

Wish I'd Been There

When considering which sporting events would have been the best to witness in person, start with the unanticipated



BOB LATHAM

I was recently asked: “Out of all the sports events in history, which one do you most wish you had attended?” It’s a useful conversation starter, and I decided to develop a list of possible answers using several criteria.

The list had to represent a variety of sports. And “milestone” games, like Hank Aaron hitting his 715th

home run, did not rate. For a sporting event to truly capture your heart and imagination, something unexpected has to happen, and there needs to be more drama than the simple setting of a record that you know is inevitable. With these thoughts in mind, here’s my countdown of the top eight.

8. **“The Rumble in the Jungle”**—Zaire, October 30, 1974. With the current disarray of world boxing, it is hard to remember how monumental a Muhammad Ali fight was. The world stopped and took notice, especially when he was fighting a legendary opponent. The Rumble in the Jungle against George Foreman is where Ali regained his heavy-weight title—a unique setting and a result against the odds.

7. **1985 NCAA men’s basketball final**—Lexington, Kentucky. Villanova beats Georgetown 66–64. An NBA final or an Olympic basketball final does not evoke the emotion of American college basketball, and this was perhaps the greatest upset in a showcase college game.

6. **1960 U.S. Open golf tournament**—Cherry Hills, Colorado. While there could be many worthy entries on this list from golf, the 1960 U.S. Open represented the crossroads of golf history, with Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Ben Hogan all in contention on the final day. Hogan won his first grand slam event in 1946; Nicklaus won his last in 1986. That’s 40 years’ worth of grand slam winners in contention on the same day. Palmer won—his only U.S. Open victory.

5. **Big Ten track meet**—Ann Arbor, Michigan, May 25, 1935. The sport of track and field is riddled with historic moments. Jesse Owens winning four gold medals at the 1936 Olympic Summer Games in Berlin would have been an inspiring sight, but there was a better moment to catch track greatness and Owens specifically. And you could have seen it all within 45 minutes at the Big Ten meet in Ann Arbor in 1935. In those 45 minutes, Owens set three

world records and tied a fourth in the 100-yard dash, 220-yard dash, long jump and 220-yard hurdles.

4. **Bears vs. 49ers**—Chicago, December 12, 1965. This was Gale Sayers’ rookie season with the Chicago Bears. George Halas did not like using rookies, so he didn’t even start Sayers until the third game of the season. On a muddy field against the San Francisco 49ers, Sayers touched the ball 14 times, scoring six times, either by rushing, receiving or returning a punt. Although there are many legendary football games to choose from, there is not another moment of such singular brilliance as this one on a day when you might least expect it.

FOR A SPORTING EVENT TO TRULY CAPTURE YOUR HEART, SOMETHING UNEXPECTED HAS TO HAPPEN.

3. **Wimbledon men’s final**—London, July 6, 2008. Roger Federer vs. Rafael Nadal. Before this match, I always considered the best tennis match of all time to be the 1980 Wimbledon final between John McEnroe

and Bjorn Borg. But this was simply tennis at the highest level ever played, with Nadal emerging as the winner. Yes, it was nearly topped by the Federer–Roddick final a year later, but not quite.

2. **“Miracle on Ice”**—Lake Placid, New York, February 22, 1980. United States vs. Soviet Union. Need I say more? You want the unexpected?

1. **Game 3 of the 1932 World Series**—Chicago, October 1, 1932. This is the most legendary and talked-about moment, from the most legendary figure, in America’s national pastime. Babe Ruth allegedly pointed to the center field bleachers before hitting a 440-foot home run in the direction he pointed. A box seat at the game and you would have stories to tell for the next 70 years. Plus you would get the benefit of seeing not one but two home runs from Ruth, as well as two home runs from Lou Gehrig.

Shall we continue the debate? Send me your candidates, and perhaps I’ll offer a revised list in a future column. ■

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