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Good Competition and Why We Should Welcome the Rise of the Giant-Killer

Let me say at the outset, that I haven't got an ounce of Irish blood in my body - Well, that's probably a lie since everyone seems to have a bit of Irish in them somewhere! - But I still celebrated Ireland's historic win over England in this year's Six Nations. Not because I enjoy England losing but because it was a good thing for the sport itself. England's recent dominance in the Six Nations highlighted the disparity between countries and served to make the competition itself a rather dull affair. Instead, it was the recent test series between England and New Zealand that was relished because the Kiwis are England's nemesis and ensure the outcome is never certain. It is this 'sweet tension of uncertainty of outcome' (to use a phrase by sports philosopher Warren Fraleigh) that makes good sport. This was noted in a tweet from ScrumQueens referring to the fact that many of England's experienced players have been taken out of the Six Nations championship to concentrate on the 7s World Cup: "Is the lack of England's 17 players undermining the tournament? We think it is MAKING this tournament".

Good sport is founded on good competition. It is driven by the desire for excellence; and this manifests itself in advancement of skill level, strategy and physical fitness. Professionalising sport enables this process to advance at a faster rate as teams and individuals are given a greater amount of time upon which to improve these things, but ultimately testing 'one's mettle' relies upon good competition. Good competition means that both teams and individuals have to give their best if they are to achieve victory. These are the sporting encounters we relish and will appreciate the most. Victory over a strong opponent tastes so much sweeter than victory over an inferior one. That one must 'raise one's game' in order to win, means that excellence is more likely to be achieved. Equally, 'playing down to the opponent's level' is frustrating because one is not playing to one's ability or able to demonstrate excellence of skill.

For far too long New Zealand was the dominant force in women's rugby. It was possible but not expected for a few other teams to beat them. Yet at the last rugby World Cup final, the tension was raised because New Zealand's dominance was no longer all that certain. Both teams had to raise their game and this meant that spectators were on the edge of their seat. The quality of the game led to previous critics of women's rugby becoming converts. Good sport is good for the profile of the game. Equally, the growth and visibility of sevens is having a similar dramatic effect. Since its inclusion in the 2016 Olympics, many countries have seen its potential as a medal prospect and have invested significantly in the game, which will make it a sport worth watching. The games on show in Rio are likely to be as exciting and as skilful as any of the best that have been seen before.

Women's sport in general will need good competition for sporting excellence to flourish. For historical reasons whereby women were excluded from many sporting activities (those of us over 30 will probably have experienced this first hand), it has to make up a lot of lost ground when compared to the hundred plus years of development in men's sport. Whilst men have been standing on the shoulders of giants for many years now, it is impressive to see the rate at which women's sport is developing. But it is by ensuring good competition that will enable it to develop the most. Women's sport today has the opportunity to exemplify good competition that is based upon 'a mutual quest for excellence through challenge' (to coin another sport philosopher, this time Robert Simon). Whilst many are becoming disillusioned with men's (professional) sport that is mired in controversy and gamesmanship, women's sport has an opportunity to showcase good sport that is founded on respect for both others and the game itself. Yes, sport needs to be based on a desire to win but not at the expense of all else.

Ultimately, what we want to see in sport is good competition; that is sport that demonstrates aesthetic beauty and skill, where we have to play to the best of our ability because the outcome is uncertain, and that is founded on friendship and respect for the game.

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