

Championship Weekend

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - CHAMPIONSHIP WEEKEND
JUNE 11, 2018

In a matter of four days from June 7 through the 10th, several championship level sporting events were decided. Beginning on Thursday with the conclusion of the National Hockey League finals through Sunday with the Men's Final at the French Open, there was a bonanza of sport available to spectators across the world. Each had its own character and each offered a different perspective on winning.

For the Washington Capitals of the NHL the victory in Las Vegas ended a very long 43 year quest for the Stanley Cup. The Capitals entered the NHL in 1974 as an expansion franchise and won only eight games that season, only one of them a road game. It was a record setting performance. It could only be uphill from there, but in fact it proved to be a very steep hill as the Caps resembled Sisyphus rolling the rock to the top of the hill, yet never quite reaching the pinnacle. Their opponent in the Stanley Cup Final was Las Vegas who got to the Finals in this their first season. The history of the two finalists could not have been much different.

After Alexander Ovechkin joined the Capitals in 2005, it seemed as if the Caps were on their way to the Cup, but they were derailed repeatedly in the playoffs. In three seasons the Capitals won the President's Cup for the best regular season record, but in each of those years they lost in the playoffs before reaching the Finals. Only once, in 1998, did they reach the Cup Final.

This season was different, as all the working parts came together and Ovechkin played at a high level in all facets of the game. He was the winner of the Norris Trophy as MVP of the Stanley Cup playoffs as the long march ended.

On Friday another champion was crowned. This time there were no great surprises as the Golden State Warriors won the NBA Title for the second straight year and the third time in four years. The sweep of LeBron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers was impressive, as was the fact that James was able to carry a mediocre team to the NBA finals.

It was in the Conference finals against the Houston Rockets that the Warriors showed their greatness by winning games six to extend the series, and then went on to win the series on the

road. In Game Six they had to overcome a 17 point deficit, and in Game Seven in Houston they rallied from 15 points behind.

Nor was it easy against Cleveland, as the Warriors nearly lost Game One before winning in overtime. In Game Three two of their stars, Steph Curry and Klay Thompson, had off nights shooting, but Kevin Durant with 43 points, more than compensated.

The Warriors can surely be called a dynasty, and it should also be remembered as the team that resurrected passing and the assist as a significant statistic in the NBA. The Warriors seldom shot before making three passes and their assists nearly equaled shots made. Kevin Durant was named MVP of the Finals but this was a clearly a team win, and this team was a pure pleasure to watch.

On Saturday, two more champions were crowned. At the French Open in the Women's Final Simona Halep won her first Grand Slam title after failing in three previous tries, including last year at the French Open when she let what looked like a sure victory slip away. Before the tournament, several of the experts were asked to name the best player who had never won a Grand Slam. Simona Halep was the unanimous choice.

In the Final, Halep faced Sloane Stephens in a fascinating match. Halep was ranked number one coming into the French Open even though she had won only one tournament in the past year. In the first set, Stephens played very well winning 6-3. The second set began poorly for Halep as she was broken in the first game and Stephens then held serve to go up 2-0. At that point it looked like Halep was finished and another Grand Slam tournament was slipping away.

Then suddenly it changed. Halep held serve, then broke Stephens, and held again, and then broke Stephens one more time to go up 4-2. Halep rolled off nine straight points during this remarkable change of momentum. Recovering, Stephens broke back and then held serve. It was now 4-all. Halep again held serve and then broke Stephens in the tenth game to win the set 6-4. Halep's tenacity and resilience carried her through this set and she went on to win the next five games, a string of seven consecutive games, Stephen's salvaged one game as Halep completed the victory, 6-1.

In hockey there is a term, a grinder, for the player who goes into the corner and battles fiercely for the puck, keeping play alive. On Saturday Halep showed that tennis too has grinders as

she simply refused to concede, contesting any and all points to the end. Watching this match you may have noticed that Halep seemed to win all the longer points. There were 55 points of nine shots or more, and Halep clearly won the majority of them. As Stephens said of Halep, "she had to grind for every point." And she did.

Later that day a different kind of athlete was crowned on the biggest stage in American horseracing. Justify completed his quest for the Triple Crown of racing by convincingly winning the Belmont Stakes in New York. Justify became only the thirteenth Triple Crown champion in history, although the second in four years.

After the Kentucky Derby many racing fans and experts believed another Triple Crown winner was in the making, but following the Preakness doubts arose. Justify struggled with the competition and seemed to have taken a slight step back. The Belmont victory proved the doubters wrong. Justify is only the second Triple Crown winner to be undefeated. The other was Seattle Slew.

In addition to Justify having a big day, his trainer, Bob Baffert became only the second trainer in the history of the Triple Crown to win it twice. For jockey Mike Smith, at age 52, it was the first Triple Crown win for one of the greatest jockeys of this, or any other, era.

If you needed one more Champion then you only had to wait one day, as on Sunday Rafael Nadal won his eleventh French Open Men's title. It was a remarkable four days of championship performances, personal triumphs, and team victories.

Do these champions have anything in common, beyond sheer talent? Do they share any particular characteristics? It is difficult to say, especially in the case of Justify, but certainly one can see such qualities as competitiveness, commitment, resilience, persistence, and perhaps most important of all a very strong will to win, often driven by its flipside, a fear of losing.

In just a few days these qualities will be on display again at the highest level. The U.S. Open golf championship begins Thursday.

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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