

Presentation Breakdown

Those who bestow awards after a sporting event need to remember who the fans came to see



BOB LATHAM

Award ceremonies following a sports championship can make for awkward moments. The phone call from the president of the United States to the manager of the winning World Series team after the game generally displays as much genuineness as a phone call from a telemarketer. Then there is the executive

of a sponsor or organization who takes the opportunity to give ill-conceived analysis of what just took place on the playing field. And there is always the general feeling that we are watching an imposition on the contestants' time, with the winners wanting to celebrate and the losers wanting to commiserate with the people closest to them.

But the awards presentation at this year's Australian Open may have been the most uncomfortable I have ever seen. Novak Djokovic and Raphael Nadal had played five of the most physical sets of tennis imaginable, with Djokovic needing almost six hours to capture the title—a record playing time for a Grand Slam final. These are two of the fittest athletes on the planet, but they could barely stand up by the end of the match—a fact that was obvious to all watching, with the apparent and unfortunate exception of the people given a microphone for the awards presentation. A representative from Kia and the president of Tennis Australia each droned on for what seemed like hours while Djokovic and Nadal alternated between wobbling from side to side, squatting, bending over and grabbing their ankles to keep from cramping, and ultimately leaning back against the net for support. The two speakers meanwhile spoke in halting sentences, with those annoying pauses to invite applause that is given only because it would be impolite to do otherwise.

ESPN's Chris Fowler spoke for all of us watching on television when he noted that Djokovic and Nadal would each be willing to forfeit some of their prize money if the speeches could be shortened. Finally, when the speakers were close to finishing anyway, some alert official came out with chairs for Djokovic and Nadal, to massive applause from the crowd—every single member of which noticed the situation, while the presenters remained oblivious.

As I was watching this scene unfold, the frustration in me caused me to imagine what might have happened if the two contestants suffering through this were not two of the most

gracious athletes in the game but rather, say, John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors. McEnroe at best would have walked off the court. Connors would have been more likely to grab the microphone and say: "Excuse me, but I have to get to the locker room, thank you very much for coming."

The Australian Open presenters violated realization No. 1 when you are making a presentation at a sports championship: No one came to watch you present. It is not your moment; it is the athlete's moment. Enhance it; don't detract from it. And there has never been a presentation where brevity was not appreciated. Each of these presenters, by staying with their prepared, bland and deliberately delivered remarks, missed a golden opportunity to enhance their brands. Imagine if the Kia guy had come out and said: "We at Kia try to be responsive to our customers' needs, and right now I want to be responsive to the needs of these two great

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players, that being to get into the locker room. So may I just say congratulations to each of them for a great tournament." And how would attendees and viewers feel about Tennis Australia if its president had then said: "Well, I want to follow suit. At Tennis Australia we are all about the players, and right now it should be all about these two players, who gave a performance for the ages. So I will simply say thank you to everyone involved in the tournament and thank you to our champion and runner-up."

One of my favorite examples of a presenter or speaker knowing his place occurred when a friend of mine was called upon to introduce the keynote speaker at a gathering of an organization to which we both belonged. The president of the organization was to introduce my friend, who was then to introduce the speaker. The president introduced my friend with the usual, monotonous recitation of his accomplishments. My friend then took the podium and said simply: "Ladies and gentlemen, Rod Jones." Rod Jones (not his real name) began his presentation with a big smile on his face and said, "That's the best introduction I've ever had." And he meant it. The audience felt the same way. ■

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