

Dave Barry

Notes on Western Civilization

It was a team loss, but great fun just the same

In the kind of once-in-a-lifetime athletic contest that, long after it is over and the players have trotted off the field, you can't really remember what happened, the Gators defeated the Stingrays recently in the Six-Year-Old Children Wearing Sneakers With Velcro Fasteners Division of the Southwest YMCA Soccer League.

I was fortunate enough to be on hand because my son plays for the Stingrays. (He was the one in the shinguards purchased from Toys-R-Us who on several occasions during the match brought knowledgeable soccer observers such as myself to their feet by actually coming in direct personal contact with the ball primarily by accident.) I was eager to see how the Rays would do, because I've been following their practices for several weeks now, and I've watched them go from being just a ragtag collection of children with short attention spans to being a ragtag collection of children with short attention spans wearing the same color T-shirts.

For this transformation, you have to give full credit to the coach, wily veteran mentor "Rick" Freeburg, whose lone shortcoming as a soccer coach is that, as he himself freely admits, he does not know a whole ton about soccer. But he more than compensates for this by having the patience that enables him to continue to speak in a kind and loving voice to the Stingrays long after many other veteran parents would have run shrieking off the field looking for garbage trucks to hurl themselves in front of.

As the Rays went through their pregame warm-ups, they looked very sharp, except for the one episode during the passing drill when Jeannie kicked the ball to the wrong person, which caused her to run off the field in tears and demand a doughnut from her mother and refuse to go back, thus forcing Coach Freeburg to make the wily tactical move of bringing the entire team over to the vicinity of Jeannie's mom for the Pregame Talk. I listened in, and it was indeed a thrill to get a "behind the scenes" look at the kind of inside strategy that goes on when the game of soccer is played at this level:

COACH FREEBURG: Okay! When we get the ball, who do we kick it to?

THE STINGRAYS: [Silence.]

COACH FREEBURG: Our own team! We kick it to our own team! Right?

THE STINGRAYS: [Silence.]

COACH FREEBURG: Don't forget!

With those inspirational words ringing in their ears, the team took the field, and the game got underway. We Stingray parents did our best to cope with the powerful emotions churning inside us by sitting down, chatting, etc. The Gator parents, on the other hand, took the more demonstrative approach



of waving handkerchiefs in the official team color (orange) and barging up and down the sidelines and even onto the field, shrieking useful instructions ("Kick it! KICK IT!!!") at such a loud volume that some of the Stingray parents were unable to read their newspapers. In the opinion of this veteran sports scribe, most of the real sporting drama took place on the sidelines, as the Stingray parents gradually became so irritated by the incessant loud barging of the Gator parents that the Stingray parents started sort of hoping their team would actually WIN, instead of just get tired enough so they would be asleep by 8:30 p.m.

Meanwhile, out on the field, nothing was clear. If you have ever seen a science documentary featuring microphotography of the human bloodstream, you know that when a bad germ cell gets inside the body, it is attacked by hundreds of good blood cells, which surround it and bump into it repeatedly. That is what the Stingray-Gator soccer game would have looked like from an overhead view, with the players as the good blood cells and the ball as the germ. Often there would be sequences where the ball would get kicked what seemed like 50 times without once leaving an area the size of a long-playing record.

Nevertheless, by the end of the third quarter, the Gators, who are undefeated, had managed to score four goals. With only one quarter left in which to pull off a miracle, the Rays gathered around their coach to hear his final inspirational words:

COACH FREEBURG: We can still win this!

STINGRAY: How? It's four to nothing!

2d STINGRAY: I have to go to the bathroom!

3d STINGRAY: Me, too!

Despite this fighting spirit, victory was not to be theirs. As the game ended, the Gator parents formed two lines so the players could run off the field between them in triumph. The Stingray parents formed a random blob and told the Stingrays they were terrific. Which, in the opinion of this veteran scribe, they were.

Bill Granger's column will return next week.