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What's the Best Thing About Sports?

Jerry Kavanagh · Wednesday, May 16th, 2012

Former New York Yankees manager Billy Martin said, “There is nothing greater in the world than when someone on the team does something good, and everybody gathers around to pat him on the back.”

When I repeated that to the writer Frank Deford, he said, “Did Billy really say that? (Laughing) I remember Billy telling me that he was responsible for something like 40 victories a year as a manager. That sort of goes contrary to that, but that’s a very sweet sentiment. And I would subscribe to that absolutely. I’m enough of a romantic to be for that. Sweetness and light.”



I once asked a number of successful sports figures and writers what they considered the best thing about sports. **Eddie DeBartolo**, whose San Francisco 49ers won five Super Bowls in the 23 years he owned the team, put it succinctly. “Winning,” he said.

“Edwin Bennett Williams called it ‘contest winning,’ said former New York Giants general manager **Ernie Accorsi**. “I guess with him it was winning a trial, and then he became the owner of the Redskins. There’s no high like the moment when you’ve just won a game. You watch the players file into the locker room and you look at each one’s contributions. The euphoria in the locker room after a win, particularly on the road, because there is no sensation like silencing the road crowd. And then you are together for the trip home. There’s nothing like that plane ride home after a great victory.”

Peter Kenyon, who as chief executive built the English Premier League soccer clubs Manchester United and Chelsea, echoed DeBartolo. “Winning is our mantra, and it won’t happen without winning,” he said. “[We] are in the ultimate competitive industry. People talk about being on the stock market and being measured every quarter. Well (laughing), we’d love to get to be measured every quarter.”

“You have a winner and a loser virtually every day [in sports],” said **Dave Anderson**, the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the *New York Times*. “I say that as a writer. People ask me, ‘Would you have rather gone into writing a general column or writing about politics?’ In politics, you seldom know who the winner is and who the loser is for 10 or 15—maybe 100—years. In sports, you know every day who won.”

Sal Galatioto, president of Galatioto Sports Partners, said, “The best thing about sports is the fact

that you get a group of people that come together for one purpose, and you know what that purpose is at the beginning of the season: It's to win. These athletes—say what you will about how much they get paid—most of them work extremely hard. They are incredibly talented. They do things that normal people just can't do, although it looks easy on TV sometimes.

“And it's that coming together for a common purpose and then achieving that goal which is amazing to me. And that's why Americans love the underdog. The U.S. hockey team that wins the Olympic gold medal, or the baseball team that comes out of nowhere to win the World Series. Everybody roots for the underdog. It's the way it is. It's part of America.”

Donald Dell, the founder and chairman of ProServ and one of the giants in sports business, said, “Ironically, one of the great things about sports is teamwork, which is much more prevalent in team sports than it is in tennis, from the moment you **install a tennis windscreen** to the final match.

Roger Staubach called the best thing about sports “the hard work that goes into being successful. They can pay Michael Jordan all the money in the world,” he said, “but he's going to fight and practice and work hard. Tiger Woods is out there making big bucks, but he's got to work on his game. In sports, you can't be successful without working at it. Some people have so much talent that they get away with working less, but you have to work at it.

“There's a team aspect to it. You've got goals and aspirations. You want to get to where you want to get to, but you've got to take someone with you, and I think sports makes you realize the importance of someone other than yourself. You learn that you are there when someone needs you and they're going to be there when you need them.

“And the other thing is perseverance. I think that in life, you get knocked down, you've got to pick yourself back up. When you're knocked down, though, you don't cook the books, you don't give up on your faith, you don't change up on your values. You just continue to fight. Sports taught me that, taught me a lot about resilience and perseverance, and those are all important things in business.

“You've got to work hard, you've got to realize that you can't do it by yourself. You need good people and you've got to expect the unexpected and that challenges and difficulties happen, and you've got to fight through it and you still maintain your values when you do it. You find out the best in people when things are difficult, and sports teaches you that, too. There are just a lot of great things in sports that are transferable into business.”

Rick Reilly, voted National Sportswriter of the Year eleven times by the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Association, said, “The best thing [about sports] is that you can't fake it. Just because you're Tom Seaver's son doesn't mean you get to play in the big leagues. But if you're Martin Sheen's son, you get a job. Believe me, if Tom Cruise's child wants to act, he'll get to act. And if Aaron Spelling's daughter wants to act, she gets to act. These people who are famous for being famous...it doesn't work in sports. You have to prove it, and you have to prove it every year. Derek Jeter doesn't just get to get by next year because he was in a lot of ads this year. It's not like being the pope. It's not a lifetime appointment.”

Gene Upshaw, who passed away in August 2008, was a Pro Football Hall of Fame offensive lineman and the long-time executive director of the NFL Players Association. He had this to say about the best thing in sports:

“The camaraderie you build with your teammates and the people that are involved in the sport. You take that with you wherever you go. You can never ever let it go. And anyone who has participated has that feeling.

“You’re in this unique fraternity, and it’s there for a lifetime: good, bad, indifferent; winning, losing, traveling, crying—all of it. It’s the camaraderie. It’s the greatest thing that you get out of this. The relationships you build through that.”

Gail Goodrich, a basketball Hall of Famer, echoed Upshaw: “The camaraderie of being with your teammates, having a common goal, and working together toward it,” said Goodrich. “That first year after you retire, there is an adjustment. The biggest thing you miss is that association with the team.”

Jerry West was in the same backcourt on the Lakers with Goodrich for two different terms. One of the NBA’s 50 greatest players, West, who later built championship teams as an executive with the Lakers, said, “The harshest lessons learned in life are probably through sports. There is no gray area. You either win or you lose. And I think it tests the character of all players. It tests the character of the people working internally. And it can lead to hastily made decisions that sometimes damage a franchise more than they would ever help because people don’t want to lose.

“I think management has a great responsibility to the ownership, almost to the point where I believe that you should lose your job if there’s something that the owner wants to do and it’s just not the right thing to do because it is an emotional thing. I do think that were all at risk sometimes because we’re opinionated and we think we know what’s best for the team, and we don’t own the team.

“I like to think I’d never work for money in my life. I do it because I love it. Obviously it’s important to get paid if you’re in a business like this. But I think the most important thing is, if somebody hires you, they should trust your instincts enough to let you run the team and for them to not interfere with some things that maybe they’re not very familiar with.”

Randy Vataha enjoyed success in college (Stanford) and in the NFL (New England Patriots) as an undersized receiver. Looking back on his playing career, Vataha, the president of Game Plan LLC, said, “One of the reasons I enjoyed playing football is you have so many teammates to share the experience with. Every year, like a lot of people, I’ll get near a television when that ball comes down on New Year’s Eve in Times Square. And you say, ‘Why would all those people get there 10-15 hours in the cold before that ball drops down? Why do they do that?’ And it’s really to share an experience with everybody else.

“Well, when I played at Stanford, the team had not been to the Rose Bowl in almost 20 years. So, to be able to win the Pac-8 and share that with your teammates, and to be able to go on to win the Rose Bowl, was a phenomenal experience. A lot of those guys have been dear friends for life, and they were all sort of forged within that teamwork. You can’t ever replace those kinds of experiences with your teammates.”

Al Leiter, who pitched for the Yankees, Mets, Marlins, and Blue Jays before moving into the broadcast booth at YES and the MLB Network, said, “I have yet to meet a teammate, or even an athlete from another sport, who is not highly competitive. And I know after 20 years professionally—15 or 16 years in the major leagues—what continues to drive my love for the game is to compete at the pinnacle of my industry. To face the greatest players in the world and

make quality pitches to get them out. It's a rush. It's a tremendous degree of satisfaction, even in the smallest battles.

"As a player, my perspective is about competition and winning. And it has to be [the same] as a fan. And I would say sports are encompassed by the desire to watch competition at its best with the feeling of euphoria or sorrow with a win or a loss next to your team."

Offering perspective from the front office on the best thing about sports, Atlanta Falcons president Rich McKay said, "It's the opportunity to compete in a game as a grownup. What I enjoy is that on Sundays you get to have your team compete against their team and see who wins. I like the fact that as adults we still get to play or be involved in a game that's usually reserved for younger people."

Pat Williams, senior vice president of the Orlando Magic, has spent a full life in sports as a player and executive. He cited the relationships you make as among the best things sports offer.

"The people you are involved with—the coaches, the athletes, the media," said Williams. "You just do not meet those kind of people in any other walk of life. I ran into a man who grew up in the Philadelphia area. He was almost in tears talking about what the 1983 76ers meant to him and to his father and to his neighborhood. This man...was very emotional. And that just brought back to me the power of sports. And the impact it has on people's lives."

Sports journalist and broadcast pioneer **John Walsh** once said, "The best thing about working in sports at ESPN is that there is a range of different possibilities every day. There are different mediums. There are different types of stories. You can come to work and be talking about Kobe Bryant on the court and his spectacular play, or the Kobe Bryant fall from grace off the court, which is an interesting, dramatic story as well. There is laughter and tears, all kinds of emotional stories that come about on a daily basis.

"What's happened in sports in the last quarter-century has been so overwhelmingly breathtaking and widespread that sports have come to represent life in America and the range of experiences, and the range of stories to cover is pretty astonishing."

Image: Eddie DeBartolo, having a good day.

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