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Major Win Streak

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Two weeks ago the University of Minnesota was defeated 3-2 in hockey by the University of North Dakota. Twenty-two months earlier on February 17, 2012 the University of North Dakota defeated the University of Minnesota in overtime, 2-1. The next day Minnesota beat North Dakota 5-2 beginning a 62 match winning streak that included two NCAA national championships and one undefeated season of 41 straight wins.

Why has most of nation not taken notice? Why do many hockey fans remain in the dark about this achievement? Where are the great network television tributes? The answer is simple. This was women's hockey.

If you Google "Women's Hockey Win Streak" little is turned up from sports news outlets outside the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. There are a few search results from Duluth and Grand Forks, North Dakota, but virtually nothing beyond the regions. The exceptions were a blog item in the New York Times that mentioned the second national championship, and a small item in USA Today noting the end of the streak.

There are those who will decry the lack of coverage of this achievement, this slighting of women's sport by the media, not to mention sports fans across the nation. What does it mean for women's sport? Does it diminish the achievement of the Minnesota women?

I must say I am ambivalent about this entire subject. Given the highly commercialized state of intercollegiate football and basketball, and to some lesser degree baseball and men's hockey, I find it difficult to get too upset about this case of neglect.

Is it the case that the only sport of value is that which is on television? If it is the case then most sport is not of value because most sport and sports are not among the commercial entertainment products that appear on our flat-screens with regularity. This does not diminish them as sports, nor does it reduce their value as sports. Someone does not need to be watching for a sport to be important or worthwhile.

The process of doing sport has an intrinsic value for the participant well beyond whatever it might do for the spectator. For the most part that value is unrelated to the gaze registered in ratings numbers or attendance figures. In fact most competitive sport at both the intercollegiate and interscholastic level is carried on beyond the view of fans without any particular harm being done to the athletes.

The level of performance is not measured by the numbers watching, but rather by the performance itself. The highest levels of performance are often achieved without spectators, or in front of very few spectators. For the athlete it is the performance, not the audience that is important.

In the artistic world of painters, writers, or sculptors, the artist is not creating for the public. In many cases the artist has a profound disdain for the public, regarding them as representative of philistine values or simple ignorance. Artists create to express themselves through their art. For the most part they do not do this on TV or before huge crowds in arenas. This does not diminish either the artist or the achievement. The art alone validates the artist.

In the same sense the sport validates the athlete. If the performance is remarkable it is not remarkable because someone is watching. So if few took notice of the achievement of the University of Minnesota women's hockey team, it does not mean that the achievement was not a great one. It simply means that a large number of people missed an opportunity to share a great athletic achievement.

This case is, of course, not unusual. The fact of the matter is that American television and sports audiences have not developed an interest in women's sport. This can be seen in the television ratings and the attendance figures for women's sport.

Some regard this as proof that women's sport is in some way inferior to men's sport. Some use this level of interest to question the significance and impact of Title IX. If your gauge of significance is in those numbers you may have a point. If on the other hand you look at the massive growth in the number of women in college and high school

participating in competitive sport, the story is one of great success for Title IX.

It does not matter how many people are watching. That is not a measure of sport but only a measure of commercial success. And as for the attendant idea that only those sports that make money are significant, it too is a bogus standard. It has nothing to do with sport. If that is our measure of sport, then it is time to close down most sports at the intercollegiate and interscholastic level.

So congratulations to the hockey playing women of the University of Minnesota who know the measure of their achievement, appreciate the meaning of their participation in sport, and understand that television and revenue are not an integral element of sport or its value.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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