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Can sports survive the 'Survivor' craze?

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A few issues ago, I asked in this column if the CBS-TV show "Survivor" represented the future of televised sport.

It's a relevant question because information released by Nielsen Media Research in April suggested that between network, syndicated and cable television, advertisers in 1999 spent more than \$4.9 billion on sports.

The NFL was the big dog with \$1.45 billion, followed by sports commentary, the NBA, college basketball and Major League Baseball. What worries me is that with the exception of the NFL, and possibly general commentary, the others are now dealing with decreasing ratings or fragmenting audiences. That means "Survivor's" bonzo success may influence how advertisers spend corporate dollars in the future.

If you've listened to CBS executives crowing about their financial windfall and improved performance against younger demos (18-54), you know the other network chiefs are putting more development dollars into play for this new kind of "sport."

If you listened to Reebok executives, you'd think this single TV program reinvigorated their brand. That's scary.

"Survivor" offered large doses of unscripted drama, quirky competition, unsung heroes, plotting villains, goofy commentators and the opportunity for numerous camera angles. To some degree, "Survivor" as a TV sports concept featured teams (alliances), power plays (immunity), penalty boxes (the all-seeing tribal council) and long-term suspensions (voted off the island).

Brands like Bud Light, General Motors' Aztec and Timberland were actually able to get down on the field. We saw their everyday presence on the athletes' bodies or verbalized on their lips.

But the "Survivor" concept also has a dark side sports business executives had better watch closely. The idea, which stands dazzlingly on the high wire, doesn't use much of a net. Anything can happen.

Example? During the final episode, an estimated 51 million viewers watched as contestant Susan Hawk publicly savaged fellow contestant Kelly Wiglesworth in order to assist the ultimate winner.

If Hawk's speech was unscripted (to be honest, her words looked dangerously rehearsed), it was one of the most blatant forms of unsportsmanlike conduct most folks have ever seen. It was brutal, and that concerns me.

For years we've watched athletes, whether as members of teams or as individuals, defeat other competitors. It is the way of sport competition and it is rooted, hot-wired if you will, into the makeup of our human genetic code.

Sport is the joy of running fastest to that tree over there. Or throwing a rock the farthest. But it's bad business to burn the losers. If I beat you today and gloat, almost assuredly someone else will beat me tomorrow. There is always a Buster Douglas out there.

To that point, athletes have wisely learned to say nondescript things to the media in order to avoid ending up as targets on locker-room bulletin boards. We've all gone to the Kevin Costner/"Bull Durham" School where we talk about the team, God's gifts or our personal trainer. Under media scrutiny, we may deflect praise or humbly accept it, but the rule in sports is we minimize, if not avoid, someone else's failure.

When an interviewer asks the all-pro wide receiver about his great, game-winning catch, you don't hear: "Well, you know, Walsh, the D-back in that alignment is really slow and I knew he couldn't cover me so I turned him around in the flat and beat him like a bongo. He was toast from the moment I left the line."

Strangely, that was what Hawk did to a fellow competitor. To a national TV audience, she said something close to, "I wouldn't give you water if you were dying of thirst by the side of the road. I'd leave you for the vultures."

Unfortunately, in our warped culture, the media and certain sports marketers may praise her candor and reflect it back to our young athletes as truth and honesty. She said what she really felt. She didn't hold anything back. She didn't lie and sugarcoat things.

Now she has an agent and is appearing on "Hollywood Squares." Suddenly she's a player.

But what if, during her live moment of fame, she had dogged out the Reebok clothing she had been provided? What if she had thrown in a few barbs at the event's corporate sponsors?

What would advertisers say to the network about that? Hey CBS, better learn to control your contestants.

What worries me more, as this month's Olympics create new winners and losers, is whether "Survivor" could influence our concept of winning and the athlete's code. What if Susan Hawk, the Wisconsin truck driver, isn't the exception but the front edge of the wave?

Hawk was voted off her island. She lost the immunity challenge that went to overtime (the Q&A contest) and then came back and mashed Wigglesworth. She was a sore loser with an agenda.

In the hour-long special that followed the show, Hawk looked radiant with splashy blond hair and Wigglesworth looked miserable. Not only had Wigglesworth lost the million dollars (in part because one contestant played "pick a number between 1 and 10" and she guessed wrong), but a vindictive Hawk had ripped her apart nationally.

By the following morning, Wigglesworth was apparently declining to appear on CBS' "The Early Show" with the other famous survivors. I can't say I blame her.

For her, there won't be another game. There won't be a rematch unless she learns to drive a truck. She's stuck with the \$100,000 and the crummy memories of compromised personal values and mistakes that weren't a normal part of her nature. TV helped create a new victim, a new loser. TV critics loved the drama and fanfare. The audience made "Survivor" the second-most watched program of the new millennium.

The new honesty took no prisoners.

So what's my point?

"Survivor," like many early 21st century activities, will be all but forgotten by 2020. But it would be an enormous shame if Susan Hawk initiated a trend where good sportsmanship loses out to blistering, mean-spirited honesty. We could be headed toward a place where losers are sacrificed for the good of the ratings and America's insatiable appetite for destruction evolves a little further.

I thought we outgrew the concept of slaughtering the vanquished. I didn't think our contemporary sport values suggested we should regularly trash the losers. But we live in interesting times. Lady Fame demands that your stage play features new material.

So watch the Olympics and see if this warped trend takes root. As sports business executives, we may play a role in determining whether victory dances, sorry losers and gloating are rewarded.

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