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## The Summer Sports Scene in England: A Report and a Comparison

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Spending three weeks in England during July at the climax of the World Cup and Wimbledon, and all of the British Open, I was able to see the English sporting scene operating on all cylinders. Some clear differences with the American sporting culture caught my eye.

We arrived in England less than thirty-six hours after the defeat of the English by Argentina in the World Cup on penalty kicks. I was not surprised that David Beckham was taking quite a beating in the public media for his foolish red card early in the second half forcing the English to play a man short the rest of the way. Most analysts felt this cost England the game. Within a few days English football fans were making preparations for Beckham's first appearance in their city in the new football season which will be a long and difficult one for Beckham.

I was surprised however by the way in which the loss was handled generally. There was a good deal of reporting, echoed on talk radio, on the gallantry of the English team, their sportsmanship, and how their brave performance wiped away the black marks made by the English hooligans. In defeat the English team was much nobler than it could ever have been in victory. French reports praising English sportsmanship were legion. Michael Owen had become a major national hero with both his size ("little Michael Owen") and his age (18) stressed over and over again.

One other striking peculiarity appeared around the English loss on penalty kicks. To my astonishment English coach, Glenn Hoddle, reported that his team did not practice penalty shots. They never practice them. This to me is an incredible statement and an abominable coaching decision. Several Cup games were settled by the penalty kick phase of the game, both in the shoot-out and in the course of the game. Four years ago the cup itself was decided in this fashion. That a coach would not have his team practice this phase of the game is completely unfathomable. Even more astounding is that few in the English press made much of an issue of this obvious stupidity.

Can you imagine the din that would follow a Super Bowl loss on the kicking game if the coach admitted later that his team never practiced the kicking game as it didn't seem all that important;

or if a hockey team never had its players practice the penalty shot?

Free throws? Oh no we don't bother with them. They are unimportant to the game. Two point conversions? Oh, no we can't be wasting our time on such rarely used plays.

Is this a higher form of hubris practiced in English football circles, or am I missing some obvious point here? Perhaps it is considered bad form to win on penalty kicks and therefore it is bad form to practice them. If this happened in the U.S. the coach would find it necessary to fear for his life, while retaining his job would be beyond any consideration.

A week after the World Cup Final the English newspaper, The Independent, ran a series of pieces on "What it means to be British?" and the article on "Sporting Britannia" had the love of losing, or heroic losing, as its theme.

The main point was that the English seemed to be in love with "the story of losing." In addition to the reaction to the World Cup loss, the writer pointed to the fact that Tim Henman was lauded for his performance at Wimbledon, not because he won, but because he lost with such grace in his titanic struggle with Pete Sampras. The English seemed to this writer to be quite adept at this art of turning defeat into triumph, be it at Dunkirk, the World Cup, or Wimbledon.

I must say that this makes some sense to me, but I would also suggest that without having much in the way of wins lately, in sport or in foreign affairs, the English may have little choice other than to take this approach to defeat. It beats the alternative, which would be madness, suicide, or both. In contrast, dwelling on the triumph of loss or the excellence of a losing performance would be unthinkable in the American press or among American fans for whom winning is the only thing.

Lacking their own great performers the English also seem to be very gracious in examining and lauding the skills of the non-English. The adulation paid to Pete Sampras was astounding to me, and in fact was considerably more than he gets in the U.S. Tiger Woods was showered with praise, while Mark O'Meara's triumph in The Open was fully appreciated.

Less surprising was the enormous amount of ink spilled on both Tim Henman for his Wimbledon performance, and Justin Rose, the seventeen-year-old amateur, for his stunning play at Royal

Troon. In fact both Henman and Rose were treated as messianic figures either of whom might be the harbinger of things to come on the English sporting scene.

Different too are the television presentations of sport, especially on the BBC where Wimbledon and The Open receive marathon coverage. The presentation of Wimbledon without commercials and with sophisticated analysis seems too good to be true. The refreshing difference is the lack of cliches and the absence of strident presentation, all done without Bud Collins. Presentation is much more matter-of-fact and the critical analysis is much more penetrating. As for The Open it echoes the virtues of Wimbledon coverage, although it does have an element of the sacred, albeit much more understated than the gushing worship of the Masters by CBS.

Finally a word on the English sports pages. They of course are very different in content from those here with extensive coverage of cricket, rugby, football, horse racing, automobile racing, and athletics (track and field). The other difference is in style. I can't put my finger on it, but the writing style is considerably different as the prose moves in a very herky-jerky fashion for the American reader. The formulaic writing of the American sports pages is absent, and I am not sure that is an improvement. Even such a small thing as an absence of a by-line can be immensely irritating at times.

In the end, it is surprising how different the sporting cultures are, and how different reporting and writing in the same language can be.

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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