

Being There Matters

Sporting events truly come to life when you see them in person and not on television

You can just picture the scene of a couch potato somewhere in America groaning, "Nah, I'd rather just watch it from the comfort of my own living room," when asked if he would like to attend a major sporting event. But if you have this mindset, you are missing a golden opportunity. You'll lose the chance to see the whole mosaic, rather than selected pieces. If you don't go, you are committed to a storyline being presented by the director of the broadcast, which is often from a pre-selected script, rather than watching the story unfold for yourself. It's the difference between viewing a documentary made by an art historian, as opposed to actually looking at a fine piece of art, directing more of your attention to the aspects of it that draw you in and interpreting it for yourself.

At an NBA game you can see for yourself the effort it takes to get open for a shot or to prevent your opponent from getting open—all work that takes place away from the ball and, therefore, away from the camera. When you're there, you can see the full scope of the minefield that Steve Nash navigates to create a play for one of his teammates, something that isn't captured on television and that even HDTV does not reveal.

At an NFL game, you can marvel at a defensive lineman who gives 100 percent on every play rather than simply focusing on a lineman when he makes a big tackle. In tennis, you can see how tennis players conduct themselves between points and between games. You can see character revealed and tested. You can feel the spirit of the fans in the arena as well as the elevation of the human spirit when a competitor does something neither he, she nor we thought possible.

If there is one time when television coverage repeatedly lets me down, it's at the character-revealing moment of victory or defeat. In hockey, it's the Stanley Cup playoffs, when teams formally exchange handshakes at the end of the

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series. I watch this moment in person with intense interest. I watch to see how former teammates react to each other. I watch to see how formidable adversaries bury the hatchet. I watch to see the mutual respect of the people who play the same position, such as goalies. Television coverage often misses this golden opportunity to learn something about the competitors by instead showing ran-

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dom handshakes, or confetti raining down on the arena, or a player doing a unilateral exaltation, or the most superfluous camera shot of all: an outside aerial view of an indoor arena.

In tennis, the manner in which the victor and the vanquished approach the net and exchange greetings may tell me something about them. But if the camera cuts away to girlfriends, boyfriends, coaches or celebrities in the crowd, we miss pivotal parts of that moment that we wouldn't miss by being there. Is the body language frosty? Do the players make eye contact on their way to the net? The graciousness of Roger Federer comes out when you see him console early-round opponents, not just the better-known later-round ones.

In golf, what a moment it was in 1978 when Gary Player captured his final Masters, paired in the final round with a young Seve Ballesteros, who came running onto the green with a big beaming smile on his face to congratulate Player, a moment that the immediate coverage at the time missed. But it said a lot about Ballesteros—and he would later say that one of the reasons he was so happy was that Player had just taught him how to win the Masters. Hey, there's no reason that magnanimity in defeat can't be coupled with just a little bit of self-interest.

I remember the tipping point in my sports viewing career when I realized the frustrations of not being there. If I were Elvis, I might have been tempted to shoot out the television that night. It was October 17, 1994, and the Kansas City Chiefs were playing the Denver Broncos in a Monday Night Football game: an aging Joe Montana against John Elway. Montana was leading the Chiefs on a 75-yard drive at the end of the game that would culminate in a game-winning touchdown with eight seconds to play. It was one of his last showcase moments.

Had I been there, I would have been able to see the trademark Montana cool before, during and after each play and the response of his teammates.

Instead, on TV after every single play, and I mean *every single play*, the camera cut to Jennifer Montana in the stands. I was watching this unfold at a sports bar with a friend until I couldn't hold back. "Can you believe this?" I exclaimed. "Why do we have to constantly look at Jennifer Montana rather than what's happening on the field? I'll bet this didn't happen back in the day." I started to get a little carried away, veering far into the hypothetical. "I mean, can you imagine Bronko Nagurski running with the ball, and the camera constantly shifting to Mrs. Nagurski in the stands?" The retort of my buddy after hearing this diatribe? "Well, I'll bet Mrs. Nagurski didn't look like Mrs. Montana."

It was, no doubt, a valid point. But I don't care. Whether it is Mrs. Nagurski, Mrs. Montana or Gisele Bündchen and Bridget Moynahan sitting together at a Patriots game, I want to see what's on the field, and I want to direct my own coverage by attending the event in person. So even the laziest couch potato should be able to see that watching a sport live only really counts if you see it firsthand with your own two eyes. ■

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