Warm up

Bad hair day…

P McCrory

Ever thought about bullfighting? I was musing on this topic recently after renewing an acquaintance with Hemmingway’s 1932 classic, Death in the Afternoon. This book, supposedly an encyclopaedic account of the sport of bullfighting, becomes a rambling, although highly readable, account about Spanish culture, writers, food, people, politics, and history. At its heart, it also represents the literary concept of the stoical hero facing deadly opposition while still performing his duties with professionalism and skill.

Bullfighting shares some important sporting parallels with many other sports. One of my personal favourite sports is rodeo bull riding. Ever since I attended a Canadian Academy of Sports Medicine meeting held at the Calgary Stampede, I have been amazed at the remarkable human (and animal) athletes in this sport. At that meeting we were treated to a first hand demonstration of a concussive convulsion by one of the cowboys who was not only thrown off his beast but stomped on by the contrary cow whilst he lay motionless on the ground. Readers will therefore breathe a collective sigh of relief when I let you into a trade secret of this sport that helps the cowboys figure out a bull’s personality. A study from Colorado State University found that when 1636 bulls in cattle yards and auction rings were analysed for their temperament scores, it was found that those bulls with a whorl of hair high on their forehead or no whorl at all were the worst behaved when compared to bulls with a low whorl.

Just image for a moment sitting on the back of a 1000 kg bull whose sole aim in life is to remove you from its back and then stomp you into the dust. As you wrap the rope around your hand (I think they call it the “suicide wrap” when they do an extra few turns around the fingers) you glance down to check the bull’s forehead to notice its forehead hair. Are you pleased when you see that it is supposedly a happy bull with a low whorl of hair? In the brief few seconds before the gate opens and the bull bucks, spins, twists, and slams you into the fence you can only hope that you stay on the bull’s back for the requisite 8 seconds. Whether you remain conscious or not is immaterial as long as you are still on the bull for that time. What a sport!

Perhaps those of you who are considering running with the bulls in Pamplona could use this tip. As the bull approaches, a quick glance at its forehead may help you understand its personality. Only 14 people have died doing this so far. Good luck.

Such ethos of “grace under pressure” is often at the heart of sport whatever its origin. It is what we as sports fans celebrate. The eminently quotable coach of the US football team, the Green Bay Packers, Vince Lombardi said it best when he said “…the spirit, the will to win and the will to excel—these are the things that endure and these are the qualities that are so much more important than any of the events that occasion them”.


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