

Be a winner! A Current Constellation of Core US Values

by George F. Simons

Tough or tender, there would seem to be no doubt that, “Be a winner” is a prevailing discourse shared by many US men and women at this point in history. The difference between women and men, is not necessarily in the degree of competitiveness, but in the objects for which they compete. This discourse about winning is related to the cluster of seminal expressions that we identified as core value expressions in the *Cultural Detective: USA*, “It's up to you,” “Take charge,” “Pursue the American dream.” “You're a loser,” has perhaps become the worst thing you can say of another person in the USA today—or can say to yourself.

When I was growing up—too long a time ago—the maxim was, “Winning isn't everything; win or lose, it's how you play the game.” This was a way of telling us that there is more to life than winning, but even in my childhood, life was already long perceived as a game. Soon the quintessential expression of the importance of winning in the game of life was emerging from football, “Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing.” This advice was attributed to legendary National Football League coach Vince Lombardi, and it might as well have been, as the man went on record with: “Winning isn't everything—but wanting to win is.”

It became a prevailing discourse. Many people already noted the countless sports metaphors that are an integral part of our business language, and penetrate every day life. The ups and downs of corporate as well as everyday existence are described as, “scoring a touchdown,” “hitting a home run,” “it's a slam-dunk,” “striking out,” “don't get to first base,” or are simply “out in left field.” When we take risks, we “ante up” or, “throw a Hail Mary pass.” So, we might ask what is the connection of sport with business and life in the USA?

Let's start with business. US President Calvin Coolidge, is frequently cited as having said, “The chief business of Americans is business,” usually quoted without the conveniently forgotten next sentence, “Of course the accumulation of wealth cannot be justified as the chief end of existence.” Perhaps this was just a palliative for some voters who expect higher ideals, as Coolidge says elsewhere, “The man who builds a factory, builds a temple. The man who works there worships there.” Certainly Max Weber could not have expressed any more succinctly the connection between faith, life, and wealth that has come to dominate US discourse. We no longer speak of the rights of “citizens” but of “consumers.” Outsiders might have some justification in thinking of the US as the “Temple of Mammon.”

Jack Welch, in his generation seen as the paragon of US corporate leadership and the model CEO, profusely cited Vince Lombardi in constructing organizational culture for General Electric, reinforcing the spirit of winning at sport at every turn. He recently got in hot water by telling women to rid themselves of a victim mentality [read “loser”]. Welch didn't create the sports slang of business but substantially popularized it as a part of his “winning” management philosophy. Lombardi also said, “If winning isn't everything, why do they keep score?” It is pro forma to be slightly in denial of financial success as a final determinant of human worth—but

only ever so slightly. Donald Trump, for example, protested that money isn't the important thing, it's just a way of keeping score. Gordon's Gekko, the protagonist in the film *Wall Street* uttered the words, "Greed is good." He is named to sound bit like a lizard.

Not surprisingly, those who used to be consultants, teachers, trainers, therapists, interculturalists, nutritionists, school counselors, whatever their level of competence, have been quick to rebrand themselves as "coaches" and create new rules for how they play their part of the game and who is allowed to play with them. Go with the flow of the discourse! On my next visit to a US restaurant, I fully expect to be greeted by the waitperson with, "Hi, my name is Alex and I'll be your dining coach tonight!"

In financial downturn, US Americans experience not just an economic challenge, but crisis of identity, our prevailing discourse is threatened with contradiction. Hence the chatter of winning has to be supplemented and reinforced with other expressions aimed at preserving this identity. Again we turn to coach Vince Lombardi who tells us, "Winners never quit and quitters never win." Losing is unacceptable, whether it means doubting the economic model or pulling out of Afghanistan, there will always be an excuse to redefine the situation so that we do not come out as "losers." Lombardi's excuse was, "We didn't lose the game; we just ran out of time." New sound bytes are mustered to defend the mental construction. We yell, "Mission accomplished!" even if it ultimately means redefining the mission or declaring a previous statement "no longer operative."

At moments of failure, we only slightly temper our "time is money" discourse with a touch of patience, but with utmost confidence of mind over matter, mental gymnastics over reality. Again, Lombardi speaks, "Life's battles don't always go to the stronger or faster man. But sooner or later, the man who wins is the man who thinks he can." In the US today, holding your job often depends on your attitude: "If you aren't fired with enthusiasm, you will be fired with enthusiasm." The whistleblower, the naysayer, the skeptic, the questioner will soon be sidelined. The US ban of speaking negatively and ad hominem seems to be lifted only for political campaigns and night club comedians, which makes sense, as it is just heckling the other team in the game being played.

Why sport? What we know as sports emerged from the mammalian instinct to play, but particularly to play at conflict. Whether pups or kids (horned or human), mock combat, the struggle for dominance and possession are its leitmotifs in the meadow, on the playground and at the game station. Is this good clean fun, or, is it euphemism for our accepted socially constructed Darwinian, "survival of the fittest?" In the lyrics of rock rapper Maino, whether we run a bank or sell crack on the street,

 "...this is it yeah,
 It's survival of the fittest
 So you better be and mind your business
 'Cause baby nothin' else matters
 You gotta be you and keep doin' what you do so
 Hustle hard, hustle hard, hustle hard, yeah yeah."

So why talk about sports when we have the real thing, namely war? Sport has broken its amateur containment and evolved into a high stakes business. Sport lingo is a palliative for the extreme sport of war. Bread and circuses provided by today's powers-that-be at \$100 per stadium seat and available for the masses on pay TV. Now that the war on terror has been transmogrified into a national "perpetual war" and has become a prevailing US discourse, we need to hold onto the language of sport to sanitize it, to hide the flag-draped coffins, and provide leggy cheerleaders for its parades. As the big wars drone on, our national discourse is flooded with other skirmishes, the war on drugs, it's the war on poverty, the war on illegal immigration, the war on cancer, etc., ad infinitum. Sports terms and neologisms sanitize the collateral damage to our identity and self-esteem as well as help us forget that "War is hell."

Please don't misconstrue what I say as a condemnation of sport. I enjoy sports and play them as best I can. But the flow of discourse here is different. It's good for me not only in terms of physical well-being and high energy engagement with others, but play is also one door to that spiritual dimension so well pointed out by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as the "flow" that makes life worth living.

How do we separate this sense of sport from its grosser or more brutal forms? One of the clues lies in our awareness that there are different kinds of games. All too much of sport, life, politics and business, is played as what we call a "zero-sum game." Zero-sum games are based on a "winner take all" philosophy. Someone must win and someone must lose. Once one has won, the game is over, and one prepares for the next contest and conquest. If the outcome is indecisive, we have to continue to play until somebody wins decisively or we choose another strategy for declaring who won.

On the other hand are gaming does not have to be zero sum. There are non-zero-sum games—I like the term "infinite games." In such games, success, "winning" if you will, is defined by our ability to keep the game going, and if there is competition, it is competition with ourselves to make our own performance "flow" and striving to reach maximum benefit for all players. Skipping rope or jump rope involves high-level performance and coordination to keep the game going, as does the joy of sex.

Infinite gaming provides an alternative discourse that supports our cohabitation of the planet. Exploiting natural resources is a zero-sum game, as is waging war to acquire them. Caring for the environment is an infinite game, and we might wonder if it is not self-defeating to describe and conduct our efforts in bellicose terminology, e.g., waging war on pollution. If our prevailing constructed discourse is fatally zero-sum, is there a way out of it?

What happens if you grow up noncompetitive?