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Dream Team - Importance of Competiton in sport

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It may be difficult to concentrate on anything else after seeing Fidel Castro do the Wave, but with the end of the Pan-American Games it might be worthwhile to reflect on the meaning of international sports competition, especially in light of the special treatment offered to the U.S. Basketball team, and the plans to allow the NBA big guys to compete at the next Olympic Games in Barcelona.

In case you hadn't heard, the U.S. Basketball team was twice flown out of Cuba and back to Miami where they stayed in better hotels, had better food, and had better practice facilities than were available to the other teams competing in the Games. Was this done because basketball players are more sensitive to sub-standard accommodations than water polo players? Not likely.

It was done to get that thing known as the "winning edge," in a sport that was invented in the United States, and in which Americans can not tolerate the idea of anything less than a gold medal. Notice this was done only in Men's Basketball, not for the women. Notice that the men had to settle for the bronze medal, the same medal won by the women. Notice also that U.S. athletes generally did quite well against the competition from this Hemisphere. This despite the fact that in many events the best U.S. athletes were not entered in the competition.

Beyond the current situation in the Pam-Am games, a decision has been made that NBA players will be eligible for the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona. Magic, Isiah, Mr. Robinson, Michael, Larry, and all those other shoe reps will be allowed to show up in Barcelona. Why? Do they need to prove that they are the best basketball players in the World? To whom? Is there anyone who doubts the outcome of the NBA's best against the Brazilians, Soviets or Spain?

Notice too that George Steinbrenner is a significant member of the U.S. Olympic Committee, and is committed to producing winners. Didn't George do enough damage in New York and to Major League Baseball? Must he cast his shadow in the Olympic Village?

What exactly is the point of this exercise in overkill? Winning. Just Win Baby! Winning is the only thing! Being number one is all that counts. Nothing else will do.

No one in the United States represents this attitude better than George Steinbrenner, and no one better illustrates the problems that such an attitude can produce.

It is time for a return to the joys of competition and a striving for excellence. The spirit of sport was once embodied in the desire to perform at the highest levels, to strive for excellence, and to savor the rigors of competition. These ideals have never been deep rooted in Sport in the United States. Here, winning has always been more important than competing. The outcome has always overshadowed the agon, the struggle itself.

An excellent illustration of this comes from skiing. In an international competition two skiers were interviewed after their performances. The first was a European who had finished third. The skier talked about the joy of achievement while striving for excellence, the great feeling of exhilaration experienced during the performance, and the thrill of competition. An American skier finished second. This interview showed the TV audience a skier in despair. It was a quality performance, an excellent run, but there was no talk of that. Only of losing. The American skier had failed to finish first, and therefore had lost.

Here were two different attitudes reflecting two different sport cultures. The attitude of the European skier toward sport is clearly the healthier of the two. It is also more in line with Olympic ideals and the spirit of international sport competition. Is it really all that important to win? Isn't the nature of the struggle much more important than the outcome?

There can be only one winner, but there can be many great performances. And those performances need to be recognized and savored, without reference to the outcome of the event. In sport the individual or the team is challenged to perform at the highest level of excellence possible. When that is done, victory is achieved. Whether victory is accompanied by winning is an insignificant matter.

So let the NBA players stay at home. No one enjoys watching a mismatch. And let's not see this relentless pursuit of the "winning edge." There were reports that Michael Jordan had said he would not go to Barcelona because he would have nothing to prove there. More recent reports suggest he will go, and indeed the American bronze medal in Cuba will increase the pressures to load up on NBA players for the Olympic team. Let's hope this

doesn't happen. Otherwise basketball in Barcelona will be a ludicrous exercise.

Send the college players. Let the competition proceed without providing special living conditions for the players. Let them compete with the best of the rest of the world. It will produce thrills and excitement within the ideals of international sports competition. Let the pursuit of excellence, not winning, be the only thing.

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