5-14-2002

Formula One: Is Winning always the Goal for all Competitors

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Formula One: Is Winning always the Goal for all Competitors" (2002). On Sport and Society. 582.

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Which is more important, the team or the individual? A rather simple question which seemingly should have a simple and easy answer. Of course not all team sports are purely team sports. Some team sports are as much or more individual sports than team sports. The mix varies. Some team sports are only marginally so. This can confuse the issue.

The headlines in Formula One racing on Monday offer a case in point. In Sunday's Austrian Grand Prix the "Ferrari Team" was heading to the finish line one-two. From the team standpoint the one-two was backwards. Michael Schumacher was behind Rubens Barrichello. So the Ferrari team leader, Jean Todt, sent word via radio to the drivers that Schumacher would win and Barrichello should give way and finish second.

The logic was simple. Schumacher is much more likely to win the total points standings than Barrichello who thus far in his career has won only one race. Schumacher, four-time world champion, now has won five out of the six races this year. With eleven races to go he is likely to be a top contender for the world championship. Ferrari wants a winner. That is why they put money into these cars and races. So Barrichello gave way to his Ferrari teammate giving Schumacher his fourth victory in a row and a 27-point lead in the world championship standings.

But is this really a team sport? Well, yes. But then, no. This is the second time in two years that Barrichello has given way to Schumacher, last season allowing Schumacher to finish second as he dropped to third in the Austrian race. Barrichello was not happy with the decision but he understood it and understands his role on the Ferrari team. He is number two and Schumacher is number one.

The fans in the stands were less understanding greeting the finish of the race and the obvious dumping of the race by Barrichello with catcalls and jeers. The press peppered Schumacher and Todt with hostile questions. Today FIA, the ruling body of the sport, issued an order for Schumacher, Barrichello, and the Ferrari team members to appear before the World Sports Council in Paris on June 26.
A touch of international politics and national crisis was added to the controversy when Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso announced to the nation that Barrichello, a Brazilian, was the real winner of the Austrian Grand Prix saying, "Today, all Brazil is unanimous...The cup is his." A friend travelling in Italy reports that the Italian media is saturated with this story.

Indeed one can understand the controversy, as Barrichello was fastest in both the race and the qualifying. Schumacher was not comfortable with the decision, but he complied as did Barrichello, and Schumacher was grateful to his teammate. As for the Ferrari team they made it clear that this strategy would be followed for the remainder of the season until it was certain that Schumacher had accumulated the points necessary for the championship.

It is odd to see someone deliberately not win in a competition. Sometimes circumstances dictate this action and it has happened before and will happen again in many sports. A few cases in point come to mind on the American and international scene.

In a round-robin tennis tournament which finishes with a semi-final and final seeding based upon the round-robin record, players have been known to deliberately lose matches in order to affect the semi-final pairings.

In the National Basketball Association it was once common practice to lose games at the end of the season to give your team a better position in the draft. For the worst teams it sometimes got comical as they vied for the number one pick by going into multi-game losing streaks to finishing the season. When these teams played each other it could be a fiasco. The NBA has since changed to the lottery to determine draft order to avoid this spectacle.

In both track events and horse racing there are some competitors in the field who are specifically there not to win. Some are there to serve as pacers or rabbits that will set the pace of the race to the level desired by "team" coaches or trainers. Others are there as blockers to box in runners or horses and prevent them from winning.

In the notorious 1981 split season of baseball it was clear that a number of teams were tanking games in the second half of the season to try to affect the playoff qualifiers.
Dallas Green's famous f-word diatribe was triggered when a reporter asked him if the Phillies were tanking. Many believed they were.

Last year at Daytona when Dale Earnhardt Jr. returned to the scene of his father's fatal accident for the first time many believe that the other drivers did their best not to win, and to be sure that Dale Jr. had every opportunity to win. He did.

So despite what Mr. Lombardi taught a generation of American athletes and coaches, winning isn't always the only thing. Sometimes losing pays. Sometimes not winning is important for other reasons. Sometimes athletes are told to compete but only well enough to lose. It is an odd sight when it happens and at times it provokes the wrath of fans and press.

Sunday in Austria what happened depends on whether you see Formula One racing as a team sport or an individual sport. Ugly as it may be Ferrari may well have made the wise, if not the popular, choice.

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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