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The Cult of Number Oneness - More Strange Motivational Technique

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Who is number one? Numero Uno. Primero. The Top Dog. The Best. The Greatest. This is the issue. This is the prime topic of all those sports talk shows that moan on and on through the long night of multiple time zones across America; Or on the twenty four hours of endless babble networks.

Does FSU really deserve its ranking? Shouldn't Nebraska be playing West Virginia for the national championship? Who can whine the loudest? What is Tom Osborne a Doctor of anyway?

When the Bowl Coalition was created this sort of speculation was to have been ended. The vital issue of who is number one in college football was to be handled by a playoff between number one and number two, and that was to be the end of it. Alas it did not work. The haggling goes on. What is to be done?

The answer of course is simple. It doesn't matter who is number one. But that is the narrow view. In the big picture it does matter, is in fact vital, the most important question in America, except maybe those questions relating to the Bobbitts, the Buttafuccos, or Michael Jackson's playmates.

It is a sign of something extreme in the culture. To be number two or three, nine or ten, out of 200 is somehow considered a disgrace. The need to win is an obsession in America, and often not a pretty one. The great American philosopher Vince Lombardi said, winning isn't everything, it is the only thing. George Allen loved to say that every time you lose, you die a little. Losing is death, winning is life. It doesn't get any more elemental than that.

In other societies winning does not take on this equation with immortality. Performance is what counts. Did you give it your best? Have you performed to your full potential? After a skiing event in Europe a few years ago an American was interviewed who had finished second. The skier was devastated, and bemoaned the fact that she had not won the event. To be first was all that mattered, second meant nothing. Shortly after a European skier was interviewed who had finished third, and talked about how pleased she was with her performance; how it represented a near flawless run, and how good it felt. The fact that this skier was third and not first was irrelevant. The quality of the performance is what counted. This is difference between sport and American sport.

This difference may also help to explain the events of two weeks ago in Libertyville, Illinois, at the local high school where Dale Christiansen, the football coach, staged a shooting in the school cafeteria in order, he says, to motivate his players for a playoff game against the Loyola Academy. During a pep talk Coach Christiansen interceded in a fight which he had staged between two students. Shots were fired, blood spread across the coach's shirt as he fell to the floor. Before the Coach could jump up several people ran out of the cafeteria, two calls were made to emergency numbers in the city, several police cars were dispatched to the scene, only to find that the pistol was filled with blanks and the blood was fake.

Coach Christiansen had no immediate comment on the incident, but the local school superintendent said that the use of a weapon of in such a skit was "totally inappropriate." The coach told the superintendent that he understood the ramifications of his actions, but "He also believes that people in general outside the football team do not understand what he was trying to accomplish." I think Coach Christiansen could take that to the bank.

Indeed people outside football have long failed to comprehend the motivational techniques of coaches. Did anyone ever figure out Jackie Sherrill's motivational message in the castration of the Bull? Or how about the high school coach who bit the heads off of live chickens, or the coach who ate live frogs. Does anyone understand coaches who punch players, twist their helmets, spit in their face, verbally assault and abuse them?

Coach Christiansen apparently doesn't realize that people inside the football team didn't have a clue as to what was happening in this peculiar motivational arena either. One player said that the shock of the notion they all might die seemed to overshadow any motivational message intended by the Coach. Senior Mike Duffy also seems to have missed the point, saying "Most of us were scared out of our minds. I ran for my life."

Doesn't anyone understand this? It's about winning. It's about being number one. It is about the manipulation of adolescents for the cash and glory that come to coaches and universities who achieve that lofty level of number oneness.

In the end it is about the higher education in America.

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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