

In the Trenches

It is often worth observing how athletes approach their business when they are not in the limelight



BOB LATHAM

One of the great things about watching sporting events when something meaningful is on the line is that it reveals character. Will a basketball player be able to hit the winning shot as time expires in the NBA Finals? (See Jordan, Michael.) Will a quarterback be able to lead his team on a long drive to win a Super Bowl? (See

Manning, Eli.) Will a baseball player be able to hit a walk-off home run in the World Series? (See Carter, Joe.)

Teddy Roosevelt, the 26th president of the United States, once wrote eloquently about the valor of being “in the arena”—that those who had been in the arena and had their character tested were more to be admired than those who had never been in the fray. The “in the arena” theory certainly holds true today.

But while the limelight may be the ultimate test of character, that character is often built, and may be revealed just as keenly, in the trenches. Therefore it is worth observing how an athlete approaches his or her business outside the limelight. Kirk Gibson is one of those who delivered in the arena, hitting a famously improbable walk-off home run in Game 1 of the 1988 World Series. He absolutely rose to the occasion on a bad leg when the lights were shining brightly.

But I first took notice of him in an early-season game in 1984 when he was with the Detroit Tigers. He sat on the edge of the dugout steps—not in the dugout—when his team was batting. I saw him question an innocuous foul ball call by the third-base umpire, wanting to know how foul it was. When a Tigers player was brushed back and began to make a move toward the mound, I think Gibson was across the third-base line to join the ensuing melee before any of his teammates had left the dugout. He was absolutely the most intense and involved baseball player I’d ever seen. So it was no surprise that year when he led the Tigers to the World Series title. Nor was it a surprise four years later when he resurfaced with the Los Angeles Dodgers and led them to a championship as well. It showed that what goes on in the trenches translates directly to the limelight.

Last year, I was at the Visa National Gymnastics Championships. Nastia Liukin, the 2008 Olympic all-around

gold medalist, had been heavily promoted for the event, so she was expected to perform in a big way. But she hadn’t trained much since Beijing, so she limited herself to just the balance beam competition and put in a rather pedestrian performance. However, what impressed me is that she would even be doing competitive gymnastics a year after reaching the pinnacle of her sport and at a relatively advanced age. Carly Patterson, for example, hung it up at age 16 after cashing in on an Olympic gold medal.

More impressive than Liukin’s participation at the 2009 competition, however, is that she showed herself to be a total gym rat. She was at the edge of the mat cheering on her teammates from the WOGA Gym in Texas as well as

her Olympic teammates from Beijing. And when I say cheering, I don’t mean lightly. Throughout the arena you could hear her encouraging them. She was deeply involved in everything, even helping to prepare the apparatus for her teammates.

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Pat Verbeek, the former NHL player known as the “little ball of hate” for his nastiness on the ice, came by it naturally. I saw him in a preseason practice for the Dallas Stars late in his career and he got into a fight with a teammate during a scrimmage that left blood on the ice. Perhaps a perverse example of conduct in the trenches, but an example nonetheless.

Walter Payton, for my money the most superbly conditioned athlete of his generation, used to engage in punishing personal workouts running up and down a hill in a park near his home in suburban Chicago. Athletes of all ages, shapes and sizes would occasionally try to mimic or keep up with him. None ever could. Is it any wonder that he retired as the all-time NFL rushing leader?

So don’t just pay attention to star players in their glory. Watch how they approach their craft in otherwise innocuous moments. More often than not, you will get a preview of how they will perform in the arena. ■

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