

How Sport Brings People Together and Transcends Competition Itself

Sports, for thousands of years, have been a wonderful means for humankind to exercise one of our most basic instincts: competition with our fellow humans. Surrounding all types of sports is the idea of sportsmanship, the respect and ethical behaviour shown to all participants of a contest. Sports fans around the world have all seen their share of sore losers, bad winners, and generally horrifying displays of poor sportsmanship. Yet, in all sports, there remain certain dogmas that only the most poorly-behaved sportsman would dare to violate. The spirit of the game, in many cases, is far more important than the outcome of the match, and a true competitor understands this. This is why many of our most beloved athletes are not always the most talented or outstanding performers; it is those who play with the purest heart, for the sake of the team, and with respect for all opponents. Truly transcendent athletes are those that are able to combine this intangible trait with world class skill.

There are greater lessons to be learned from this besides being well-liked in the sporting community. Sports, and by extension, the athletes who play them, are able to go beyond cultural differences; surely there are stylistic differences between countries and regions, but in general, sports are played the same wherever you go. Similarly, all fans of a sport are able to appreciate incredible athletic feats or truly classy displays of sportsmanship. Simply put, sports have a way of bringing people together. In a day in age when settling cultural differences is of utmost importance, turning more towards sports is a reasonably viable way to bring the world closer together.

The best example of a sport bringing two societies together today is the case of cricket contests between India and Pakistan. Tension and hostility have marked the relationship between the two countries for much of the last century. What has become known as cricket diplomacy has been able to bring an air of friendliness to talks between leaders. In 2011, the former president of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf was quoted on the benefits of cricket diplomacy. He said, "Firstly, I think it can be used as an ice-breaker in case the two opposing groups' leadership is not in touch with each other. Secondly when they meet, it improves the environment of discussion because they have a better understanding of each other because I have personally believed that inter-state relations have much to do with inter-personal relations." Although he went on to say that he does not believe that cricket diplomacy will lead to resolution, it is clear that it eases the initial tension that can be a major detriment to diplomatic proceedings.

From my own personal experience as an American currently living in London, I have had the opportunity to speak to both Indian and Pakistani students studying here. The response I receive when I bring up cricket is remarkable. The passion and love they have for the game is unmistakable, and, as is often the case when someone speaks passionately, I have been an eager listener. They want to share the game with me. Then comes the dreadful moment when I am asked "Why isn't cricket played in the US?" It is the world's second most popular sport, yet it is virtually non-existent in one of the world's largest and most capable countries. Naturally, I do not have a good answer; to me, it just is not popular. Further embracing and becoming familiar with sports that are not played at home can really help in overcoming a cultural divide, even if it is just to get the conversation going.

There are countless other examples of the way sports can overcome cultural boundaries. Kobe Bryant, of the NBA's Los Angeles Lakers, is immensely popular in China—one city has built a statue of him. Ichiro Suzuki, a Japanese baseball player, has easily been one of the most popular player's in the MLB during his time in the US, despite rarely giving an interview in English. It has been said that he “speaks baseball”—that is, he plays the game the right way, one which any true fan will appreciate.

Similarly, a recent trend of European footballers, such as David Beckham and Thierry Henry, coming to the US has helped quell the notion that Americans do not play or watch football, although the country still has a long way to go. Lastly, international events such as the Olympic Games or World Cup are perfect opportunities to show the world that international cooperation and peace are possible, if only for a few short weeks every couple of years. Sports can and need to be used as instruments of change, proponents of peace, and in general, positive and unifying forces in an ever uncertain world.

The Olympic Creed says it best: “The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph, but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered, but to have fought well.”

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