Losing is good for the Soul

October 20, 2003

Winning is good for the ego. But, if you operate in an environment that is close to your limits, losing happens about half the time. Statisticians talk about the law of large numbers and the central limit theory; sometimes you have good days and sometimes bad ones. Sometimes a guy that is significantly better than you shows up on race day and sometimes the other guy has a good day. Sometimes you are good (relatively) and sometimes you get lucky (probabilistically.)

Losing

One day I was asked to open the batting for my cricket club, Harborne, against Stratford upon Avon. I was a little late for the first ball, which swung away past the outside edge of my bat to be caught by the wicket keeper in front of first slip. The second ball cut back from the off side, passed between my bat and pad, flew past my leg stump and went for four byes. I had this guy sized up – he could swing it both ways and was in the habit of alternating – I chased the next ball outside the off stump, got an edge and the ball squirted between first and second slips for a four. The next ball was short of a length, bounced high, hit the inside of my bat and down to the long leg boundary – four more. The next ball was short again, started in the line of the off stump and veered away; I swung a horizontal bat after the ball got a thick edge over the slips’ heads for four more - sixteen runs off the first five balls against this county caliber quickie and I hadn’t a clue what was happening. The last ball of the over swung in, pitched in my block hole and totally demolished all three stumps. The sound of falling timber was a reminder that sometimes you get lucky and sometimes you don’t.

Winning

It was a Tuesday evening and we won the toss and elected to bat against the team from the next suburb, Weoley Hill. I batted number two and watched my partner play out a maiden over in this twenty over game. For the next sixteen overs I swung my bat at everything that came my way and distributed the ball to the four corners of the ground, sometimes on the ground but mostly in the air, making good use of a short boundary. They tried fast bowlers, slow bowlers, left arm and right; all of then found the middle of my bat. After about 15 overs I had 100, having sneaked a quick single at the end of each over and watched wickets fall at the other end. Try as I could, I couldn’t get out and ended up 117 not out when we declared after 17 overs. We bowled the opponents out for about 30 and retired to the club house. That year I had two more big wins – a Ph.D. and a baby girl.

Losing

The Dalhousie University staff soccer team played in the local parks league. Our most loyal spectator, a girl friend of one of our team, was the news anchor on the local TV channel. On this occasion I played left full back and we lost 10 – 0. But it was a great game – we ran and tackled and passed and lost the ball and they scored again. And again and again and again. This youth on the right wing must have been related to Stanley Matthews; he went this way and that and left me dizzy. It was a good lesson. A few years earlier I had played for my university team, out of my league, against a professional team, Leicester City, that had a handful of internationals. They kicked and controlled the ball so much faster than we did, but we only lost 2 – 0. I even got inside their full back once and hit the woodwork with Peter Shilton beaten, close but no cigar.

Winning

When I was a little boy, aged about 12, I captained my village soccer team against that of a neighboring village. I think that we were about eleven or twelve at the time. We rode the bus, wearing our clean boots and the set of jerseys that we had bought with the proceeds of a jumble sale. The other team players were bigger, but we were faster and won 17 – 1. I was a little cocky in those days and started telling the referee how to do his job. It turned out that this ref was a bus conductor who knew my dad. Needless to say I was a little embarrassed when the three of us met the next day at the bus stop. Some thirty five years later, I played for a local team in the Oklahoma. We reached the cup final through a combination of effort and team morale, with a little bit of skill and luck. Just before the final our team was enhanced by the arrival of a new professor of engineering, from Nigeria. We were playing our arch-rivals, but Deji, playing center forward, proceeded to put up four unanswered goals. In the words of Queen, “we were the champions”. By this time age had made us a little more magnanimous, but forty five year old ego can always do with a boost.

Losing and winning

When I worked as a physiotherapist at the Birmingham Accident Hospital we used to play table tennis in the gym at lunch times. There were two remedial gymnasts, the hospital photographer, a couple of doctors and me. We heard about a hospital table tennis league and recruited and old cricketing friend (Mac) of mine to strengthen our team. We had a lot of success and reached the final, playing against a team from a hospital across town. Their number one player was also an outstanding club rugby player who had played fly half for England. We agreed that I would play against him, to maximize our chances down the order. He played strategically on my weaker backhand and took the match three games to one. In the end our only victory was our number five against a weaker fill in.

The next year we had improved considerably, what are lunch times for? And turned the tables to win the Inter hospital challenge trophy, and this time I beat their number one.

