

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPEAL OF SPORTS

Sports fulfills a specific role within our contemporary society. An analogy to illustrate how a colossal "institution" can function within the parameters of providing a highly specific need pertains to the entertainment industry. The purpose of entertainment is the provision of escapism (the ability to temporarily forget about our problems by being "absorbed" and "immersed" within a specific form of entertainment). Although the institution of sports does *not* provide this same specific function, it still constitutes the provision of a specific psychological need within contemporary man. The psychological need is as follows.

*Sports acts as a metaphor for **certain specific** aspects of life.*

In order to initiate the analysis, the world's major sports will be compared. When referring to "major sports", the parameters will constitute sports which experience a substantial following and generate significant revenues for all those involved (in one respect or another) with the sport. A preliminary analysis of all major sports would seemingly indicate the existence of too many disparities among the various sports, thereby rendering any attempted analysis futile. Specifically, there is no correlating factor to impart a "unifying component". However, there *are* two correlating components amongst all sports, regardless of what manifest disparities may exist among the various sports. It is these two correlations which provide the basis for the thesis of this paper. In every sport, there exists offence and defence. Other than the fact that all sports are the result of physical activity, this is the *sole* correlating factor among all major sports. It is these specific components of offence and defence which function in the capacity of acting as a metaphor for certain specific aspects of life. The sport (and individual) which successfully accentuates these two elements with optimum effectiveness, will achieve the pinnacles of fame and affluence.

Everybody in life experiences problems of one kind or another to contend with. As was stated in the initial paragraph, the entertainment industry is of assistance to us by causing us to temporarily forget about these problems. Although sports does not assist us in the same way (we do not become as thoroughly "engrossed" in a sporting event as we do during the course of an *effective* piece of entertainment), sports does provide a metaphor for contending with these problems. This metaphor is provided via both offence and defence.

Firstly, some self evident facts about defence within major sports shall be delineated. A boxer must evade or block his opponent's blows, a goalie in hockey must prevent the other team from scoring, a baseball player must catch the ball and throw it to a base man prior to the batter reaching the plate, etc., etc. In life, how do we contend with life's difficulties and problems when we experience them? If the boss is wrongfully accusing you of some serious error at work, are you able to deal with it in such a manner that the problem becomes alleviated in one respect or another? If your unreasonable co-worker is making the work environment completely intolerable, can you find the correct solution to the problem? If you've foolishly worked yourself into debt, are you capable of finding the judicious way out of it? It is self evident that this list is potentially endless. All too often we are fundamentally incapable of solving these problems. Consequently when we witness athletes who effectively implement defensive capabilities, it

becomes a metaphor for our own inability to deal with our problems. On an *unconscious level*, we live vicariously through them. When we see athletes who successfully defend against the offensive measures of their opponent(s) we witness a metaphor for what we wish we could implement in our own lives. Namely, to effectively defend against the "offensive measures" that we are experiencing. This is *one* factor which causes us to be drawn to sports.

Some readers may be of the following view. Living vicariously through an athlete (even on a temporary basis) does not imbue us with the ability to actually solve our problems. Witnessing someone who can accomplish what we wish to accomplish (metaphorically speaking) does not imbue us with any real sense of solving our problems. Therefore, this analysis must be erroneous. A (potential) critique of this nature is completely devoid of validity. Speaking analogously, it is comparable to stating that entertainment does not actually cause our problems to become non-existent. Consequently, the principle that the purpose of entertainment is to provide escapism is fallacious. Obviously, entertainment does not cause our problems to vanish. However, the fact that we are capable of temporarily forgetting about them *is* of assistance to us. By the same token, witnessing proficient athletes does not "magically" imbue us with the capabilities to implement successful solutions to our problems. However, when dealing with the unconscious mind, the reader should give due consideration to the following principles. When an athlete implements effective defence (especially against formidable offence) we are witnessing someone who, metaphorically speaking, accomplishes what we wish we could accomplish in the course of our own lives. When Muhammad Ali successfully evades his opponents rapid blows, we do not realize the solution to our own personal problems. But he *is* (again, metaphorically) accomplishing our own desire. This provides us with a certain level of gratification. An *exceedingly* superficial analogy which (incrementally) illuminates this is as follows. (The reason this analogy is so superficial is that it will deal with the conscious mind. This paper and its fundamental thesis pertains to the unconscious mind.) The battle of Stalingrad was the emotional turning point of World War II. Why? Prior to this battle, the German forces were viewed as an invincible fighting force which were comprised of "supermen". The belief in the early stages of World War II was that they simply could not be beaten. Stalingrad was their first actual defeat. (In the battle of Britain, they were not defeated per se. They merely failed to achieve their objectives.) When they were *actually* defeated at Stalingrad, the Soviet forces realized for the very first time, that the Germans were actually humans who did bleed. They were not invincible and it was possible to defeat them. Witnessing an athlete with formidable defensive capabilities does not imbue us with the solution to our problems. However, it does provide a certain level of gratification when we see an athlete who (metaphorically) accomplishes our desires

Defence is not the only component of sports. There is also offence. A boxer must land effective blows, a hockey player must score against the goalie, and a baseball player must make it to base. In life, how effective are we in achieving our (potentially difficult) goals? Does our job performance impress the boss sufficiently to achieve the promotion we've been striving for? Are we able to achieve our fortune by accurately predicting the stock market? Is there a way to fulfill the dream we've had since childhood? If we are unable to achieve certain critical goals in our life, we live vicariously through athletes who are capable of implementing formidable offensive measures. When Michael Jordan is able to cut through the defence and score, he fulfills our own individual wishes metaphorically. When a boxer knocks out his opponent, the

same thing transpires. (If the reader is opposing this tenet for the same reason that the alleged anomaly pertaining to defence was opposed, then the same counter argument remains in effect.)

For the readers who may consider this analysis to be far fetched, give due consideration to the following. In the twentieth century, whenever a *truly great* champion has been heavyweight champion of the world, he has been amongst the most popular celebrities in the entire world. Furthermore, he was always amongst the highest paid athletes in his day (if not *the* highest paid athlete). Give due consideration to Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, and, of course, Muhammad Ali. (Even though Jack Johnson was more notorious than famous, this was only because he was black and the people of the day couldn't tolerate the idea of a black champion.) The reader may be of the view that this is nothing more than a riddle. How does this fact provide even incremental support for the thesis of this paper? An explanation is as follows.

Boxing is the one sport which most effectively fulfills the psychological attraction of sports. To be specific, in no other sport does the concept of defence and offence manifest itself as clearly as it does in boxing (assuming of course, that the champion is truly a great champion). In order to elucidate upon this, let us compare and contrast boxing with various other sports.

Firstly, we shall focus upon defence. In no other sport, is the potential for the *effective* manifestation of defence more acute than in boxing. As Muhammad Ali illustrated between 1964 and 1967, he could, for all intensive purposes, proceed for several rounds without the opponent landing a single blow on him. Defence of this magnitude simply doesn't exist in other major sports. In basketball, soccer, hockey, football, and baseball, the other team *will* score. Even on occasions when the score of one team is exceptionally low, this is not necessarily the result of brilliant defensive prowess on the part of the victorious team, but rather incompetence on the part of the losing team. Therefore, when dealing with team sports, the losing team *will* score. However, in boxing it is possible for a great champion to attain victory while simultaneously avoiding his opponents blows (almost) in their entirety. Consequently, this constitutes one component where boxing more effectively fulfills the psychological appeal of sports than any other sport.

Regarding offense, a similar situation prevails. In no other sport is there the potential to so *clearly and unequivocally* achieve victory. What is specifically being referred to, is the knockout (which Ali usually achieved in his title defences between 1964 and 1967). A victory achieved by knockout is *decisive*. You completely overwhelmed your opponent. Victory of this magnitude simply doesn't exist in other sports. In other popular sports, champions can be established via the thinnest margins of victory (as small as a single point). These victories are certainly not decisive. There are times when champions in team sports may not be the result of the supremacy of one team, but rather an accidental slip up on the part of the losing team in the final seconds of a game. If this slip up had not transpired, the losing team may have become the champions instead. In boxing, slip ups do not occur. Although it is entirely possible for there to be egregious decisions on the part of the judges (should the final decision be theirs), a knockout is only achieved by one fighter being superior to the other. A boxing victory achieved by knockout is far more decisive than a victory achieved in other sports. Therefore, this is the second component wherein boxing more effectively fulfills the psychological appeal of sports than any other sport.

In contrasting boxing to other sports, it would be appropriate to mention one other differentiating factor which contributes to decisive victories. In team sports, there is a set schedule which will not be altered. In other words, even if a team is playing for a championship and their most effective players are injured, the championship series proceeds. I am convinced that the outcome of the 1993 basketball championship would have been drastically different if the losing team did not suffer the injuries they suffered prior to the commencement of the series (one of their more important players did not play at all and another one played with an injured elbow). This is not the case in boxing. There is no schedule. If one of the fighters suffers any type of injury, the fight is called off. In other words, if there is a decisive victory in boxing, it is, almost always, the result of the supremacy of one fighter over the other, not a healthy team playing against an injured team.

Yet another contrasting feature between boxing and other sports is as follows. In other sports, *highly* effective offense and defense is not implemented by one individual. It usually requires a minimum of two people to proceed with an effective offense *and* defence. The implications of this are as follows. The athletes whom we will lionize to the largest extent are those who can effectively fulfill our wishes for *both* offense and defence. It is *only* in boxing that one individual can (and does) effectively implement both skills. An analogy will elucidate upon this. Let's take a hockey team. We will assume that they have the greatest goalie in history and the greatest (offensive) player in history. With every game, the goalie stops 100 shots on net. The opposing team never scores. Furthermore, the offensive player scores a minimum of twenty goals a night. If such a team existed, the team would be exceedingly popular. However, *one* individual is not fulfilling our wishes. It requires two of them to implement superlative defence and offense. This simply is not the case with boxing. Only one individual encompasses both skills.

Consequently, the basis of stating that *great* heavyweight champions are amongst the most prominent celebrities in the world and the highest paid athletes in their time, is to state that boxing provides evidentiary foundation for the thesis of this paper. This is for the simple reason that boxing (when properly "implemented") fulfills the psychological appeal of sports more effectively than any other sport.

Another form of evidentiary foundation to provide further support for this thesis can be found via Larry Holmes, the reigning heavyweight champion subsequent to Ali. He never achieved even a fraction of the adulation and wealth that Ali accumulated during his reign as champion. There is one central reason for this. *He failed to fulfill the psychological appeal inherent in sports.* There were two reasons for this. Firstly, he did not knock out his opponent. Time and time again the judges rendered the decision, or there was a technical knockout (one fighter is seriously injured and the referee or doctor halt the fight in order to prevent further injury). Secondly, he would consistently emerge from his fights battered, bloodied, and bruised. It was not overly difficult for his opponents to land their blows upon him. Therefore, since he failed to fulfill the psychological appeal of sports, he failed to gain extreme fame, or wealth. (The only reason he achieved some degree of fame and wealth was because he was the reigning heavyweight champion of the world. In other words, although he achieved "hollow" victories, he did achieve victories.)

Many readers may be vehemently opposed to the position outlined in the previous paragraph. Specifically, this was not the reason for Holmes' lack of appeal. His lack of appeal

was the result of "following" Ali as the new reigning heavyweight champion, a tough act to follow. There is no question that this factor contributed to Holmes' lack of appeal. However, it was a peripheral factor in his failure to capture the public's imagination. The validity of this precept is clearly established by scrutinizing Sugar Ray Leonard. Leonard *did* capture the public's imagination and earned a great deal in the process (his pay days were even more lucrative than Ali's). This was for the simple reason that he fulfilled the psychological appeal of sports. He emerged reasonably unscathed from his fights and was able to achieve decisive victories. Furthermore, he captivated the public despite fighting at a much lower weight class than Ali. The heavyweights possess the most significant level of punching power and are therefore more capable of delivering effective knockout blows. Therefore, they earn the highest salaries and gain the greatest degree of adulation. Consequently, the argument that Holmes' lack of popularity was the result of following Ali is invalid given the fact that Leonard attained an enormous level of popularity *despite the fact* that he fought at a lower weight class. If Holmes had been capable of consistently knocking out his opponents and emerging reasonably unscathed from his fights, he would have achieved the glory and highly lucrative pay days that he so ardently yearned for, even by following Ali.

The final bit of evidence to support this thesis is highly contentious. Many readers may be fundamentally opposed to its validity. Therefore, let me acknowledge in advance (prior to the reader's potential protests) that there were many reasons for Ali's inordinate popularity. However, a critical reason for his popularity was as follows. He was the only man to defeat a seemingly "undefeatable" problem (by way of metaphor). What is specifically being referred to is his defeat of Sonny Liston and George Foreman. They were the "Mike Tysons" of their day. They were *phenomenally* powerful punches. They were both capable of defeating the top boxers of their day with the greatest of ease. Their opponents were virtually incapable of offering any level of resistance. The prevailing view from both the general public and the professional boxing community was that beating them was an impossible feat. Yet Ali defeated both of them (in 1964 and 1974). What Liston and Foreman represented to the public (from a metaphoric standpoint) was a seemingly insurmountable problem for which there seemed to be no solution (i.e. curing cancer). Yet Ali defeated this insurmountable "problem" and showed the world the courage and power of human ingenuity. Furthermore, he was the *only* boxer who could accomplish this. Although, as already stated, there were many contributing factors to explain Ali's inordinate degree of fame, this factor was a primary one. Consequently, the idea of defeating a seemingly insurmountable "problem" (thereby greatly contributing to his fame) is additional evidence for the support of this thesis.

I have striven to anticipate the readers' potential objection(s) to this theory. Namely, the anomalies that seemingly render this theory invalid, or, at the very least, weaken it. I will now deal with these alleged anomalies.

There is one primary fact which would (seemingly) render this entire theory invalid. An example from boxing will serve to illustrate its nature. The "superfight" (a match between two established champions) always garners the highest level of public interest, and the most substantial revenues. Yet in these fights, both fighters emerge battered, bloodied, and bruised. Furthermore, there is no decisive victory by way of a knockout. As a general rule of thumb, the

judges render the decision of the victor. I have stated that these are the precise reasons that Holmes failed to gain significant fame and wealth. Yet these fights generate the most money and the highest level of public interest. Wouldn't this fact, *unto itself*, render my entire theory invalid? Although the reader's objection is entirely understandable, it is without merit.

In order to clearly illustrate why this objection is groundless, an analogy with food will be drawn. What is the *purpose* of food? Obviously, to provide nutrition which enables us to live. Although this is the *purpose* of food, is this the *sole* reason we human beings eat. Is there not also the additional factor of stimulating our taste buds? To put it succinctly, although the reason for eating food is to provide nutrition, is there not also the additional factor of eating for sheer pleasure even if the food is completely devoid of nutrition? What would you prefer to eat? Something which is highly nutritious, but completely insipid, or something which is very tasty yet devoid of nutrition. For most people, the latter would be the more preferable choice. However, does this choice alter the fact that the purpose of food is to provide nutrition? Certainly not. By the same token, a "superfight" is exhilarating. The excitement inherent in such a fight is very stimulating. Human beings tend to be pleasure seeking organisms. They would rather experience something stimulating instead of something pragmatic. In the same way that the desire for tasty food which is devoid of nutrition does not alter what the function of food is, the fact that "superfights" generate extreme income and public interest does not alter the function of sports. However, if it were possible to watch nothing but "superfights", any interest would eventually cease, just like continually eating tasty foods which are devoid of nutrition will eventually cause you to die. Furthermore, how is a "superfight" achieved? By both fighters establishing themselves as great champions in their own right who fulfilled the psychological need of sports.

Prior to completely leaving this point, it would be appropriate to briefly address one element. Ali did not reach the pinnacle of fame and wealth when he fulfilled the psychological appeal of sports (1964-1967). His highest levels of fame and affluence were achieved as champion from 1974-1978. However, in these years, he did not fulfill the psychological need of sports. He failed to knock out his opponents and, all too often, he was emerging battered and bloodied. The reasons for his continued popularity despite these facts are as follows. Firstly, he already proved to us that he could fulfill the need of sports in his previous years. Therefore, he was a champion worthy of lionization. Secondly, from '74 to '78 he gave us the excitement that (pleasure seeking) humans enjoyed. Since he already proved that he was a worthy champion, his greatest fame and wealth were derived when he excited us.

A second anomaly pertains to Rocky Marciano and Joe Frazier. This thesis states that it is the *combination* of defence and offense which fulfills the psychological needs of sports. Both of these champions were lacking defensive pugilistic skills. In many of their fights they emerged battered and bruised even though they could achieve a knockout. Yet despite this fact, they both achieved tremendous fame and considerable affluence. Wouldn't this fact, at the very least, render the validity of this thesis rather weak? This fact does not weaken the validity of the thesis. However, this fact does demand an *extension* of the explanation of the thesis.

The best way to live one's life is via highly proficient defensive capabilities (avoid or effectively deal with the pain and problems that life presents). However, it is not the *only* way to succeed. Rocky Marciano and Joe Frazier personified another way to succeed in life. Namely, regardless of the pain and opposition you experience in pursuing your goals, never give up,

always persevere, and continue on, no matter what. Both of these fighters were consistently savagely beaten by their opponents. Yet regardless of their own physical pain, they always drove on and pushed themselves relentlessly. They simply refused to give up and continued to drive themselves unremittingly in the course of their fights. In the end, Frazier was usually triumphant and Marciano was *always* victorious. Consequently, this fact does not weaken the thesis. It merely requires an extension of the explanation of the thesis.

Once again, just a brief word prior to leaving this point. When Ali beat Foreman in 1974, he did not evade Foreman's blows. On the contrary, he fully absorbed them in his stomach and arms with the intent of tiring out Foreman (he kept his head protected in order to prevent being knocked out). However, it required tremendous courage on Ali's part to lean against the rope and endure this terrible beating. Consequently, he showed tremendous "heart" (as the boxing community refers to it). Therefore, although the *intentional* beating he endured may seem to weaken the thesis, the reader should not disregard what was stated in the previous paragraph.

The third anomaly pertains to Ali's early years and, to some extent, his years from 1970 to 1974. As a result of his *alleged* arrogance (I am the greatest!) people were yearning to see him defeated. This was especially acute from 1964-1967. People would flock to stadiums in the hopes of witnessing his defeat. They *yearned* to see him lose miserably. Wouldn't this fact invalidate the thesis. No. One should give due consideration to a few points.

Ali intentionally strove to engender this effect in the public. He realized it was greatly conducive to the stimulation of ticket sales. Furthermore, in show business there is a prevailing concept. There's no such thing as bad publicity as long as they spell your name correctly. In other words, if you can get your name before the public in any capacity, then something positive has been accomplished. Consciously speaking, they may have yearned for his defeat, but because so many people ended up attending, when it was all said and done, they witnessed a man who could fulfill their wishes for their own lives like no one else before him. He evaded all of his opponents blows and usually knocked his opponent out. Furthermore, during the "twilight" years of his career, many recognized that he wasn't bragging. He simply spoke the truth.

The final anomaly pertains to the complete lack of appeal of professional sports in people who, according to the thesis outlined in this paper, should, in principle, experience an *intense* interest in sports. An example would be the following. Let's take a cancer researcher. Furthermore, let's assume his wife has been diagnosed with cancer and has six months to live. During these months, he works ferociously to accelerate his research. However, in the end, it is in vain as she succumbs. During his period of mourning he develops an iron clad constitution to cure cancer so that no one will have to endure the pain that he is enduring. Yet try as he may, his efforts are futile. A man like this is facing a seemingly insurmountable problem. He was completely unable to defend against the pain of life. Some readers of this paper may feel that an individual like this would take some measure of solace and refuge in the domain of avidly watching professional sports. And yet, I'm sure that there are people who (*very loosely*) conform to this analogy and yet have no interest in sports. Does this not weaken the merits of this paper? In order to explain why this paper is not weakened, the thesis will not be extended, but merely clarified.

If the reader has already read my paper pertaining to an analysis of Sylvester Stallone, clarifying the thesis of this paper will not be difficult. The answer lies in recognizing that although it is the unconscious mind which dominates one's interest in sports, conscious

considerations are not to be dismissed in their entirety (as was the case with Stallone continuing with *Rocky IV*). Prior to developing an interest in sports *via its unconscious "appeal"*, there must initially be some degree of interest in what consciously manifests itself. This simply entails experiencing an interest in the physical activity that is witnessed. If an intellectual has been averse to physical activity all his life, then he won't have any real interest in sports, even if the hypothetical scenario previously outlined prevailed. An analogy will elucidate upon this.

It has already been stated that the purpose of entertainment is the provision of escapism. However, does this mean that anybody with problems will gladly experience *any* form of entertainment in order to temporarily forget about their problems? Certainly not. The ardent intellectual would probably have no interest in the hard rock musical stylings of Led Zeppelin, any more than someone who did enjoy such music would be interested in the opera. However, this doesn't alter the fact that the purpose of entertainment is the provision of escapism. But prior to these underlying needs being fulfilled, there must be some interest in what consciously manifests itself. Consequently, if an intellectual has always experienced difficulties with athletics since he was a little boy, then he would probably have no interest in sports, regardless of the magnitude of his problems. Therefore, the fact that there are certain types of people who have no interest in sports (despite the fact that the thesis of this paper does *suggest* that they should experience an intense interest) does not invalidate the thesis. It merely requires clarification of the thesis.

The fact that the physical activity which manifests itself has some bearing on the appeal of a sport causes one other (small) factor to be addressed. This pertains to Michael Jordan's inordinate appeal during his "heyday". In this paper, the position has been adopted that Muhammad Ali's enormous appeal was largely predicated upon the fact that he fulfilled the psychological need inherent in watching sports like no one else previously. This would imply that Jordan's phenomenal appeal is for a similar reason. However, he did not ever exhibit the magnitude of defensive capabilities that Ali exhibited, and his scoring was not, on average, *significantly* higher than his closest competitors in the N.B.A. Since this was the case, why did he achieve the magnitude of fame and wealth that he did?

The primary reason for his fame lay in what consciously manifested itself on the court. Specifically, his particular style of play was exhilarating to watch. Therefore, although he did not fulfill the unconscious need involved in watching sports to an inordinate extent, as a result of the exciting style of play which manifested itself, he became phenomenally popular. However, the achievement of this popularity was facilitated by another factor. He "emerged" at a time when the popularity of the N.B.A. was at an all time high. During the '80's, professional basketball had reached unprecedented heights of popularity. Jordan's "ascendancy" within the sport coincided with this surge, thereby facilitating the magnitude of his appeal. In other words, if Jordan had emerged in the '70's, his appeal would only have been a fraction of what it was during the height of his career. This popularity "translated" itself into extreme wealth *not* through his direct salary from basketball, but predominantly from his product endorsements. Consequently, Jordan reached the apex of fame and wealth *not* because he fulfilled the psychological need of sports the way Ali did, but as the result of other "mitigating" factors. (i) An exciting style of play. (ii) Emerging at a time which coincided with the enormous growth in the popularity of the N.B.A. (iii) These two factors resulting in an inordinate level of popularity which lead to lucrative product endorsements.

In the latter parts of this paper, I have striven to anticipate the areas where there are seeming anomalies and explain why these alleged anomalies do not invalidate this paper. However, the sports oriented reader may be cognizant of other facts which seem to invalidate the central thesis of this paper, or, weaken it considerably. However, it would not be fair to me to come to the conclusion that my paper is invalid until, somehow, I have had the opportunity to defend myself.