

A PANE IN THE GLASS BY BILL TSCHIRHART

THE MARGIN OF VICTORY

As a society we are obsessed with winners and losers. We see it in all walks of life. Someone has to win and someone has to lose or the activity just wasn't worth the effort. What a philosophy!

One of my pet peeves is the annual ritual known as the Academy Awards. I don't need to see one winner and four losers in each of the categories to enjoy the evening of Hollywood's way of slapping itself mightily on the back. Each time the list of nominees is announced prior to the opening of the envelope (oh, have you noticed that in recent years they no longer say, "And the winner is..." but rather, "And the Oscar goes to...") I feel somewhat sad for the rare nominee who just wanted to excel at his/her craft and had no intention of "competing" with his/her colleagues for a gold statue. Perhaps a younger, slimmer Marlon Brando had it right when he sent a first nation representative to the Academy Awards in his place in case he "won". I truly wish that at the Oscars, no one was nominated but rather in each category, talented people who excelled at their craft were "honoured". If two or three or more are at the top of their game, they all should be so recognized. If it's suspense the audience craves at events such as this, it will still be there.

Our definition of success unfortunately is so coloured by the type of people like the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences where to "lose" regardless of

the margin of loss, has a stigma attached that is difficult to shed.

Bill Buckner of the Boston Red Sox will not be remembered for the excellent player he was but instead for the ball dribbling between his legs in the World Series. Conversely, the Calgary Flames will ever be etched in the minds of hockey fans as Stanley Cup Champions but let's go back to the first round of those playoffs. Those same Stanley Cup Champions faced their west coast rivals, the Vancouver Canucks in the first round. Not only did the Canucks provide worthy opposition, but had it not been for the left skate blade of goal keeper Mike Vernon, the Calgary Flames would have been lost on the scrap heap of first round "losers". For in the seventh and deciding game of that first round series, with the score tied in overtime, the low scoring defenseman for the Canucks Harold Schnepps, found himself with the puck on his stick and a wide open Flames goal staring at him. All he had to do was direct the puck into the net and the Canucks, not the Flames would move on toward Lord Stanley's hardware. And shoot he did when literally out of nowhere flashed the aforementioned skate blade belonging to Mike Vernon who in desperation stuck out his left leg. The puck struck his skate blade. Later in that same overtime period, Lanny MacDonald scored the goal to propel the Cowtown gang into the next round and eventually to

their only Stanley Cup victory.

In 1986, the world curling championships were held in Toronto. Sporting the Maple Leaf on their backs was a quartet of curlers out of that same western city of Calgary, the Ed Lukowich rink. Fresh from their Brier victory in my hometown of Kitchener ON, the Calgary Winter Club four were easily the odds on favourites to capture the global rock chuckin' title.

As has happened so often in international play, the Canadian contingent found the sledding against their European counterparts more difficult than perhaps they might have imagined. Sparing you most of the details, suffice to say that they had to defeat an inexperienced squad from France in the final game of the round robin to secure a playoff spot. In the last end, with the winning Canadian stone entrenched in the four foot, the French skip had only a raise takeout between himself and victory which might have placed the Calgary lads permanently on the sidelines. The stone to be raised was a relatively short distance from the Canadian counter, an easy shot for most experienced curlers regardless of the level of play. But the inexperience of the French skip percolated to the surface and he missed the raise leaving the Canadians shot, paving their way to the playoffs and an eventual world championship a few days later.

Memory plays funny tricks. It appears as though it recalls events in summary, like who won the championship and details such as those I have just described are lost to it. It's a double edged sword. I wouldn't for a second suggest that the members of either the Ed Lukowich or Calgary Flames teams of the preceding paragraph view their championship as somewhat tainted. But, they might do well to also recall that the difference between winning and losing sometimes is small indeed. I believe it's called perspective.

What I'm really dealing with in this article is the definition of success. If yours is solely based upon winning and losing, then you're skating on thin ice in your athletic career. You may end up like the late John Candy's character in

the motion picture "Cool Runings". There is a poignant scene in the movie where one of the athletes from the Jamaican bobsleigh team asks Mr. Candy's character why he cheated in his competitive career. He replied, "It's easy, really. I had to win. I had made winning my whole life. Nothing else mattered." If you recall that motion picture you will remember that Mr. Candy's character, after world records in both the two and four man events and two Olympic gold medals was caught cheating. He went on to say that... "A gold medal is a wonderful thing. But if you're not enough without it, you'll never be enough with it". When his athlete asked how he would know if he were enough, the coach's replay was, "When you cross that finish line, you'll know"

When I speak with athletes in our sport, I coldly remind them that only one team is going to win the world curling championship in any given year. I then challenge them to answer the question, "Does that mean that every other team has failed?" Of course the clear answer is NO. And the reason is that the "pursuit of excellence" is what this is all about, not winning and losing.

And to those gold medalists out there who are puffed up with their championship, perhaps you would do well to remember that the margin of victory is sometimes as "thin as a skate blade"

Enjoy the journey. I'll see you soon behind a pane in the glass.

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COACHING

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