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All that glisters ...

'This is why we watch the Olympics', said Mat, my son-in-law, when Kelly Holmes stormed past the field round the outside of the final bend to win her second gold medal. A few minutes later our relay team beat the US by an infinitely-important inch and, in spite of Steve Backley coming fourth in the javelin, we finished that super Saturday feeling like a million dollars. I don't know whether anybody died of excitement watching but it's hard to believe it didn't do the rest of us a heck of a lot of good.

It's great to be winning. It's great to be top. And just at the moment, through the mental trick of identifying ourselves with a rather satisfactory number of successful athletes, we do have that feeling of vicarious victory, almost as good as the real thing and ever so much less effort.

But it is a mental trick and it is vicarious. The way we identify with a particular champion has elements of family pride, of tribalism, of the mediaeval joust, which are deeply embedded in the anthropological history of mankind. But this ancient relationship is now being mediated in a way that is utterly new. The fact that we can join our proxy fighters in distant contests by remote control — experiencing the action in synchrony and at apparently close quarters, from the safety and comfort of our homes, while remaining perfectly isolated from the myriads of other spectators who are doing exactly the same thing — has introduced a colossal element of illusion and unreality.

Take this extraordinary emphasis on coming first all the time. Everyone else is now a 'loser' (that horrible word). In this Olympics more than in any other, winning a silver medal was seen as a disappointment. And where, I ask, does that leave the rest of us? The old ideal of participation being the important thing is just that: an old ideal, held in contempt. Just as liberalism, another self-evident good if ever there was one, is reviled in neoconservative America.

The absolutism is quite explicit: no matter how narrow the hair's breadth victory, one gets on the podium and the other doesn't. One gets in the medal winners' photograph and the other doesn't. One gets on the open-top celebration bus and the other doesn't. And then, just to put the cap on the absurdity, the immensely courageous and vastly distinguished Paula Radcliffe is expected by armchair commentators to battle on through the television-schedule-dictated Athenian sun, long after her colossally-hyped medal bid has failed. For my money the woman deserves a medal for services to reality. (But how can media corporations get away with that degree of irresponsibility when the absolutist fear of litigation has removed diving-boards — for example — from the lives of an entire generation, and with them the glorious fun of diving, not to mention the possibility of future Olympic diving medals).

This idea that we have failed if we are not the best in the world is deeply pernicious. At a time when being best in the world means starting with an exceptional mental and physical talent and then training harder than anyone else, the lifestyle required is often pathological. People with more ordinary mental and physical talents who want to lead a balanced life are now shunning sport. This is because they have been misled; ordinary people never did do sport in order to win Olympic gold medals. They did it for the fun of it, at the local level, among people with whom they had real, not virtual, contact.

It would be fine if British Olympic success was inspiring people in general to take up sport. My fear is that as a result of these distortions, the opposite is the case. I think the emphasis needs to be changed because here, as in all things, we need to put the ball back in the court of the ordinary person and everyday first-hand, person-to-person contact. And that is just what general practice is about, or should be.