

I liked John Robbie's column about how the on-going changes in major sports all conspire to increase TV revenues and player remunerations, but leave traditionalists hanging high to dry their tears. He worries that the integrity of sport' is under siege, with undefined consequences. And there's the rub. What are the consequences of compromising the integrity of the sport'? Is it just a general worry, like with genetically modified foods, where we simply do not know what might result in the future, or can one be more specific?

Is it simply a rallying cry for conservative fossils who lament the bygone era when they still understood every aspect of their game, including the referee's doings? Or is it just a nice sounding phrase, which fits in beautifully with the widespread cynicism and disaffection prevalent in today's coffee bars and halfway houses?

For some answers, one can go back 2000 years, to ancient Rome, where entertainment was big and very well organized. There were physical activities for energetic men in the Campus; the Baths were visited for daily relaxation; there were many theaters, where an actor's killing would actually happen on stage with the substitution of a condemned man at the last moment; there were chariot races in the Circus Maximus with up to 250 000 spectators; and of course the gladiator and wild beast fights in the local Amphitheater, where up to 50 000 seated spectators would see beasts and men killed in great numbers - 2000 gladiators died over 100 days of events at the opening of the Collosseum in AD80. Entrance was free, and betting on all contests was common, with a cut for the winner. Sounds familiar? Not really?

The authorities of the day believed that for happiness and easy governance it was good policy to provide free bread and entertainment to the people, which included many unemployed. It does not seem likely that there was a lot of interest in detailed tactical analysis nor the finer points of "brawn or brain", "decoy or here-I-come", "defense or aggression". Skeet and Donder, Blood and Guts, non-tomato sauce everywhere was the order of the day. It is reported that all those who found this rather gauche and less than appealing to their finer sensibilities would only go to the theater, where killings happened much less frequently.

Accepting that humans have not changed in the meantime - after all we are supposed to be basically the same for the last 120 000 years at least -, and that the Romans had taken about 300 years to develop the entertainment scenario described above, then one can see that to be successful, today's major sports should in the main provide explosive action and supercharged excitement in a frenetic atmosphere of high decibel sound and kaleidoscopic colour. Heard of WWE Smackdown? Or 20/20 Cricket? Or the new Rugby laws?

And what about those people with the passion for The Game, who have profound knowledge of past happenings and present intricacies, who take cerebral pleasure in analyzing current contests and who can exult in experiencing a superb sporting performance because they know and can judge? The ones who understand that losing the integrity of the game' means that they will now enjoy it much less because their knowledge has become somewhat irrelevant? Because the game has changed or maybe because the playing field is uneven!

underline;">Well, they unfortunately have to bite the bullet - like the theater goes in the past, or the fan of the present who would rather not watch a Tour de France race because s/he thinks the Superhero is probably on better drugs, nor a Super14 match because s/he does not trust the officiating. That's where WWE scores.</p> <p>Is it possible that the sport administrators and promoters are putting the cart before the horse, making changes in the sport when they should be looking at ♦integrity'? And thus bring back the disillusioned fans? Bring back the local flavor with fewer imported players and coaches?</p> <p>Because I do believe that existing major sports can be fantastically successful again, live and on TV, if the amazing modern technology is used fully and ♦integrity' is maintained and assured. Take 5-day cricket: Add technologically controlled officiating, have effective internal controls ensuring 100% player effort, use TV close-ups, slow-mos and excellent commentary - even the ancient Romans would have gone for that!</p> <p>(Letter published in Star newspaper May 2008♦- minus some of the gory bits).</p>