose performances will have been exposed as having been enhanced by substances banned by the International Olympic Committee. You see, I'm naïve enough to feel that when an athlete competes in the earliest stages of competition leading to possible participation in the Olympic Games, that participation clearly indicates to the athlete's colleagues that he/she will compete fairly, with training methods acceptable to the culture of the Olympic sport in which he/she competes.

We have made "the prize" too valuable. It's not the Olympic gold medal that's the motivation it's the tangible rewards that go with it. I'm one who was not happy when the Canadian Olympic Committee decided to reward our Olympic medal winners with cash prizes. I felt that Canada's stand to not follow so many other countries that do, was a shining beacon to the sports world. Now, we've acquiesced to baser instincts. I'm also less than thrilled that prize money is now on the line for our

national curling championships. What's wrong with simply the pride that comes from being able to say that you're the Scottie or Brier Champion? We now have our feet on the same slippery slope so many sports have found treacherous! Good luck with that!

I play a "game" in my Team Dynamics workshop called "*Win As Much As You Can*". I won't go into all the details of the game but suffice to say that in teams of four, each participant has two cards, one with the letter "X" and one with the letter "Y". The rules are simple. As the game's moderator, on ten occasions I give the command "Up". When the participants hear that, they choose to hold up either their "X" or "Y" card based upon a chart I project onto a screen that lists the five permutations and combinations of four X's & Y's (from 4 X's to 4 Y's). Depending upon the card you and your "teammates" hold up, each player will either win or lose fictitious dollars. In one combination (4 X's) everyone on the team loses money. For three of the others, if you hold up your "X" card, you win money but your teammates lose. The only way "the team" wins is if each player holds up the "Y" card but you have to trust that your teammates will too. If everyone holds up the "Y" card, the team will win four dollars for a game total of \$40. I rarely have a group of four that wins \$40! Why, because when I start the game and announce the title (which is also the object of the game – "*Win As Much As You Can*"), most if not all of the participants see the word "you" as singular. They will want to beat their teammates to win the game even though in my explanation of the game, I use the word "team" or "teammates" about 8-10 times. Why is that?

I learned this game from a history teacher who used it to teach one of the key cultural differences between industrialized countries and third world countries. What she noticed was that her industrialized (read "North American") students invariably saw "you" as singular because the culture in N.A. is to think self and to get ahead even if it's at the expense of others. Third world students on the other hand learn very early that their very survival depends on working together.

As coaches, we can do something to stem the tide of this "win-at-all-costs" attitude. Here are some of them. I'm sure you can think of more.

- Instill in our athletes that pride of performance, fun and integrity are paramount. Winning is simply a by-product of performance, something that can't be controlled.
- Teach skills within the rules and for the right reason, and that's to make the contest fair and safe for all who play, not in light of circumventing the rules.
- Identify coaches who do not adhere to the ethics of coaching and help to redirect their energies elsewhere. They should not be influencing our most valuable resource, our young people. If necessary, take steps to assist in their departure from sport!
- If our athletes are minors, make sure the parents/care givers know that we do not subscribe to the win-at-all-costs attitude and that we'll be coaching their son/daughter in that manner.
- Attend sport association meetings to make sure we have their support in this philosophy.

- Demonstrate by example everything you believe to be right about sports!
- We need to draw to the attention of our athletes that in the curling rule book, the first page is the "code of ethics" and it's for athletes, coaches and officials.

We have all heard the adage that "sport builds character." That's not true. Sport reveals character.

I'm not anti-competition! If that's the impression this essay has left, then I've missed the mark. Competition promotes progress in mankind. I'm against the "win-at-all-costs" philosophy that seems so pervasive in sport today where athletes will do anything and I mean anything, to win.

"Sport is that child we raised with money but not love, who we allowed to grow up amid privilege but no value except to win at all costs. The child is grown up, out of control in a culture of cheating, of steroids and illegal taping of embarrassing conduct off the field."

That's not what sports are about, at least not from my position behind a pane in the glass.

Oh, by the way, the MVP of the 2005 World Series was Jermaine Dye!