**Beautiful Games**

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SUBWAY EMPLOYS "sandwich artists," Alvin and the Chipmunks are "recording artists," and everyone else on Earth has made art of some kind, from Sun Tzu (The Art of War) to Donald Trump (The Art of the Deal) to the guy selling peppermint beard conditioner in The Art of Shaving store. So let's stipulate at the start that art is whatever you say it is. FOR RANGERS FAN, THERE IS AN ART TO "POTVIN SUCKS" CHANT, a New York Daily News headline reminded us above a story on the David Hockney of hockey heckling.

But let's also acknowledge that some artists are more artful than others, which is why Roger Federer has been called a Baryshnikov by so many, including John McEnroe, who himself was often likened to the tortured genius Van Gogh. Certain athletes are so creative that other artists are drawn to them. When Hemingway wrote about Joe DiMaggio, or Updike about Ted Williams, they were merely making more art out of already existing art.

Among athletes, pitchers are most frequently portrayed as artists. They paint corners. Their work is framed by catchers. Boxers get similar treatment, and not only because they work on a canvas. Tennis and golf are next. McEnroe and Seve Ballesteros, like Hockney and Van Gogh, measured out their work in strokes. "I'm an artist," says PGA rookie sensation Bryson DeChambeau. "I love creating things." His shots are shaped and drawn, and success means a large gallery.

All of this is by way of asking a simple question: What is the primary purpose of sports, even (or especially) at its highest level? Is it to win? Or is it to perform as beautifully as one can—and in doing so, to shine a light on what it means to be human? These two ideals, victory and art, aren't mutually exclusive: Federer, the Golden State Warriors and FC Barcelona prove it is possible to win and make art at the same time. But what if you had to choose one?

Arsenal manager Arsène Wenger once said, "My never-ending struggle in this business is to release what is beautiful in man." He added, "A guy said, 'There is only one way to live with the idea of death. It is to try and transform the present into art.'" And so the Gunners—who haven't won the Premier League in 12 seasons—strive to play beautifully as a middle finger to the Grim Reaper.

And they are not alone in this pursuit. "Michelangelo never said he made a perfect sculpture," the first pitching coach of the Rockies, Larry Bearnarth, told me at the team's first spring training. "He said only that he 'chipped away the excess.' Now, I'm not comparing myself to Michelangelo...." But, like Michelangelo freeing David from a block of marble, Bearnarth tried to reveal an aesthetically pleasing hurler locked inside a prospect or a veteran castoff. In the 23 years since that inaugural season, it has proved difficult to pitch beautifully in the thin air of Denver. (Is there a more hapless role in all of sports than Colorado pitching coach?) Yet this endless striving in the face of futility is the essence of being human—the rolling of the boulder up the hill every day.

This struggle makes sports more revealing of the human condition than the traditional arts. Baryshnikov never performed Swan Lake with the swan hitting back. Astaire wasn't hand-checked by Patrick Beverley or cross-checked by P.K. Subban. When an athlete tries to make art, another artist is trying to overturn his easel.

Tony Gwynn called his book The Art of Hitting. Tom Seaver called his The Art of Pitching. When hitter faces pitcher, one artist has to win and one artist has to lose. And so every pitch in baseball is Keats versus Yeats in a head-to-head freestyle rap battle. With his go-ahead homer for the Blue Jays in last year's ALDS, Jose Bautista wasn't flipping his bat; he was dropping the mike.

Great art is sui generis, without antecedent, the shock of the new. You know it when you see it. The French artist Paul Gauguin said, "Art is either plagiarism or revolution." But while everybody makes art, only a few make something utterly original. Or to put it another way: Everyone talks about the weather. Steph Curry makes it rain.

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