

Why fans should see like refs

By **Bob Katz** March 08, 2016 from a Boston Globe opinion article

Sports are phenomenally popular as teaching tools for values that go beyond sports. Life lessons from baseball, football, and basketball concerning the tenacity, discipline, and perseverance needed to improve, prosper, and thrive are a recurring refrain, urging us onward. We who will never face crunch time in the Super Bowl can seemingly profit from Peyton Manning's tips for performance under pressure.

Want to up your salary, your social life, your game? Why not turn to someone with a proven track record: Bill Belichick for systematic management, Billy Beane for scouting out the undervalued, Lance Armstrong for . . . well, viewer discretion is always advisable.

Prominent athletes, coaches, and sportscasters writing books, giving speeches, and delivering commentary advise us to swing for the fences or slam-dunk whenever possible. Athletic metaphors are so ingrained in how we frame our personal and professional aspirations that America has effectively become one big locker room.

With one serious omission: referees and umpires, the men and women with the whistles around their necks. Which is really unfortunate. Because the one special insight that officials can contribute to the cottage industry of self-help bromides spawned by sports may be one most sorely needed these days: how to damp down divisiveness and restore equanimity.

In a political season marked by demonizing, know-it-all harangues that sound as if they come straight from the sports talk radio beer stand, a shift away from rampant polarization can't come too soon. Enter the zebra shirt.

The two most striking characteristics about referees are that they love the game and that they really don't care who wins or loses.

To most of us, it seems nearly inconceivable that a fellow human, particularly one with such a sensational view of the action, could watch an exciting contest without secretly pulling for a particular team or player or coach to triumph. Rooting, often fanatically, is the essence of fandom. And fans, let's face it, may be our largest demographic.

How do refs do it? By concentrating instead on a parallel and overriding quest, their game within the game to establish fairness. Achieving it ain't easy. The action (especially with football, basketball, hockey, soccer) is often a visual madhouse, chaotic and blurred. Strong, fast, nimble athletes jostle, slap, swirl, shove, swipe, stumble, slam. The line between inadvertent and intentional is often unclear. Skulduggery abounds.

The ideal outcome from the refs' perspective, the kind that leaves them privately slapping five in celebration, occurs when they've applied the rules correctly and consistently in a way that allowed the team that played best a fair shot at coming away with a win. An almost impossibly subtle form of victory, to be sure, and nearly invisible. It won't get blasted over the Jumbotron or

packaged into pithy paperbacks. It won't help anyone knock a sales pitch out of the park or full-court press that job search. But our problems are bigger than that.

As a viable democracy, we could well be facing third and long. Or worse. The election results are not doing their intended job resolving our differences. The standard secrets of success championed by the usual heroes are not what the current crises demands. The wisdom of refs, rather than all-star quarterbacks, may be what's needed in the huddle.

Bob Katz is the author of several books, including 'The Whistleblower: Rooting for the Ref in the High-Stakes World of College Basketball.'