

32. The Psychology of Winning

In "The Psychology of Winning," the story of David Lavalley, a standout high school athlete from New Hampshire in the 1980s, is recounted. Lavalley, who was the only soccer player in his state to be named an all-American that year, was instrumental in his team's unbeaten championship run, scoring sixteen goals. Acknowledged in a local newspaper, his coach noted that while Lavalley lacked the highest skill level, his character and tenacity were invaluable. His qualities as a supportive teammate overshadowed technical prowess.

Success in sports is portrayed as stemming from more than just athletic skills. It involves various elements such as coaching, practice, discipline, and sometimes luck. However, the essence of effective teamwork is identified as a vital aspect of team sports, with football serving as a prime example for studying human behavior in competitive scenarios.

Lavalley later pursued a career in sports psychology, investigating the dynamics that elevate certain teams above others. His work hinged on social identity theory, which suggests that when team members feel a sense of communal identity, their performance is enhanced. The bonds forged within a team can significantly influence behavior and motivation, providing competitive advantages.

For the Cubs, their shared experience of deafness created a unique social identity. The players hailed from diverse ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses, yet they connected through their method of communication, which transcended typical barriers. As they pursued a championship title, they relied on this "social identity" to bolster their chances of success.

Beyond athletics, the Cubs' team provided its members with camaraderie during a time often marked by isolation. The players, navigating a hearing world, had faced moments of loneliness and exclusion, making the bonds formed on the team not only impactful on the field but crucial in their personal lives.

Furthermore, a longstanding Harvard study on happiness underscored that healthy relationships significantly contribute to a fulfilling life, overshadowing the importance of wealth or success. The Cubs, regardless of the championship outcome, had formed vital friendships that promised lasting connections—a brotherhood that would endure through life's challenges .