

Sports Science

Chemistry gets the credit for many top performances, but perhaps other disciplines deserve praise as well



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The San Francisco Giants' World Series victory has re-inforced that a particular discipline of science has progressively crept into the sports consciousness. The Giants did not have an everyday position player who was an acknowledged superstar. That's sometimes the way it goes in American sports. Either a

team rides the back of a superstar to a championship or comes together as a team of equals, misfits (the Giants) or "idiots" (Johnny Damon's description of his 2004 Boston Red Sox). When a team takes this latter route to a championship, it is inevitable that every description of that team lauds its "chemistry."

But how did chemistry hijack the sports page from other academic departments, including other science departments? After all, what happens when a bat hits a ball is much more a product of physics than chemistry. And elements such as a player's size and speed, not to mention the much-coveted ability to pitch left-handed, are matters of biology, not chemistry. It amazes me that, in the competitive world of academia, the physics and biology departments have ceded this sports ground to the chemistry department.

When we speak of team chemistry, of course, what we really are making reference to are intangibles like team members being inspired to play for each other, to bring out the best in each other, and to create a situation where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts (a proposition that the math department may take issue with). But when we analyze the way players interact with each other, aren't we talking more about sociology than chemistry? Staying in the social science field for a moment, many teams employ sports psychologists. If chemistry is more critical to on-field performance, why don't sports teams employ team chemists?

There is, of course, the irony of citing the triumphs of chemistry in sports, particularly in the sport of baseball, at a time when concerns about performance-enhancing substances are so pervasive. Perhaps this is one reason you do not often hear of a cycling team in the Tour de France having good team "chemistry." Such a quote from a team member in a French newspaper is likely to be misinterpreted and result in an immediate raid of the team's hotel rooms by French authorities.

I also am surprised that theology departments do not step in and take some degree of credit. With the number of players who, in postgame interviews, attribute their performance to God, Jesus or both, it is somewhat incongruous that we do not hear about good "team theology." Perhaps theology professors have heeded the words of Yogi Berra, who reportedly said, after Minnie Minoso stepped into the batter's box and made the sign of the cross, "Minnie, don't you think God should be allowed to just watch the game?" Come to think of it, shouldn't the philosophy department stand up for itself? Given the phenomenal postseason success of the philosopher Berra, it would seem that it would deserve some credit. Plus, as the eloquent Mr. Berra once observed of baseball, "90 percent of this game is half mental."

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Perhaps it is not the examples of positive team chemistry but rather the negative examples of a radioactive mix of players, or the bringing in of an unstable element, that brings the focus to chemistry. The toxic Randy Moss, now with his third team in just half a football season, is a prime example. The Minnesota Vikings put him on waivers and only one team in the league, the Tennessee Titans, picked him up. Thus, it is perhaps the detonator—not the catalyst—that is responsible for the toehold "chemistry" has had in the sports lexicon for so many years.

A unique chemistry experiment may be taking place this basketball season as we all watch the beaker of LeBron James, Dwayne Wade and Chris Bosh interact with the Miami Heat. If the amalgamation of three superstars with only one basketball between them works, will it be a tribute to chemistry or alchemy?

I, for one, would like to see more parity in the credit allocated to various academic disciplines for the performance of a sports team. It is high time to convene the academic roundtable and figure out the appropriate curricular mix for maximum team performance. ■

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