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Glowing Pucks

*If you do not change direction,
you may end up where you are heading.*

*- Lao Tzu
570-490 B.C.
Tao Te Ching*

Hockey action is fast - the best NHL players skate at speeds in excess of 28 m.p.h. The puck routinely reaches 100 m.p.h., and when shot from the blue line, gets to the net in 0.34 seconds. At the 1996 All-Star Game in Boston, fans watched Ray Bourque score the winning goal for the Bruins with 38 seconds left in regulation play. Although something was going on with the pucks that night – they kept changing them out – attendees were oblivious to what the fans at home were seeing: a blue halo around the puck that turned into a red comet tail on the slapshots. The FoxTrax radio puck and the new FleetCenter’s built-in receiver technology were created to make the game easier to follow by making the puck easier to see. Although the glowing puck was eventually abandoned, the idea grew legs and a company too.

SporTVision, Inc. is responsible for the Yellow 1st & Ten™ line and blue line of scrimmage used in NFL and NCAA games; and Baseball’s K-Zone, which frames the strike zone and marks the path of the pitch; and NASCAR RACEf/x™, which puts a bubble around a particular car; as well as PITCHf/x™, which tracked the dips and curves of pitches during the 2005 World Series. Proponents argue the technology is helping fans to appreciate the athletes and to follow the game without necessarily knowing all the rules. Detractors argue that it is imprecise, distracting and unnecessary.

Sports are an important part of American culture. Sport happens when individual(s) participate in an activity with a set of agreed upon rules where their physical and mental abilities are to be measured against a standard. The rules and venue become a shared experience and allow for the emergence of learned and innovative strategies, skills and behaviors. Individuals can measure personal best performance and improvements in personal best as well as those of the team, and of their opponent. The other important dimension of sport is as a metaphor for character. But, what does this have to do with conflict resolution?

Aristotle in *Poetics*, saw metaphor as a part of rhetoric, making discourse more elegant. Negotiation, a kind of discourse, is often thought of in sports terms. Usually, the references are to sports with opponents, for example; court and field sports like basketball, baseball, soccer and football or combat sports such as boxing, wrestling and martial arts. Rarely are references made to individual achievement sports, such as running, swimming, cycling, golf or weightlifting.

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Sports metaphors are sometimes good for talking about business because they are similarly paradoxical: Sports are fun to play, but they are also serious undertakings, bringing many rewards and often a great deal of pain and sacrifice; A combination of raw energy and discipline is required for sustained success; There is a tension between keeping to the rules and breaking them; There are always stars among teams and a balance is often impossible to achieve, and a bit of luck never hurts too.

Keep in mind that with metaphors, analogies, and similes, qualities of one concept are imparted to another. A simile compares two essentially dissimilar concepts using like or as. A metaphor compares attributes of one concept to another and an analogy is an extended comparison. They all work by conjuring up an image in the listener's mind, so choosing something that only makes sense to you or that does not really make your point probably won't create clarity. However, if used artfully, they can capture abstract ideas that would otherwise be lost. Thinking back on your experiences in mediation and negotiation: Did the mediator lay the ground rules and touch base with you prior to the mediation? The ball was in whose court when you started? Did you get to the ballpark?

When working with negotiators who see it as sport, the essential question becomes: Which game are we supposed to be playing?

- A team sport such as Basketball calls for a high level of skill and intuition to discern the totality of a complex situation and then react in a highly specialized way instantly. Although players used to "do the shuffle" playing every position, now the best players do one thing extraordinarily well, such as power forward, shooting forward, point guard or off guard. Teams aggressively push the ball down the court, each performing as a specialist, but also as part of the team.
- A team sport such as Football calls for situations to be thought out ahead of time, plays written - such as the Single Wing, the T, the Wing-T, the I, the Wishbone, the Veer, the 4-3 Defense, the 5-2, and the 4-4 - and practiced almost daily. The play is executed when a particular situation presents itself in the game. Performance is analyzed again and again and again.
- A team sport such as Baseball calls for order and deliberateness and does not concern itself with time. Players, except the pitcher and catcher, have freedom to move around depending on the situation, but each is actually assigned a position. The head coach is known as the manager and sets the team's strategy and makes all personnel decisions. Some managers control pitch selection and defensive positioning, but others leave it to the player's discretion or delegate decisionmaking to other leaders.

Figuratively speaking, it could be said that the mediator is to negotiation as the yellow line is to the offensive first down. It highlights something that is already there, but is hard for some people to see. Some don't need it because they can read the markers. Others find that the switching camera angles, zoom shots, small screens, diminished eyesight, interruptions and other such things make it too easy to lose one's orientation, even though the rules of the game are fully understood. Although sometimes unnecessary, the yellow line will be there when you need it, but won't get in your way if you don't.