

I was working out the other day, watching TV trying to make time go by a lot faster. On comes [Happy Gilmore](#). The movie is a classic. It also could be the ultimate sports marketing class. It should be required viewing for every professional sports commissioner.

For those who don't know about the movie, let me give you the Sports Marketing Class recap.

Failed hockey player needs to make money so his Grandmother can keep her house.

Hockey player realizes he can drive a golfball a long way and can make money doing so.

Hockey player qualifies for golf tournaments and wins money. We root for him to save Grandma's house.

Hockey player as golfer has a huge temper. Throws clubs. Curses. Yells at fans.

We suspend belief as movie watchers. Not that this couldn't or wouldn't happen, but there aren't negative articles in the media calling Happy Gilmore every name in the book and saying how he is the worst thing ever to happen to pro sports.

Happy Gilmore continues to show every bit of poor sportsmanship that he can. He screams at and threatens fans. He confronts a fellow golfer and breaks a beer bottle, willing to fight him.

Happy Gilmore's fan base grows. Fans love him.

TV Ratings skyrocket.

Attendance skyrockets.

We suspend belief as viewers because we still don't see any headlines condemning him as the worst thing to happen to sports. Ever.

Happy Gilmore gets into a fight with an 80 year old Bob Barker.

Happy Gilmore screams at the golf ball, which is toning it down for Happy.

Happy Gilmore hates Shooter McGavin, who is having a career year on the tour.

We love him more.

Happy Gilmore saves the day for Grandma. Fans go wild and love him. He is our hero.

Why is he our hero? Because he is as far from perfect as he can be. He has one skill he is amazing at. He also has an amazing temper. He is just like any number of people we all know, only he has a special skill that put s him into a very unique situation. He can be a pro golfer.

What does that have to do with professional sports? Everything. It's a great example of what is wrong with pro sports marketing.

In pro sports marketing we try to make all the athletes perfect. In doing so, we make them unlike anyone any of us can relate to. It's not that we should hear about their frailties and problems all the time. It's that we should see and hear about them in situations that makes them normal. or they shouldn't be part of league marketing plans at all.

We see them serving food in soup kitchens. We see them surrounded by kids in obviously managed situations.. We see them trying to push kids on a swingset. It's a mistake because it's so contrived that we automatically ignore it as being artificial and brand management.

Consumers are savvy. Does anyone think that this situation just happened and miraculously the cameras were there? Of course not. We all see it as an obligatory Public Service Announcement and ignore it.

NFL Cares about the United Way. MLB Cares about something. NBA Cares, NHL Cares. MSL Cares. I'm sure Volleyball, Bull Riders and Bowlers Care as well. We know. We get it. Stop it.

It doesn't make fans think better of athletes. It puts athletes on pedestals. Exactly where they shouldn't be. What's worse is when an athlete doesn't live up to these artificial brands we create of them and falls from the pedestal the same fans and media watching the commercials, thrive on tearing them down. It's dumb marketing that creates more opportunities for failure than success.

Not only do I think the "we are so caring" marketing is a mistake, I think the trend towards taking personalities out of the game could be a fatal business mistake. Leagues are so intent on polishing and packaging athletes that they forget the Happy Gilmore lesson. Fans love, or love to hate athletes with personality. Most importantly, they watch those players and buy their merchandise.

Shaq is a larger than life personality who always has something to say. Even if it means being fined by the NBA. Phil Jackson tweaks me, Sacramento, Shaq, everyone. He is showing a personality, which helps makes the Lakers more popular. When Dennis Rodman played for the Mavs, he drew crowds and TV Ratings wherever we went, and it wasn't for his basketball skills. Terrel Owens, Chad Johnson, Barry Bonds are all big personalities that get and keep people interested in the games they play.

The beauty of Happy Gilmore and big personalities is that you don't have to create commercials to promote them. You don't have to build marketing plans around them. Fans take to them, whether it's love or hate and pay attention to them. The media keeps their storylines going, knowing it's what fans want. Knowing they are the exceptions that make things interesting.

One of the biggest challenges the NHL has is that there isn't one player that we all know is going to be quotable and the media is going to run with and pay too much attention to. Now if Sidney Crosby, or any of the young superstars of the NHL were to be quoted bragging about themselves as "The Greatest of All Time", or about how they "hate so and so", or were to get a hat trick and pull out a cap and put it in front of the opposing goal keeper. Or maybe, pull out a magic marker and write the score of the game on the boards. Yeah, there would be some gloves dropped, but if it happened a 2nd time, it would be all over the national news and sports fans across the country just might be curious enough to turn on the TV to see what would happen next. It's the Happy Gilmore affect.

This is of course where the "purists" of each sport jump in and say that the games themselves are enough. Yeah right. A matchup between the greatest point guard ever and one of the 3 best Power Forwards ever, both league or finals MVPs, got the lowest ratings ever. Once you get past the hard core fans of the game, or the regional fans of the team, they don't care about a matchup between "the two best at their position" in the league. They care about a matchup that is combustible. They want to know that tempers could flare. They want to see what will happen to the guy who "stomped on the star at Texas Stadium" his next trip

back. Don't believe me, just look at the ratings and whose merchandise sells the best year after year.

Big personalities create rivalries. Rivalries are great for the sports and their leagues. But in terms of rivalries that are of national interest, all that is left is the Red Sox vs Yankees rivalry. I couldn't care less about either team. But I'm always curious as to what will happen when they play. I want to see the fans and the signs. I want to hear the players talk about how much they hate the other team. I want to watch to see if there are any brushback pitches or bench clearing brawls, even though guys spend more all their time dancing and never brawling.. It doesn't matter that they don't really fight. It's part of what makes a great rivalry. The chance that something intense can happen.

That's why we watch teams we don't directly root for. We watch because we might see something that we can't see or feel in our day to day lives. The things that a sportscenter replay can't truly capture. The Happy Gilmore moments. We want to feel the tension through our TVs. We want to feel the excitement in our stomachs when two guys who we know hate each other because of comments they made matchup. It doesn't matter if it's pitcher and batter, batter sliding into 2nd, a faceoff, or skating towards an obvious check against the boards, or a player going to the basket, with the only defender being the one guy he hates. Nothing has to happen. We just like knowing it could.

Football does a great job of letting guys talk trash about players and teams they hate while publicly saying they are against it. Players are often quoted as not liking someone/someteam. They push and shove each other. They spit at each other. They smack a guy across the face and it's 15 yards and they have to lineup the next play and do it again. If they truly wanted to stop it, they would kick a guy out of the game. They would automatically suspend him for the next. They don't. It's combustion at its best. It's unpredictable. It's fun to watch. We know they leave it all out on the field. The NFL does its very best to protect guys from injury, from there, despite league pronouncements to the contrary, everything and anything goes. Fans love it.

Every other sport is trying to take out the very things fans turn towards the game for: personalities, conflicts, tension, euphoria and every other emotion we can't show away from sports.

It doesn't have to be about fights. Fights are bad for any sport. Fans don't want players to get hurt. Fans do want trash talking. Fans do want players to hate each other. Fans do want confrontations. Watch hockey fans respond to fights and major penalties. Watch basketball fans respond to technicals, and in particular a 2nd technical. We shouldn't kick a guy out for a 2nd technical, we should increase the number of free throws to match the number of technicals. Fans would love it. More opportunities to get out of their seats and yell at Rasheed or whoever.

In 2007, we have to realize that fans' expectations are different today than they were 10 or 20 years ago. Every kid playing every video game goes "Happy Gilmore" on the person they are playing against. Watch the trash talking on the competitive video gaming shows. ESPN is running if you don't have the chance to watch a couple people playing video games. Advertisers are lining up trying to find ways to be in front of those players.

Play a fantasy sport to see the hysterical trash talking that goes on in every league. Listen to talk radio. Advertisers are running towards, not away from both.

Sports provide us what our day to day lives can't. Sports give us an outlet for our day to day stress that we don't get in our day to day lives. We want to love, hate, yell, scream, jump up and down. We want to be the 6th man. We want to go to work in a great mood because our team won, or commiserate if we lose. We want to laugh at and with the big personalities of sports.

Look at the fastest growing sports of the last 10 to 20 years. The sports where bragging, hating and yelling are part of the culture. From wrestling to cagefighting to NASCAR where drivers hate each other, their fans hate each other, and even their girlfriends and wives hate each other. It's great entertainment.

We want as many Happy Gilmores as we can find. It's what makes sports special.