

Playing to Win vs. Playing to Excel

By Robert Jones

In contemporary professional competitive sports, the dominant trend has become one of “playing to win,” that is, engaging those tactics and actions that are designed or intended to aid a team or player in winning at all costs. These tactics may exploit the game’s rules set, or they may merely be designed to throw the other team off its game, rendering them less able to perform to their maximum ability. And while such tactics may be permissible by the rules of the game, they give rise to important questions: should they be used, regardless of their legality under the rules? Should winning at all costs be the goal of an athlete competing in a sport, or a player in a game? Should so-called “cheap” tactics be employed? And if there is a reason for us not to use them, is it strong enough to justify doing so?

It is important that, before we begin, we define the two most important terms that we’ll be using throughout this paper: game and competitive sport. We may define a game as a contest, governed by set rules, entered into for diversion or as a test of mental or physical prowess. Furthermore, we may define competitive sport as any physical game conducted in order to provide symbolic testimony of human physical prowess.

There is one note of particular importance in these definitions: nowhere is the term “winning” used in any of its forms. Neither the definition of game nor the definition of sport mentions winning as a goal. Rather, these definitions state that the goal of both games and competitive sports are the demonstration of physical or mental prowess, of which winning is merely a consequence. Consider basketball, for example. The goal of

basketball is not to win, but rather to score more points than the opponent by getting the most baskets. The player or team that wins is the player that has scored more points at the end of the game.

But how does this distinction change the way we view games and competitive sports? Consider the current attitude of professional athletes, in which many athletes are concerned foremost with winning, regardless of the tactics used to achieve victory. These players engage in trash-talk, so-called “cheap” tactics, and do their best to “break” the game by finding ways to exploit the rules. If the goal of a game is to excel over an opponent by demonstrating prowess, then tactics that impede an opponent’s prowess are detrimental to this goal.

At this point, it is still difficult to justify abandoning Play-to-Win-style tactics. A savvy player might consider our definitions and argument against “cheap” tactics and merely respond with “so?,” or perhaps reject our definitions of game and competitive play. But I would argue that this response misses the point, and that the player who plays only to win is not playing the game at all. Additionally, I would argue that there are powerful reasons beyond the definitions for abandoning the play to win mentality.

Consider two players, player A and player B. If both players are evenly matched in a competitive sport, then one must excel beyond his previous ability to demonstrate prowess over the other. On the other hand, if there is a noticeable disparity of talent and ability between players A and B, then one player need not excel to demonstrate prowess, and as such will fail to truly compete, regardless of the other player’s ability. For a less abstract example, we can look at some examples from professional sports. Consider the games where athletes or teams play against tougher opponents, such as last year’s Rose

Bowl, where the University of Southern California faced the University of Texas. Up to that point, both teams had gone undefeated, dominating every opponent that they had faced. Because of this, it was difficult to tell which team was the better of the two (although most analysts predicted USC to win due to their having won the championship title in the two years prior). When the teams played against each other on the field however, they were forced to play their best in an attempt to demonstrate ability above and beyond that of their opponents. By playing against a team of equal or greater skill, each team was forced to play harder, and in the end, better demonstrate their physical and mental prowess on the field. The end result is that each team pushes the other to play better, with the added bonus of the game being more fun to watch.

In this way, it is always desirable to have an opponent who is playing at the top of his game. Not only because it forces a player to push themselves harder, but also because winning against a weak or handicapped opponent is ultimately meaningless in determining physical and mental prowess. The champion doesn't achieve his or her status by defeating hundreds of weak opponents, he or she gets there by defeating the previous champion, by excelling over the best athletes that the sport has to offer. And furthermore, his or her legitimacy as champion or as "the best" is only recognized if those opponents are beaten when they are playing their best, or at the top of their game. This is self-evident: When a team wins over a weakened team or a team that is not playing its best, we recognize it. We say that the losing team "lost the game" rather than proclaiming the other team the winner. We fail to legitimize the winning team's victory because we know that excelling over a weak opponent is meaningless, and ultimately fails to demonstrate physical or mental prowess.

Hence, those tactics that are designed to weaken an opponent, specifically by lessening their ability to demonstrate their excellence should be avoided. But what are these tactics? How do we determine which tactics lessen our opponent's ability to excel and which tactics are part of our allowable set of tactics in oppositional competition (competition where players may impede the bodily efforts of opponents, either directly or indirectly)? Certainly there are actions and tactics that can be employed in competitive sports to impede opponents without reducing their ability to demonstrate physical or mental prowess.

This is admittedly a tough line to walk. While we have obvious examples, such as trash-talking and some forms of psychological attacks on players, others can be much more difficult. Consider the no-huddle offense in football, employed by the Indianapolis Colts: the Colts move up the field offensively without calling huddles, both to keep the defense off-guard with respect to play-calling, and to prevent the defense from being able to switch out players for different defensive formations. This is perfectly allowable by the rules, and though difficult to execute for an offense, a powerful tactic, as when a quarterback sees the defense attempting to make a substitution, he can call for the ball to be snapped, and force a penalty on the defending team, gaining "cheap" yards.

Is this a tactic that should be discouraged? It is both designed to directly and indirectly impede an opponent's bodily efforts, by reducing the time they have to line up effectively and efficiently, but also to keep a defensive formation on the field, forcing teams to play defense with sub-optimal players in some conditions. It's clear that this is not a game-breaking tactic, since the Steelers demonstrated a defense that can clearly dominate even the no-huddle offense, but it's also a strong enough tactic that the Colts

were able to go 13-3 over the regular season using it. Overall, the tactic forces the defense and coaching staff to plan accordingly, and it pushes defensive players to excel in roles that they may otherwise not have done so in. So the no-huddle offense should not be discouraged.

Indeed, as we look at the tactics and strategies in question, it seems as though we can get a good readout on them by examining the side-effects. Does the tactic in question present a scenario where a team must play better in an attempt to overcome it? Does it force a player to play harder as a consequence? Or does it merely force a player to ignore it, or play at the same level, despite the tactic being used against him or her? Does defeating the tactic merely mean playing to the same level after the tactic is used?

In the case of trash-talking and some psychological attacks (such as “icing the kicker” in professional football), it is clear that both fall into the latter category. A good player will continue to play at the same level and ignore their opponents’ trash talk. A good kicker will not be affected by the pressure and added thinking time they are given due to icing. Good players are able to continue playing at the same level despite the tactics being used against them. The use of these tactics in addition to those of the other category are the group of strategies employed in “Playing to Win.” These tactics defeat the very purpose of the game and competitive sport by reducing a team or player’s ability to demonstrate excellence.

By contrast, it is easy to see some of the tactics that fall into the previous category. The no-huddle offense forces defenses to play better, and be more versatile. Feints and trick plays force an opponent to stay on their toes and be more aware of the situation. Playing conservatively forces an opponent to be more aggressive in order to

catch up. Getting around these tactics isn't simply a matter of playing to the same level, it requires that players beat them by playing better and surpassing their previous level of play. Playing with these tactics and forgoing the use of those tactics in the previous category can be described as "Playing to Excel," in which the goal is not to win at all costs or to throw the opponent off his game in an attempt to make winning a more likely consequence, but rather to play the game, and demonstrate mastery of the game's tasks.

Due to the nature of competitive sports and games, and the both the lack of legitimacy and meaninglessness of winning over depleted opponents, Playing to Excel is preferable over Playing to Win. Furthermore, Playing to Excel produces spectacles that are more entertaining to watch, better demonstrations of physical and mental prowess, and ultimately, better testimony as to which player or team is really the best. It is the case then that Playing to Excel should be the ultimate goal for athletes as it has the greatest benefits for the athlete, who pushes him or herself harder, the spectators, who are presented with greater testimony and more entertaining matches, and the promoters, who will ultimately make more money on games that are more exciting to spectators, and as a result, will be able to pay the athletes better.