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“A PANE IN THE GLASS”

STARS SELL TICKETS - TEAMS WIN CHAMPIONSHIPS

by Bill Tschirhart

The MVP’s (most valuable players) in the four major North American team sports at the time of writing (November, 2007) are Ladainian Tomlinson (San Diego Chargers of the National Football League), Dirk Nowitzki (Dallas Mavericks of the National Basketball Association), Sidney Crosby (Pittsburgh Penguins of the National Hockey League) and Alex Rodriguez (New York Yankees of the American League of Major League Baseball). In the case of Mr. Rodriguez, I’m going to suggest (with all due respect to Jimmy Rollins of the Philadelphia Phillies who was voted MVP in the senior circuit) that he’s the MLB MVP.

And now for my question, what do these MVP’s have in common besides incredible talent? Answer: ***In their MVP year, their teams not only did not win the championship, they didn’t get past the first round of the playoffs!*** In fact, you have to go back many years in each of those sports to find an MVP whose team did win the championship in that player’s MVP season.

The knee jerk reaction in North American sports is to focus on star athletes. TV executives know it sells tickets and that sells air time and that sells products and services. Team owners fall victim to the same malaise with a few exceptions. And most fans follow suit!

I’m not an Alex Rodriguez fan. I believe the numbers he puts up, stellar as they may be, belie the fact that in my opinion, he’s not the impact player he should be to garner all that

adulation and the accompanying financial compensation. How many of his home runs won games for example? What good is a home run if your team is several runs ahead or behind? When you look at A-Rod's numbers in that light, they don't shine nearly so brightly. But, much to his credit, he was quoted recently that he'd give up his three MVP awards for one championship. Good for him!

On the other end of the scale is the retired Michael Jordan, who won MVP awards **and** league championships. The one enduring photograph for me is MJ literally hugging the NBA trophy with tears in his eyes following yet another Chicago Bulls championship. I never saw nearly the same display of emotion with the MVP trophy.

As the title suggests, star players sell tickets but teams win championships. But if it's MVP awards that you like, notice the “playoff” MVP winners. Generally they are a “role players” who comes up big when the team needs it most. One such example for me was the 1992 World Series MVP of the victorious Toronto Blue Jays (heh, New York and Boston, you don't win the AL East every year) the quiet, businesslike catcher for the Lake Ontario nine, Pat Borders. If you want a recent example, this year's World Series MVP is the largely unheralded Mike Lowell of that Boston squad.

In the long history of baseball, players who have won the regular-season MVP award in the same season as the World Series MVP on winning teams include: Mike Schmidt (1980), Willie Stargell (1979), and Sandy Koufax (1963). That's not a very long list!

Sports are replete with instances of star players being injured or for some other reason, unable to play in an important contest with the result that the rest of the team members each dig a little deeper and the collective is *greater than when the star is in the line-up*.

This weekend, the oldest trophy in Canadian sport will be contested at the Rogers Centre in “The Big Smoke” (aka Toronto) between the Green Riders of Saskatchewan and those upstarts from Winnipeg, the fabled Blue Bombers. The team from Regina is favoured, and some would say heavily favoured to win since the Blue Bombers first string quarterback is injured and unable to play. I'll make a prediction right here that those same Blue Bombers will each dig ... (you know the rest). Does that mean they will win? No, but it won't be because they don't have the star playing.

Let’s direct our attention to curling. Those who know me well also know how dead set I am against MVP and all-star awards. MVP awards are right up there with shooting statistics in my view (but that’s for another time). Every shot in our game is a team shot! This is the ultimate team game. It takes four players to make a curling shot. Case closed!

At an elite high performance camp in Guelph, ON, attended by all of the best young players in the eastern portion of our country, one of the team members of the team that was on the top of the curling world at the time (and is still in that conversation) said the following (and I paraphrase), “We really have only one good player on the team. One of us thought he was washed up. My front end partner and I are good players.” And it was at this point that he paused and looked around the room before adding, “But, we figured out how to play together!”

Too many talent laden teams never figure out, or take the time and effort required to learn how to play together. It takes time and work, and, if I may, a coach (if you want the process to move forward smoothly and efficiently). I have written extensively about choosing players for your team that bring more to the table than a solid delivery. I believe teams are starting to get the message!

Most of the time I spend with teams is making them aware of the areas in which the team is not hitting on all cylinders and suggesting practice plans to put them on the road to making the team greater than the sum of its parts (are you sick of hearing me say that?).

- *Are the four deliveries working together or are some modifications to be made so that stones track down the ice in a similar fashion from player to player?*
- *Does the team know how to communicate effectively, avoiding self-imposed distractions?*
- *Has the team discovered its strategic DNA?*
- *Does it agree on game and end plans?*
- *Does it know the appropriate tactics to be employed?*
- *Are the strategic and tactical decisions commensurate with the team’s overall abilities & philosophies and are those plans disseminated in a timely manner?*
- *Does the team know how to guide stones down the ice?*
- *Does the team understand one another’s deliveries so that help is always close at hand?*

- *Does the team actually practise the shots they attempt most often in game situations?*
- *Are there as many team drills in practice sessions as individual drills?*

Most teams don't know the answers to these and other questions. Many have never even considered them! And of course, there's the big one.

- *When the team was assembled, was consideration given to all that the players bring to the table (both assets and liabilities), not just the candidates' curling deliveries?*

Enjoy Grey Cup weekend and watch out for those Blue Bombers! They have a dangerous mixture of high skill level and low expectations (don't confuse that with confidence).

I'll see you soon behind a pane in the glass.