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PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

"A PANE IN THE GLASS"

IT'S JUST MANNY BEING MANNY

By Bill Tschirhart

It's one of my favourite times of the year but for most non-sports enthusiasts (I was informed in no uncertain terms by another member of my household that I could not use my original term "wives/girlfriends etc.") it's likely right up there with root canal. October is World Series, NHL startup, football (of both the CFL and NFL persuasions) and of course, curling, as leagues and bonspiels are in full swing! Can you say, "Heaven on Earth."?

But it's the baseball playoffs that are the center of a "minor storm" (or at least a tropical depression) thanks to the published, spoken words of one Manny Ramirez of the Red Sox of Boston who, as of last night (10/21/07), earned (oops, if you're a Cleveland Indians fan "were handed") the right to participate in the 2007 version of the World Series.

I'm not a Red Sox fan. If the New York Yankees are "the evil empire" of professional baseball with their seemingly bottomless pit of a budget, the Beantowners are the landlords of the game collecting rent from most everyone. It's one of those teams, that unless you live in the Harvard city, you love to hate. When I meet a Yankee or Red Sox fan who does not reside in either of those east coast metropolitan areas I ask if they also cheer for Micro Soft. What's to cheer about?

The current crop of Red Sox players are by in large, a group of likeable characters but none more so than the warden of the lawn in front of the Fenway Park's left field wall (affectionately known by the locals as The Green Monster) the aforementioned Manny Ramirez.

Some would argue that he's on the team more for his bat than his glove. To wit, in one game this season, as a left fielder, he cut off a throw to the infield from one of his outfield compatriots. Now if you know anything about baseball, that's one for the archives. I doubt whether that's ever happened before. When he tracks down a fly ball, it's a project that more resembles a search and rescue mission than an athletic endeavour. His physical features and attire do little to dispel the perception as well. Those dread(ful)locks that flow from his pine tar encrusted batting helmet suggest a devil-may-care approach to a calling for which he's paid in the millions of dollars. His uniform fit makes him look like an

unmade bed. His countenance also does little to suggest that baseball is the most important thing on the planet which those who pay the stipend to observe his play might expect.

That being said, his contribution to his team's successful ascension to the "big show" which begins in two days was noteworthy to say the least. He hit the cover off the ball at key times and displayed uncommon defensive skills as he caught everything hit his way, played the caroms off that right field wall expertly and even had a few outfield assists, gunning down runners attempting to stretch singles into doubles. He "walked the walk" to put it in the vernacular!

But all those on-the-field accomplishments paled in the wake of his words which were uttered to a throng of media hounds just before one of Boston's three elimination games. For the record, the Red Sox came back from a 3-1 games deficit to defeat Cleveland. Mr. Ramirez rarely speaks in public. I feel that's partly because he feels his command of English is not what he'd like it to be but mostly, that's just Manny. No one knows why he afforded us the pleasure of his thoughts on the playoff situation between his squad and the twenty-five from the shores of Lake Erie but nonetheless, he did.

As happens so often, the printed word paints a somewhat different picture from the spoken word. If you actually heard Ramirez's voice inflections, I would argue you would not have come to the same knee jerk conclusion that many Red Sox loyalists did. Be that as it may, this is what he said when questioned about the Red Sox precarious standing in the American League Championship Series (ALCS).

"We're confident everyday (you know)...it doesn't matter how things go for you (you know)...we're not going to go give up...we're going to go and play the game like I said and move on...if it doesn't happen, so who cares, there's always next year...it's not like it's the end of the world."

Imagine your typical Fenway fan when he/she heard those words! And if you count yourself among that group of diehards, here's likely the only thing you heard... IF IT DOESN'T HAPPEN, SO WHO CARES...

Those words resonated around New England like a pinball in a pinball machine, setting off alarm bells and flashing lights in rat-a-tat-tat fashion! But, to the enlightened fan (that's you because you read the essays in "A Pane in the Glass") what Manny said was not only accurate but a refreshing breeze on a dry sports landscape and here's why.

Notice that he began with an acknowledgement that he and his teammates were *confident in their ability to perform* and that regardless of the scoreboard or series situation, the team was not going to fold its collective tent (for those of you who watched the last three games of the ALCS, that "knock" is more appropriate to the Cleveland gang). In other words, he was focusing on *the part of the athletic contest he could control*, his personal (and therefore his team's) performance. He instinctively or through experience knew that *the outcome of the game/series/season is not within his control* so why would one spend any time expending physical/nervous/psychological/spiritual ... energy on it (therefore the words "...if it doesn't happen, so who cares...").

If I might make an editorial comment here, the average sports fan is really ignorant (adj. - lacking in critical knowledge). George Steinbrenner, owner of the group of overpaid pin-striped attired athletes from "The Big Apple" is the poster boy of ignorance in this matter. He makes no bones about the fact that each and every year he expects a World Series Championship from his team. How ignorant! You can't control that! In placing that burden on his Bronx Bombers, he's actually creating one of the biggest distractions with which the team will deal. The team would be much better served if his aspiration for the team was on the field performance which is quite different from winning what reward or award he feels appropriate at the time.

Performance goals are much better than outcome goals! If each member of the team focuses on those aspects of the game that are in his/her control, records the degree to which he/she is successful, the collective performance will be close to the team's potential. The winning or losing will take care of itself!

If I might cite a Canadian example, the revered Great One, Wayne Gretzky, makes the same error as Winter Olympics approach with our ice hockey team. He has made the statement more than once, and I paraphrase, that it's "gold or nothing for Canada". Well, that may be the case in his mind and those of millions of Canadian ice hockey fans but when that's the goal, it's clearly an outcome goal and at the risk of repetition, you can't control an outcome goal, but back to baseball.

Clearly the vast majority of the media (print and electronic) got "sucked in" along with those Boston faithful who interpreted Manny's words as an indication he is nonchalant or not caring about the fortunes of the team. They didn't get it!

Manny was expressing exactly the right attitude in my view. I especially like that fact that he referred to "playing the game". When he says he's going out to "play the game" I feel he has established for himself precisely the right balance of trust in one's abilities and the determination to execute them successfully as possible. The outcome is something over which you cannot exert control. You can only influence it by "playing the game". For those of you who know the work of the noted American sports psychologist, Timothy Gallwey, you will recognize a balance between "self one" and "self two". For those unfamiliar, please read "[The Inner Game of Tennis](#)" (ISBN 0394491548) and when you do, as I know you will, when you see "tennis" read "curling" and substitute tennis skills and terms with the corresponding curling nomenclature.

Speaking about attitude, and I speak about it a lot in clinics and camps around the curling world, I'm frequently asked my opinion of "the right attitude. My answer, **"I just can't wait to play!"** That expression speaks volumes. It implies confidence in one's abilities, preparation, a focus on performance and perhaps most important, a love of the game and a desire to just play.

As coaches, we need to keep the team focused on those matters it can control. As athletes we must never lose sight of performance as the finish line looms and impending victory. The teams/athletes that have snatched defeat from the jaws of victory by focusing on the outcome are legion in number.

It is often said that baseball is a kid's game, played by adults. Manny plays with childlike enthusiasm and abandon. More athletes should play like that regardless of the number of candles on the birthday cake!

The opposition for those Red Sox of Boston is an unlikely group of young players from Denver known as the Colorado Rockies. The team has no "star" players. It seems as though each game, someone different steps up and makes the key play either defensively or at the plate. They are the current poster team for "becoming greater than the sum of its parts". They had to play an extra game at the end of the regular baseball season to even qualify for post season play. They ended the season winning 14 of their last 15 games. Now that number stands at 21 of their last 22 games. If you know the major league baseball playoff format that means they've gone through two playoff rounds and have yet to taste defeat. Can you say, "on a roll"? The team has the best team defense statistics "in the history of the game" (yikes). We just may see what happens when "the irresistible force meets the immovable object". I can't wait to see these teams, play the games!

The clear difference between the teams is post season experience. Boston has lots and Colorado very little and as we know in curling, experience is a key ingredient to success but is not a guarantee.

I'll be rooting for the mountain boys and their ace pitcher from right here in British Columbia but I'll do with it with a new respect for that guy in left field for Boston. And if he should say or do something unconventional, I'll remember, it's just Manny being Manny!

I'll see you soon behind, "A Pane in the Glass"!