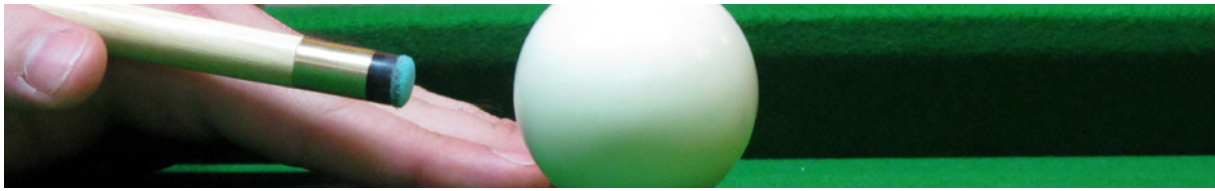


From the Kitchen

1 August 2012



One myth I live by is that sport used to be sport – not politics or commerce or an opportunity to shame someone. Sport used not to be about technology but certainly about enjoyment – on the part of those participating and those watching.

It is heartening to see that sportsmanship does still exist, that crowds of spectators can still show their appreciation of a game well played, no matter which side scored the point. Crowds can also be monstrous and use the opportunity of a loss by one team or the other to engage in seemingly random violence and vandalism. There are also those who will go to a sporting event, where there will be a large crowd, in order to foment violence in the crowd.

Probably the biggest factor in the changes in the practice of sport is the commercialisation that is rife. Sporting teams can be named after their main sponsors and sports stadiums frequently change their names according to the naming rights bought by companies. I expect a day will come when sports stars will change their names to reflect their sponsorship – “Eugene Nike Teac today again triumphed over Thomas Adidas Shell in the 100 metre sprint.”

Many sports teams are owned by companies or wealthy individuals. In some sports an individual can even own an entire league of teams. Even small, local children’s sports teams may now rely on business sponsorship for their survival.

The modern Olympic Games used to include non-sports events in the spirit of the artistic pursuits included in the ancient Olympiads. Until 1952 these included architecture, literature, music, painting and sculpting. Their abandonment by the IOC is ironic – the reason given was that almost all ‘artists’ were professionals and sportspeople were amateurs. How times have changed. Can many ‘serious’ sportspeople these days be truly called non-professional and how many ‘professional’ artists make a good living from their pursuits? Baron Pierre de Coubertin wanted the non-sports events included to make the Olympics more a balance of body and mind. Whether this was the reason for the inclusion of the arts in the ancient games is not clear.

‘Sportsmanship’ used to be held up as a standard by which to live one’s life. It embodied the principle of doing one’s best but not carrying the competition beyond the event or game. Thus, one will see competitors acknowledging each other after an event, whatever position they came in the competition. Sportsmanship can also be witnessed during a competition. For Australians this is probably epitomised by the action of John Landy in the 1956 Australian National Championships. In the 1500 metre final, Ron Clarke, another Australian, stumbled and fell. Landy leaped over his friend, then doubled back to see if Clarke was alright. Both men continued the race. Landy caught up with the leaders in the final laps and went on to win the race.

Behaviour such as this is remembered and talked about for much longer than many outstanding competitive sports achievements. It speaks to something in us that recognises nobility. As a famous film character might have said, “Noble is as noble does.”

Now that sportspeople are not only ‘heroes’ and celebrities but also represent companies and brands, they may often be seen in the unedifying situation of promoting those companies and brands, clearly not believing much, or anything, of what they have been told to say. I am prompted to ask how much many of these sportspeople would be willing to sacrifice for their sports if they weren’t financially supported. Most of the Paralympians still do without sponsorship and they may be more passionate about their sports for it.

Many people now argue that most of the sport that is televised is simply entertainment and that the celebrity of sportspeople is akin to that of popular entertainers. They may be right, when you consider how much television networks pay for the broadcast rights – sometimes in the billions of dollars.

In many sports, players are traded like possessions and sometimes treated that way. As a consequence, in many team sports there are players’ unions to negotiate pay and conditions.

I know that there are still many people who participate in sports mainly for the love of it, including many young people. Unfortunately, while young people are enjoying their weekend sports, many of their supervising parents take it much too seriously and even resort to violence against parents of other children, sports officials and children themselves. What is it about sport that anyone can take it *that* seriously?