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For the Athletes Unsung — Smerconish

Steven Biondolillo February 25, 2020

5-6 minutes

February 22, 2020 will mark the 40th anniversary of an event famously dubbed by *Sports Illustrated* as the "greatest sports moment of the 20th century." That "moment," of course, was the U.S. Olympic ice hockey team's victory over the Soviet Union in the 1980 Winter Olympics, known ever since as the "Miracle on Ice."

Why "Miracle"? Because the heavily favored, four-time defending gold medalist Soviet team was composed of seasoned professional players, while the American team, essentially, was a group of 21-year-old college kids. Moreover, the game's symbolic dimension as a Cold War proxy battle bolstered the sense in the West that the victory was divinely assisted.

As only a divinely assisted occasion might do, the 1980 Winter Olympics precipitated a cultural sea change, although some might call it a "cultural undertow." Literally overnight, a preposterous percentage of American families began both to eyeball their children as potential Olympians, and unwittingly assist in birthing a problematic, if not pernicious cultural ethos: "Winner take all."

While it took the supremely commercialized 1984 Summer Olympics to rocket the new ethos into orbit and set the culture on its current, even deadlier trajectory, "Win at all costs," actual lift off was achieved in Lake Placid 40 years ago. Today, as we all know, and as is abundantly evident in most spheres of American life, these evil twins--"Winner take all" and "Win at all costs"--are eroding, if not crippling our culture.

In the world of athletics, however, we can begin to correct our course by recognizing the truth. Specifically, that all winners are supported not only by coaches, parents and friends, but by their teammates on the bench, those who didn't make the team, and competitors.

In sports, nanoseconds, centimeters, and opinions often make the difference between "making the cut" and "getting cut," between victory and defeat. In 1980, the last three young men cut from the storied U.S. Olympic ice hockey team were Dave Delich, Jack Hughes and Ralph Cox. On February 22nd, why not think of them as representing all athletes everywhere--at all levels--who make winning a place on the podium possible.

While many in the worlds of Olympic sports and ice hockey are set this month to celebrate the "Miracle on Ice," let's put that achievement in, well, truly divine perspective by celebrating three of the unsung athletes who made the miracle possible, and by beginning to bleed the "evil twins" of their toxicity.

... from *Macaroni and Cheese Manifesto* (Third Edition)

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For the Athletes Unsung

Here's a song about playing the game—
about glory and heartbreak and truth,
About three unsung men whose good names should be raised
for the sake of the “red, white and blue.”
They say “Winner take all!” is a natural call,
but in truth it's a shame,
For a nation obsessed with one slice of the best
chokes its children with pain.

Yes, these three once performed side-by-side
with the best of the best in the land,
But because of some “twist” a great chance each did miss
to alight on the stand;
Pray, what “twist” could engender a miss
but the imperceptible truth—
A split second, a hair, an opinion, a stare . . .
an odd phase of the moon.

So our story begins in Lake Placid,
and ends with this now-famous line—
“Do you believe in miracles? Yes!”—
and we all went along for the ride:
Thus the Stars-and-the-Stripes beat the Soviets,
and ice hockey captured the gold—
Faith in youth, revolution and victory—
a century’s whole story all told.

In the haze of our wild exultation,
things died that we all failed to see,
For Dave Delich, Jack Hughes and Ralph Cox,
their young names and young hopes and young dreams;
You see these were the last of the players
whom circumstance cut from the squad,
And I bet all the tea in old China
that each felt abandoned by God.

While the victory band sailed in heaven,
the souls of some men swirled in hell;
Oh those feelings, those feelings, those feelings—
to many are known all too well:
Desperation and loss might describe them,
or blackness or madness or pain—
Oh those feelings of rage and injustice—
all prices of playing the game.

Now it’s true about every dream realized
that sacrifice has to be made,
But it’s true that all winners with clear eyes
do know where their debts should be paid:
While the usual thanks go to coaches,
to parents, officials and friends,
It’s the athletes unsung who prop high
all who’ve won in the bittersweet end.

So remember the likes of Dave Delich,
of athletes Jack Hughes and Ralph Cox,
They're your teammates in truth
and your literal boost to that cereal box;
Sing a song for the likes of these athletes—
a prayer for the athletes unsung,
For in God's perfect view—the simplest Truth—
glory and heartbreak are won!

[Note: The poet, a 1977 graduate of Boston University, was a competitor in the 1980 Canadian Olympic Team Trials in freestyle wrestling.]

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