



Gaming the Games

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I suspect you were outraged when three badminton teams were disqualified from competing in the Olympics after they intentionally lost their matches in order to get a better position in later rounds. After all, the Olympics are supposed to be about sportsmanship, fair play, trust, and honor. It makes an interesting analysis why intelligent young athletes, who have trained countless hours and sacrificed years of time to be the very best in their chosen sport, would risk losing the ability to compete in order to gain an illicit position advantage.

At every Olympics, there are scandals where athletes find some loophole to exploit in their quest to be called the best. The irony is that when they wake up in the morning, they have to live with themselves, knowing the cost of their victory was the very thing that made them losers. How pitiful; they managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. They tarnish their medals.

The problem is that we give the people who cheat and get caught suspensions, but we give the people who cheat and don't get caught medals. I am not saying that all athletes cheat; far from it. I honestly believe that the vast majority of participants do play by the rules. It would be interesting if we could ever determine the exact percentage of honest competitors who would rather play the rules and lose than find a way to cheat and win.

One could argue that the people who cheat are from countries who have a political need to always be the best, regardless of the tactics. Their warped sense of supremacy gives the games a political intrigue that is unhealthy, but always present. While national pressures can be one cause for the rot, I believe there are individuals from any country that would game the games if given the opportunity.

I believe the real culprit is the pressure to win, which is ironic because that is the core reason for the Olympics in the first place. Playing by the rules involves making thousands of hard choices over years of time. The burning desire to be called the best drives athletes to walk up to the point of doing inappropriate things but never cross that

fine line. That conundrum appears to be a bigger challenge than to swim faster than any other human being alive. To take advantage of every training aid and legitimate nourishment regime but never go one micrometer beyond is pressure of a different sort. For those athletes who do not compromise their integrity, I think there should be a medal of trust. They have earned it, and when they wake up, they have the joy of knowing they competed at the highest level whether they won or lost. They are the true winners.

We cannot ever tell who cheats just a little bit in some rule of competition. That would be impossible. Rather, we have to rely on the forces within individuals to drive most athletes to take the high road and snatch personal victory from the jaws of defeat.

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