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# From "Acing the Test" to "Touching Base": The Sports Metaphor in the Classroom

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*The use of sports metaphors to convey business lessons both within and outside the classroom is a common phenomenon. The sports metaphor, however, is prone to misuse and can often inadvertently exclude large segments of the student population. To address these issues, we put forth an innovative and novel pedagogical approach that attempts to capitalize better on the shared meanings between athletics and certain business practices. Using the sports of tennis and basketball, we demonstrate how sports metaphors can be responsibly used to aid in the understanding of business lessons, such as managerial decision making.*

Keywords: Metaphors, sports, decision making

**I**NSTRUCTORS OFTEN USE METAPHORS to enhance the learning experience. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that metaphors are important because they can deeply influence a person's attitudes, perceptions, and world view. Because of the increasing popularity of athletics within US culture, sports metaphors are becoming more common (Palmatier & Ray, 1989). Unfortunately, these metaphors are often used without thought or consideration to possible student reactions. This article introduces a class module aimed at teaching important business lessons through the responsible use of sports metaphors. First, we briefly discuss the needs and benefits of using sports metaphors within the classroom. Second, we draw attention to some potential pitfalls of misusing these unique metaphors. Finally, we demonstrate how the sports of tennis and basketball can aid students in understanding aspects of managerial decision making.

## Needs and Benefits of Sports Metaphors

As many researchers have noted, metaphors are linguistic devices that can improve communication and enhance learning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Morgan, 1986). To begin, metaphors can simplify difficult concepts. For instance, researchers have found that using sports can assist children to learn difficult math problems (Freedman, Hanvey, Lindsey, Ryan, & Bell, 1995). Also, metaphors can often communicate more efficiently than other forms of expression. For example, Archer and Cohen (1998) argue that court judges often use sports metaphors in their judicial opinions to capture a point quickly. Finally, listeners usually respond to metaphors. This is particularly important when the subject matter is viewed as dry or overly technical. Metaphors, then, are unique because they trigger an individual's memory and sensory capacities and thus increase the motivation to learn regardless of the subject area (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995). Because many people participate or have participated in athletics, sports metaphors are often likely to generate listener interest. So sports metaphors are of educational value because they can simplify difficult concepts, shorten communication cycles, and generate listener interest in many subject areas.

## Problems with Sports Metaphors

Despite their apparent value to the learning experience, there is growing evidence that instructors should exercise discretion when using sports metaphors within a classroom. To begin, sports metaphors can alienate segments of the student population. For example, women and international students may miss or misinterpret lessons that use the uniquely American and male-dominated sports of baseball or football. Consequently, these types of metaphors are likely to produce an out-group, which often results in feelings of awe, awkwardness, and detachment (Archer & Cohen, 1998; Katz, 2001). Thus, a professor using specifically targeted metaphors may produce a classroom atmosphere of exclusion.

In addition, an element of fit is needed between metaphor and classroom lesson. Instructors do not always choose the appropri-

ate lesson to accompany a sports metaphor. For metaphors to work they must demonstrate some qualities parallel with the target lesson. These shared meanings are less likely to form if application to the classroom material is misdirected, inaccurate, or inappropriate to the given situation (Barr, Stimpert, & Huff, 1992). For instance, using professional, or even collegiate, sports as a parallel for teamwork may be inappropriate. Some would argue that professional sports are the antithesis of teamwork. Rather, at these levels, high salaries, exaggerated egos, and self-centered behavior are more common than the selfless behavior that is required of teamwork (Wellins, Byham, & Wilson, 1991). So instructors should use metaphors that include as many segments of the student population as possible. Also, instructors should examine the relationship between the sports metaphor and parallel lesson to ensure proper fit. When these conditions are met, sports metaphors are more likely to enhance the learning experience.

### **Using Sports to Explain Managerial Decision Making**

Keeping in mind that sports metaphors can be counterproductive unless they are thoughtfully implemented, we propose that instructors can best use these metaphors to communicate lessons surrounding managerial decision making. First, the pace of sports parallels the increasing speed of business. For instance, researchers suggest that the dynamic business environment has exponentially increased the complexity of problems and the speed at which strategy and decisions need to be made (Milliken, 1990; Mintzberg, 1990).

Second, the types of decisions that are required in the athletic arena mirror the choices that contemporary managers face. Harrison and Pelletier (1997) describe a new wave of decision making in which "satisficing," not optimizing, decisions are preferred. Satisficing decisions are managerial choices aimed at achieving better than average outcomes with the available information at hand. Satisficing usually involves a very limited information search prior to the managerial choice. Hence, satisficing decisions aim at

achieving high quality but not perfect outcomes in a speedy manner. Interestingly, decision optimization is untenable in both business and athletic contexts because information is often lacking or is too ambiguous to make a perfect decision. Since the environment in both scenarios changes dramatically and swiftly, a decision initially believed to be optimal in a turbulent environment is more likely to become sub-optimal. Thus, both managers and athletes are rewarded for making a series of quick but good decisions with the information at hand.

Finally, athletes, coaches, and managers should be proficient in making sense out of their surroundings. This skill of environmental scanning allows one to canvas the environment for cues, trends, and information that will assist in developing strategies, goals, decisions, and courses of action (Aguilar, 1967; Bourgeois, 1980; Dess, 1987). This skill is particularly important because evidence suggests that executives in high performing firms are more skilled at environmental scanning than their underperforming counterparts (Daft, Sormunen, & Parks, 1988; Miller & Friesen, 1983). Consequently, the ability to scan the competition, customers, and the market effectively is likely to determine the quality of subsequent decisions. Instructors can use the pace, the types of decisions, and the importance of the environment within an athletic context to communicate lessons surrounding managerial decision making.

### **Sports Metaphor Training Module**

This training module attempts to intersect dialogue, critical thought, and sensory mechanisms to produce a meaningful learning experience. The instructor should serve as a facilitator during this module. He or she will need a VCR/DVD player and an overhead projector for this program. Additionally, the instructor should allocate 45 minutes to one hour for this exercise. Holpp's (1987) framework can be useful in achieving an engaging and value-added module.

The training module should begin with an objective that the instructor may announce or display. We offer the following global objective statement as a guideline:

At the end of today's module, you will be better able to critically evaluate language tools, such as sports metaphors, that are used to convey business practices. Also, through careful examination and by responsibly using sports metaphors you will be better able to understand the complexities, difficulties, and opportunities that abound in managerial decision making.

The instructor should then cover the agenda for the module. We propose four stages. In the first, students are introduced to the concept of a metaphor in general and of the parallels between sports and business in particular. The second stage addresses parallels in decision making and the third, parallels in coaching. The final stage is an after-action review of the exercise aimed at the evaluation and future improvement of the program. As suggested by Holpp (1987), we recommend including a benefit statement at the beginning of each phase to focus the learning efforts.

### **Phase I: Metaphor Exploration**

First, the instructor should read or display a benefit statement like the following:

What you will get out of this phase is that metaphors invoke similarities between two objects or happenings and that it takes a discerning eye and critical mind to detect differences that exist beneath the surface. In addition, these perceptual differences could trigger undesired consequences.

By using a metaphor, the instructor sparks class discussion that should easily identify similarities between two occurrences or phenomena. The instructor then attempts to demonstrate slight but meaningful differences that exist but often go undetected between sports metaphors and business.

After this opener, the instructor requires students to write down on paper similarities that exist between the two elements in the metaphor, "Business is a game." In one column students mark "game," and on the other, students brainstorm shared meanings in business. This should take three to five minutes. Then the instructor writes on a transparency the similarities that the students found. The instructor can prime the students with broad but leading questions. Our suggestions for similarities can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Similarities Between Games and Business

Characteristic	Game	Business
<i>Formal Rules</i>	Rule Book	SEC & Government Rules
<i>Oversight</i>	Referees/Judges/ Statisticians	Internal & External Auditors/Institutional Stakeholders
<i>Feedback</i>	Scores	Market Share/Financial Ratios
<i>Equipment Dependent</i>	Athletic Gear	Technology Infrastructure
<i>Leadership</i>	Coach	Manager

Next, the instructor should attempt to invoke contrast between the two components of the metaphor. We recommend starting with minimal differences and then building to a more dramatic threshold of contrast. The instructor may begin by priming for differences in the time horizon between a game and business strategy. Specifically, games usually have very defined and distinct time limits that are often known before the start of the game. Conversely, business strategy, product development, and even quarterly financial reporting operate on longer time horizons. Also, for product development and business strategy the time line is often ambiguous and uncertain. The instructor should then move on to what would appear as a germane and apropos similarity—that of competition. The instructor needs to encourage students to think critically about fundamental but sometimes overlooked differences in how competition is viewed from an athletic versus business perspective. Because businesses operate in a global context and now engage in webs of networks, competition is less visible, more international, and masked by interlocking alliances and joint ventures. The instructor can punctuate this point by examining the consequences for business leaders who only engage in local competition or view competition in a dichotomous and harshly adversarial manner. Table 2 represents key differences between a “game” and a “business” perspective on competition.

The instructor should reinforce this lesson by referring to the original benefit statement.

**Table 2. Differences in Perspective on Competition: Games and Business**

Competition	Game	Business
<i>Visibility</i>	Highly visible	Often invisible or cloudy
<i>Proximity</i>	Local	Global
<i>Nature of competition</i>	Dichotomous/Binary	Ambiguous/Changing

### **Phase Two: Parallels in Decision Making**

In phase two, the instructor leads students to examine parallels between a particular sport and business in terms of decision making. Tennis provides an excellent example. First, it is widely popular across lines of gender and race. Second, it seems to converge on the trend towards more individualistic sports. Third, tennis is an international sport found in both mature countries and developing nations. Finally, tennis is a game of speed and quickness with rapid satisficing decisions occurring throughout the match. For these reasons, tennis holds great appeal because of its ability to resonate with a wide audience while demonstrating several parallels with managerial decision making.

### **Benefit Statement**

The following benefit statement directs attention in this phase:

What you will get out of this phase is an appreciation for the complexities surrounding decision making. This phase will illuminate that decisions often are demanded by immediate problems that surface quickly. These issues are also fraught with complexity and uncertainty.

### **Learning Objective**

The instructor will use tennis to highlight the following points:

- Decisions are often made under fatigue.
- No two problems are the same. Therefore, approaching a problem with past tactics could illicit unfavorable consequences.
- Sometimes you will not have the benefit of a coach for counsel.
- Reflection is important in decision making.



## Procedure

The instructor shows a game at the end of a competitive tennis match. The taping should include a changeover, where the tennis player is given a break before returning to the opposite and different side of the court. The instructor should show the four-minute tape without priming the class. After the first viewing, the instructor instructs the class to write on their sheet of paper factors affecting the decision making process and/or parallels to managerial decision making and show the same clip again.

Although not comprehensive, Table 3 offers some parallels that the students should address or which the instructor may wish to emphasize.

As in the previous step, the instructor should end this phase by returning to the benefit statement to reiterate the objective of the stage.

## Phase Three: Coaching

Like tennis, the game of basketball can be the source of potent sports metaphors. Basketball also appears to span gender, race, and cultural divides. Thus, this metaphor serves to unite or include a diverse array of students. Utilizing basketball also brings the role of coaching to the forefront. This is particularly salient for business undergraduates or MBAs who are likely to serve in supervisory or mid-range managerial positions. In fact, this illustration captures the trend within the business arena that views and labels managers as coaches.

## Benefit Statement

Here's one form of a benefit statement for this phase:

In addition to reemphasizing points made during the previous example, in this phase you will gain a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the decision making process, particularly from examining how coaches make decisions under time constraints within dynamic environments.

## Learning Objective

The instructor will use basketball to highlight the following points:

Table 3. Parallels Between Tennis and Business

Factor	Game	Business
<i>Fatigue</i>	The tennis player is having to make decisions and then execute those decisions under severe fatigue.	Today's managers often work longer and are affected by work and role overload. This is especially prevalent in flat organizations where the duties of the managers are expanded.
<i>Problem Uncertainty</i>	The ball drops in a different location every time often with different spins. No volley or exchange is exactly the same in tennis.	Managers can face two types of problems. Those which are programmed, which are similar problems that occur routinely. It is more difficult to respond to unprogrammed decisions or those issues that are unique and do not occur with any regularity. These problems are difficult to anticipate and harder to solve.
<i>Speed required to decide</i>	A typical serve can reach speeds over 120 mph. A tennis player must often react or make decisions with lightning quick reflexes to survive.	Today's managers and executives are bombarded with stimuli from customers and competitors. This information flows at incredible speeds due to technology. Thus, successful managers are those who can process this abundant information quickly, often relying on instinct and reflex.
<i>The role of reflection</i>	The tennis player is not allowed a coach. During side changes and in between games, the player is allowed to rest. During this time, the player often evaluates past strategy and rethinks current tactics.	Business, technology, and job demands can overwhelm many managers. It is important for managers to reflect on their prior decisions in order to enact better ones. Unfortunately, managers rarely incorporate after-action reviews or periods of reflection to examine past strategies.

- Managers are similar to coaches.
- Good decisions are ones that can be executed.
- Decisions are often made in “noisy” environments or dynamic circumstances.
- Competent coaches make good decisions by seeking input from multiple sources.

### Procedure

The instructor should show the last three minutes of a women's collegiate basketball game. The game itself should be competitive and close, and there should be a time-out in the last three minutes. While the tape is playing, the instructor should note that this example highlights current trends in business and is representative of the students' role in future occupations. Namely, business, like basketball, is becoming more team driven. Also, as future managers, many of the students will be fulfilling a role similar to that of a coach. Both are responsible for the maintenance and performance of the team. In addition, the instructor should highlight shared occurrences or lessons between the tennis example and the current basketball clip (i.e., the importance of making speedy decisions, fatigue in the decision making process, and the essential nature of a time-out to reflect and assess). At the end of the video clip, the instructor should allow the students three to five minutes to reflect and to put down some thoughts on how this basketball example parallels managerial decision making. The instructor should then run the clip one final time. At the conclusion of the tape, the instructor should try to recreate the learning environment of the tennis example by capturing the students' thoughts and perceptions between the sport and business. The instructor may prime the students. To that end, Table 4 suggests some shared lessons between the two.

### Phase Four: Reflection

We stress that these examples and suggestions of dialogue and discourse are, indeed, just that—suggestions. Instructors should improvise, enhance, or augment this module with their own cre-

Table 4. B to B (Basketball-to-Business) Parallels

Factor	Game	Business
<i>Interplay between decisions and execution</i>	The coach must assess the talents, ability, and motivation of her team and the competition when devising tactics and strategies. A good decision is one that can be executed by her team.	It is often easy for managers to make decisions. However, that is only half of the equation. The team, the department, or organization must be able to execute that decision to maintain a competitive edge. Managers who make decisions without the forethought of the capabilities required to implement those directives are likely to experience poor performance and declining morale.
<i>Environmental Dynamism</i>	For a coach to make a good decision, she must tune in to the important information (e.g., her coaching staff and player feedback) and tune out the voluminous environmental noise (e.g., screaming fans, cheerleaders).	Largely due to technology, there are mounds of information from which a manager can turn to before making a decision. However, much of that information is inconsequential. The challenge then for the manager, as is the coach, is to filter out meaningful information and discard noise or useless info.
<i>Consultation &amp; Feedback</i>	A good coach is often in constant consultation with the referees, their coaching staff, and players on the court as they make decisions. Importantly, good coaches solicit feedback from their players that are involved in the action who are intimately engaged with the competition.	Managers should seek multiple and diverse sources of feedback when engaging in the decision making process. Depending on the importance and the time constraints of making those decisions, a manager can often benefit by consulting those who are face-to-face with the customer and competition. Often, this will give the manager a fresh perspective along with meaningful insight at the most important intersections of business—those between customer and those between competitor.

ativity and insight. In the last phase, the instructor should seek to enhance the module by having students reflect on their experience. The instructor may wish to capture students' insights regarding alternative examples or different metaphors (e.g., jazz, other forms of music, or dance) and how they can help us understand various business practices. Also, the instructor should annotate specific suggestions to improve and bolster subsequent module learning experiences.

## Conclusion

Most leaders in the classroom and in the management ranks understand the power of metaphors in communicating. However, some pitfalls accompany the use of metaphors, including disenfranchisement, alienation, and miscommunication of key points. To avoid these problems, we sought out potential parallels and intersections by canvassing several business practices and then comparing them to multiple athletic events. After research and consultation, we contend that instructors can best capitalize on the pace, speed, and uncertainty associated with sports to communicate important themes raised by managerial decision making. By adopting our approach to using sports metaphors within the classroom, instructors and students play a game in which all parties stand to win.

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