

Editorial

Fear and Self-loathing on the Campaign Trail

The French take the entire month of August off for vacation. Americans typically don't have that luxury. That's why for two and half weeks this summer, the Beijing Olympics were a welcome break for many Americans from the tedium of our everyday world, a vacation away from our popular culture. In particular, the games were a break from the two-and-a-half year presidential campaigns.

But they're back — in full force. And despite both parties having nominated honorable candidates, the campaigns have disintegrated into the typical tit-for-tat, charge and counter charge, political industry camp vs. political industry camp. Lots of sound and fury signifying almost nothing.

But it wasn't just American presidential politics that the Beijing Olympics allowed us to break from; they also allowed us to ignore, for a short time, our own over-marketed, mind-numbing, once glorious sports culture. Today when you think of the American sports culture, you think of baseball players breaking Babe Ruth's home run records using steroids. Or Super Bowl games where the fan emphasis is on judging the virtues of the newest advertisements, to say nothing of having to mute the almost always poorly done aging hipster rock star halftime extravaganza. Or you might call to mind the low-rent, hip hop atmosphere that NBA Commissioner David Stern has brought to the league's arenas. Even the esteemed Madison Square Garden is vulnerable to Stern's lowest common denominator marketing philosophy. Someone forgot to tell Stern that when you try to manufacture soul, you end up with no soul.

Is anybody having any fun out there in our sporting culture? It's hard to when crass commercial marketing takes the spontaneity out of the games. But then came the Beijing Olympics.

One of our favorite moments of the Beijing Olympics was when members of the Redeem Team enthusiastically cheered on Michael Phelps and the American swimmers as Phelps wrapped up his eighth gold medal. Amidst the American basketball players, who just happened to leave their agents at home, sat Kobe Bryant wearing a funny hat and enjoying his teammates' camaraderie.

It was as if the Olympics allowed Kobe to take a vacation from himself, from his image, and along the way he found an Asian culture and a country full of fans back home who actually liked him. He might have even found a few teammates who thought he was okay. On vacation from being Kobe, the new, improved Olympic version wasn't all that bad. Credit, of course, goes to Coach K. who had the audacity to suggest that the over-priced, over-hyped American athletes might just play defense this one Olympics. Playing defense also meant that they might have more fun.

The larger message of the American culture trending an up-tick in Beijing wasn't lost on *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman whose post-games column read, "Melting

Pot Meets Great Wall.” Friedman wrote how the meeting of the two cultures seemed to bring out the best in both. “Both countries can — and will — look at their Olympic success as reaffirmations of their distinctly different political systems. But what strikes me is how they could learn from the other ... you can’t look at the U.S. Olympic team and not see the strength that comes from diversity, and you can’t look at the Chinese team and not see the strength that comes from intense focus and concentrated power.”

Friedman elaborates on our diversity:

The Associated Press reports that there are 33 foreign-born players on the U.S. Olympic team, including four Chinese-born table tennis players, a kayaker from Britain, seven members of the track-and-field team – as well as Lopez Lomong, one of the Lost Boys of Sudan’s civil war, who was resettled in the U.S. by Catholic Charities, and Leo Manzano, the son of an illegal immigrant Mexican laborer. He moved to the U.S. when he was 4 but didn’t gain citizenship until 2004.

What the Chinese brought to the Olympics as well, besides focus and concentration, was a joyous enthusiasm for capitalism, economic growth and opportunity, reminiscent of an America of the 1890s, 1920s, or even 1950s. The Chinese showed not cynicism, but gratitude and eagerness toward their new culture. Okay, the Chinese do like to cheat a little, especially when it comes to women’s gymnastics, patent law, and stripping needed resources from Africa, but they are not a jaded people. Jaded better describes the European culture, not Asia’s new commercial exuberance. Warning: being cynical or jaded is not something Americans do well; better, as Friedman notes, to use these Olympics as “a teaching moment.”

But the Olympics ended last month. And Americans — *groan* — have now been forced to return to the 24-hour news cycle, to lowest common denominator campaigns, controlled not by the candidates but by their respective political industries. The messages we hear dwell on our brilliantly successful and greatly admired, country’s flaws and problems, on candidate’s peccadillos, and on the crises we may face — a steady diet of fear and self-loathing on the campaign trail.

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Early last summer John McCain tried to break this cycle and take control of his own campaign and political destiny. He offered Obama the chance to debate every week until November, thus ratcheting up the role the two candidates would have in determining who would win in November and ratcheting down the role of pundits, advisors and all things loud-mouthed. McCain’s offer was reminiscent of the deal Kennedy and Goldwater worked out in the fall of 1963 when they agreed over cocktails at the White House to campaign together in whistle-stop fashion.

It was a chance to throw out the agents and the images. Unfortunately for American voters and for our culture, Obama turned down McCain, falling back on the traditional

tired debate structure that has been in place since the 1992 campaign. Had Obama been less afraid to take on McCain directly in weekly debates, who knows what might have happened? Maybe he, like Kobe, would have found himself at the center of a culture up-tick, where spontaneity is possible and citizens are allowed the time to breath, to think, to vote, and feel once again renewed about their great country.

Wouldn't it be remarkable if we could spontaneously cheer for our candidate, rather than flip the channel from yet another over-marketed campaign commercial? Why have we ceded our fate to the marketers?

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