

Commentary: Competitiveness is key to American spirit

Watching competitive sports over the weekend, I heard the players mention that they hoped to provide entertainment as a form of relief from the recent tragedy. I suggest that they do a far more important service. These players are symbols of the overall American spirit.

This is the competitive spirit that builds America. This spirit is the drive, stamina, creativity and courage to work to be a better individual, team, business, family, community, nation and even a better world.

In sports, the team cannot excel without the individual members giving their best and the individuals cannot excel without working within the team. America works because it strives to achieve the same balance between individual rights and the needs of society.

When a teammate falters, the rest of the team works to fill the gap. When a team falls behind, we measure their grit and determination to stay in the game. When a team loses, we measure the sportsmanship and the ability of team members to learn from their mistakes, to rebuild and try again. In the spirit of competition, we admire creative risk-taking as well as the solid strength in the slug-it-out strategy. Hard work and taking risks, balanced with caring for each other, are the key elements of American competitive spirit and leadership.

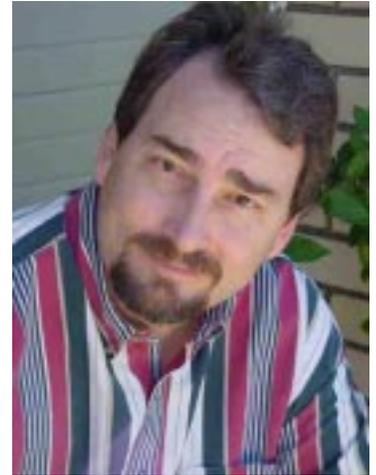
We frown on poor sportsmanship—the cheap shots or outbursts of frustration by beaten competitors—and are repulsed by people destructively lashing out because they feel inadequate to compete. Yet we can have compassion for the underdogs, cheering them on and offering a helping or guiding hand. People who have dealt our nation some of the cheapest shots have become our steadfast friends because we have demonstrated our tradition of being good winners and our capacity to forgive.

As a winner, America can expect that small-minded people, feeling inadequate to compete, will lash out. If they can tie their actions to a pseudo-noble or religious cause, they can twist their cowardice to appear to some as heroics.

The World Trade Center towers stood as working symbols of the same American spirit to build and compete, to be bigger and better. The people working in those buildings were striving in their own way to represent themselves, their families, their businesses, their community, their nation in this global competition and this goal to achieve something better. The bravery and heroic actions of the police, fire and rescue workers who faced danger to help victims of this cheap shot is unquestioned. The bravery of the occupants of the Pentagon and the military forces, who stand in harm's way to shield us against overt threats to our way of life, is also unquestioned.

Perhaps not clearly appreciated is the bravery necessary to live in an open, free, and competitive society. Just as the athlete must risk losing a position to a teammate or suffering a career-ending injury while competing to win, the average American must step out the front door every day and confront a huge list of vulnerabilities inherent to an open and competitive society. This environment makes Americans, as a whole, trusting, caring and brave, as well as strong and competitive. We respect these qualities, even in our opponents, and are outraged by “sucker punches” or “cheap shots.” We need to recognize that the vast majority of people in this world respect these qualities too, and look to America as a model to emulate.

In New York, some inadequate, frustrated bullies exploited our openness to deal a cheap shot on a symbol of American spirit and harmed our teammates and fellow competitors. After the hurt, anger and outrage, how we respond over the next months or years will also demonstrate the American spirit. Our strength is in building and creating, not tearing down or destroying. Although the competitive spirit has given us almost limitless power to destroy in defending ourselves, the other elements of our American spirit restrain us from abusing this power. ♦



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