

# COLLECTIVISM, INDIVIDUALISM, OR WHY WE ALL SHOULD PLAY TENNIS

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Iga Swiatek is the best woman tennis player in the world, and she is only 20! After winning a tournament in Stuttgart last month—which in addition to prize-money offers the winner a gleaming Porsche—she has just won another top tournament; this time in Rome. Swiatek and Serena Williams are the only players in history who did this twice in a row. When one watches Swiatek play, it soon becomes clear that there are only two tennis camps: Iga and the rest.



*Iga Swiatek, Day 11 of Wimbledon 2018.*

While watching her play against Ons Jabeur, an excellent Tunisian player, an excited commentator on

Polish television, said a few times: "our girl," "she represents Poland well." Hearing that, I wanted to exclaim, "Hold your horses, Paco! She is Polish, but she does not represent Poland." Swiatek has not been selected by anyone to play in a *national* team. She represents herself and herself only, and if your heart is beating faster because next to her name on the television screen there is a Polish flag, it is no more than a form of the player's country identification, not different from a car license plate driven by Mr. Kowalski.

Here is the thing worth reflecting on. Chess, or sports like tennis, golf, or cricket are individualistic enterprises. They show the individual's talent, and the player has no need for a crowd waving a national flag, screaming loudly. Tennis is a fierce game, played by two people over whose heads the only sound that hovers is silence. The sound of a bouncing ball or a player's occasional bellow is the only sound we hear. Precision requires concentration, which requires silence. That is why the spectators must remain silent prior to a serve, and they can't leave their seats while the game is in progress. Clapping is allowed only when the game stops. Only very seldom, one sees small groups of fans who bring a national flag, trying it make tennis a national spectacle.

Here is another thing: the net separating the players makes a collision and, thus, a foul impossible. No foul, no fair play. Only the rules and the skills. What is most important, since you are one of the two players on the court—you and your adversary—you can't blame your adversary for your failures. If you lose, it is your fault; and, if you are averse to assuming blame, you must recognize your adversary's superiority.



*John McEnroe, 1981.*

The English like to say that football is a sport for gentlemen played by ruffians; rugby is a sport for ruffians played by gentlemen. By way of paraphrase tennis is a sport which requires you to be a gentleman. In moments of anger, you can, of course, smash your racket on the ground (as those non-gentlemen Jimmy Connors and—still worse—John McEnroe notoriously did), but you can't blame anyone; and the arbiter will likely fine you for un-sporting behavior. All that makes tennis look rather unemotional and suggests that you had best limit your emotions to the very end when instead of cursing or smashing a racket, you throw it up in joy, or you kneel in humility, like Iga Swiatek did when she defeated Ons Jabeur, while the latter accepted the defeat with grace, congratulating the winner.

All that stands in stark contrast to our beloved team sports—such as football (or soccer, to use the American idiom)—which often reflect the worst of us. The behavior of the English football fans in the early 1990s was so bad that FIFA had to fine England and threatened her with not allowing its team to participate in international tournaments. However, there is nothing singular in the English case. When in

the 1966 Brazil was eliminated in the World Cup in England, Vicente Feola, the coach of the Brazilian team, discretely exited the stadium disguised as a nanny. Why? Because he was afraid of the Brazilian fans who would blame him for the failure of their national representation, which would be seen as the failure of Brazil as a country and Brazilians as a nation. When Bill Shankly, Liverpool manager, was asked by an interviewer, "Bill, is football a matter of life and death for you?" Shankly responded, "Oh no, it's much more important than that!"

If you think it is insanity, you are likely to be very wrong. Football is a national religion. Winning is a form of salvation, and losing is seen as perdition.



*Fans of the FC Karpaty Lviv football club honoring the Nazi Waffen-SS Galizien division, in Lviv, Ukraine, 2013.*

In *collective* sports, it is not just the team that plays; it is also the public, the nation, all of whom are seconding their team. The fans identify with the team, and at moments of joy, following a goal, they become one with the team, and the team becomes one with them. Emotions run high and cannot be controlled.

In contrast to tennis, the spectators are not forbidden to talk or even scream. Individualist games require suspension of emotions—golf and snooker are other good examples—while collective games feed on emotions. When the team wins, the nation wins; when the team loses, the nation loses, and the nation is in mourning. Repeated loss of games in tournaments may even be perceived by the nation as its own weakness that results in a sense of humiliation. Hence the irreverent chorus of English football fans: "God save our gracious team!"

World Cup and other international tournaments are wars of nations. "It's stupid," you may say. "Birth is a matter of accident; and are we supposed to second our respective teams only because Smith was born in Liverpool, McDonald in Glasgow, and Russo in Rome?" That's the thing about nationality. It is an irrational form of attachment that comes with your birthplace and your language. Collective sports feed just on national spirit, and they are ersatz for real killing. Be that as it may, it is obviously far better to see the English beat the Scots, the Irish, the French (or vice versa), or the Germans beat the Poles (or vice versa) than actually going to war.

Nationalism is not the only aspect of sports. During the Cold War, the leaders of the Soviet Union and East Germany (the most ideologically extreme country among the Soviet satellites) saw sports as extension of ideological war. In their heads, winning by a team or an individual athlete from a socialist country meant superiority of socialism over capitalism, over the corrupt capitalist West, etc. This was all hogwash; but because no aspect of human existence was free from ideology, one had to believe that winning by a team from a socialist country meant the superiority of "homo socialisticus." Similar thought perversion can be found in Nazi totalitarianism. The winning of four gold medals by the Black American Jesse Owens during Olympic games in Berlin, in 1936, could make you doubt the idea of Aryan superiority.

Happily, the ideological era in sports is over; or it would seem so. However, the recent movie *King Richard*—about the Williams family—is loaded with racial undertones. It is the story of Venus Williams and her spectacular rise to fame; her father's determination to raise two great tennis stars: Venus and Serena. We all know them and there's no need to remind the reader who they are. The movie—with Will Smith playing Venus' father—needlessly focuses as much on Venus' talent as it does on the idea of a black girl playing "white" tennis. I do not know whether those moments in the movie are true or whether the director invented them, but race identification here only spoils the joy of seeing those wonderful girls striving for individual perfection. I doubt whether those who saw Venus and Serena play (or Tiger Woods), thought them black. What they saw was something breathtaking: an individual's

pursuit of excellence.

This is not so in collective sports. What underlies them is a sense of atavistic belonging: local (city clubs fighting other city clubs) or national (national teams fighting other national teams). They are expressions of nationalism, and the fans' reactions and popularity of football and other collective sports is a barometer of the nation's sense of identity.

The metaphor of war in sports is not new and cannot be limited to nationalism only. It also touches on a problem of human emotions: fighting others you hate or dislike. It was interestingly explored in the 1974 movie *The Longest Yard*, with Burt Reynolds, in which prison inmates take on the sadistic guards playing American football. They beat the guards, which compensates for physical and psychological abuse of the inmates by the guards. Apparently, sometimes fictional war can compensate for real life degradation and humiliation.

To be sure, team sports are not gentlemanly encounters, in which you strive for personal (not the nation's) excellence. They may add glory to your nation. A fan's sense of pride is borrowed. However, even as a player, you share winning with your playmates. You are part of a group, and only a few strikers, like Pele, Diego Maradona, or Gerhart Muller, will forever be remembered—but not as Brazilian, Argentinian, or German.

The same goes for tennis players. Iga Swiatek may be Polish, Venus and Serena American; but they do not represent Poland or America, or white and black races. National and racial identification is one thing; collectivism is another. Any attempt to make tennis an expression of a race or nation's spirit is an expression of collectivist thinking and opposite of individuality. What we need today is more tennis and other individualist sports. In addition to their respective virtues, they force you to behave like a gentleman, which is the opposite of a collective's lack of civility.

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*Featured image: "Tennis at Hertingfordbury," by Spencer Gore; painted in 1910.*



