



Are You a Good Loser?...

RECENTLY, VINCE Lombardi, an American Football coach, was quoted in The Times as saying, "Show me a good loser, and I'll show you a loser."

It made me think - and, although I knew exactly what he meant, I dared to disagree with him, because, although losing undoubtedly hurts, in my experience good winners also know how to lose gracefully, a point exquisitely made in a sport like ours.

For three decades, I was privileged to be the pairs partner of the greatest bowler who ever lived - David Bryant was the living manifestation of good sportsmanship - a man who was good at winning, but who could take defeat on the chin - yes, he was the definitive good loser.

Let me re-phrase that - he certainly appeared to be a good loser. When the other chap reached twenty-one first, he would always smile, hold out his hand, and congratulate his opponent: "Well played - all the best in the next round!" - and it was all perfectly genuine!

Perfectly genuine? - on the surface, at least! David Bryant was famous for treating those two imposters - victory and defeat - just the same. It was only a game. No-one had died. Life goes on.

But hang on a mo! - Was it all genuine? - Sorry to beat about the bush, but my answer to that very valid question is bullishly equivocal - Yes and No!

'PERMISSION TO LOSE'

An eminent Canadian sports psychologist, who had studied a number of great sportsmen, once told me: "You have to give yourself permission to lose. Only then can you relax and play your best game, without the fear of losing, which can turn you to stone. Yes, it can petrify you."

David Bryant gave himself permission to lose. He knew he was the best, and he had perfected the art of winning. He was Ambitious. Relentless. Ruthless (ironic that, because Ruth is his wife). But he was not afraid of losing - it happens to us all. Get over it.

But that's not to say it didn't hurt. Losing must hurt if you are to go on winning. It's just that the great sportsmen manage to hide their hurt, and do the honourable thing. And that's an essential part of what makes them great.

GOWSHALL GRACIOUS IN DEFEAT

At 32, Amy Gowshall has already proved herself to be England's top singles player - a bold statement on my part, given the

fact that Ellen Falkner defeated her in the 2011 national women's final, and Natalie Melmore is the Commonwealth Games champion.

Amy has won national titles at two-wood (2005) and four-wood singles (2004), has scooped the Champion of Champions title six times (98/99/03/04/07/09), and, in her younger days, won the under 25 singles title four times (96/99/01/02).

I have been watching Amy since she played in her first national final - the triples - in 1993, and have never seen her lose badly. Like Bryant, she smiles, holds out her hand, and congratulates her opponent with a warmth that just has to be sincere. Doesn't it?

After she lost one game she ought to have won (we've all done it!) I complimented her on her composure on being bundled out of a national championship, and asked her how, after all her success, she coped with defeat.

Her answer was revealing: "Oh, it hurts" she admitted. "But you've got to be able to take it. Then I go home and kick the cat!" She was joking - I think!

SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY PART OF THE GAME

Without naming names, I remember in the 1980's a certain nation came up with the idea of employing a sports psychologist - but, sadly, did not approach the guy who had been so illuminating, my 'permission to lose' character.

That nation's quest for medals became all-consuming. They learnt about body language and became more self-assertive. They strutted their stuff as if they owned the green. And they were told never - never - applaud your opponent's best bowls.

That was the nub of it - whatever you do, don't applaud your opponent, because it will boost his or her confidence. He or she will see it as a weakness. Don't show respect - he or she will thrive on the adulation. Be aloof. Make no eye contact. Own the rink. Breathe deeply. Be strong.

Make no mistake, it did their game some good - you could certainly see an increase in confidence. But they lost some friends. And, more to the point, they lost the ability to lose with grace. Winning became too important. They did not cut themselves some slack - and failed to give themselves permission to lose.



DAVID BRYANT THE CONSUMMATE PROFESSIONAL

Back to David Bryant. He would always applaud his opponent... before striding to the mat to beat the shot-of-a-lifetime he has just witnessed! His applause was generous. Whole-hearted. Genuine. But it was a sign of strength, not weakness.

Just imagine - you have played the best bowl of your life to hold a match tie against the world's greatest bowler. You are over the moon, and he... well, he must be as sick as a parrot.

You glance over at him. He's only got one bowl left to save the match, and he's smiling. The pipe is still clenched firmly between his teeth, but... he's beaming.

"Well bowled!" he offers. "A magnificent shot - perfect!"

You are dumbfounded. Your pièce de résistance, your masterpiece has failed to disturb this man. His equanimity is intact.

You watch incredulously as he sizes up the situation, sucks his pipe once more for luck, returns to the mat-end of the rink - and delivers the inch-perfect draw or bulls-eye drive that not only saves the match, but wins it at a stroke.

TEMPERAMENT IS KEY

Bowls is a slow, non-contact sport, in which speed and strength count for little. There is plenty of time to allow circumstances (the idiosyncrasies of your opponent, the vagaries of the rink, the weather, or the intervention of Lady Luck) to get to you.

It's no coincidence that the most successful bowlers all have a solid temperament. Or at least the ability to SEEM unruffled. It may be - and probably is - partly an act, but it's one that convinces onlookers - and, if you're lucky, yourself, too!

Bad losers show their frustration - and invariably become worse. Good losers publicly hide their disappointment, kick the cat privately (metaphorically, of course!) and live to fight another day.

I know which I would prefer to be, and which course of action I would recommend to any young player embarking on a career in bowls.

Let's have another look at that quote from Vince Lombardi: "Show me a good loser and I'll show you a loser!"

My response that would be: "Show me a bad loser, and I'll show you a loser!"

Jamie Hill qualified for the World Championships but did not come for financial reasons.

Left: David Bryant - a sincere loser, but still a winner all the same!

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**Is the Kiwi Extinct?...**

WHO WOULD have thought that the Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines World Championships would set sail without a single New Zealander on board?

Yes - the 2012 championships at Potters were the first since the event was launched in 1979 with absolutely no New Zealand representatives. Not one!

THE REASON?

Why not? Is the PBA dead Down Under? Did they not hold a qualifying event? Has the NZ chapter been expelled from the PBA? Has there been a massive fall-out?

When I asked World Bowls Tour tournament director Richard Maddieson for an explanation, Richard stated: "They were unable to send anyone." So that was that - and New Zealand's place at the top table was taken by Aussie Brett Wilkie.

FINANCIAL PROBLEMS

I turned to Richard Corry, the Chairman of New Zealand Professional Bowling Association, and, although he threw a little more light on the subject, he was less than forthcoming. But he did explain that the issue was a financial one.

He said: "With the increasing difficulty in obtaining sports sponsorship due to the global financial downturn, we are currently only able to part-fund winners to the UK.

"We gave our winners the option of a partly funded trip to each of the World Bowls Tour (WBT) events, or to receive a smaller cash prize for winning our qualifiers. If they chose not to take the trip, then the place was offered to our runner-up.

"Unfortunately none of our winners or runners-ups chose to participate in the WBT events this year."

JAMIE HILL WOULD HAVE LIT UP THE TOURNAMENT!

Jamie Hill, one of the sport's most exciting players, actually won the NZ PBA play-off, and should have been at Potters, where his skill - and fearsome firing - would have kept spectators entertained. Murray Glassey was the runner up.

The event was the poorer without a Kiwi - and the decision of the qualifiers to decline a place in the field of the world's most prestigious event begs a few questions. Without Bias hopes they get asked.

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