



Some Perspective on S.I.'s “Sportsman of the Year”

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No swimmer in history has ever won it.

Since *Sports Illustrated* introduced its “Sportsman of the Year” award back in 1954, the roster of honorees who have earned the coveted title represents a virtual “Who’s Who” in American sport.

Not surprisingly, star athletes from the three major U.S. professional sports have been well represented over the past half century. In baseball, for instance, the likes of Stan Musial, Sandy Koufax and Tom Seaver have been featured as “Sportsman of the Year.” In basketball, Bill Russell, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Michael Jordan have earned the accolade. And among those who have been honored in football are Terry Bradshaw, Joe Montana and Tom Brady.

But the list contains no swimmers. No Dawn Fraser, Debbie Meyer, Shane Gould or Janet Evans. No Don Schollander, Mark Spitz, Ian Thorpe or Michael Phelps.

Even though the first recipient of the award was Roger Bannister, an Englishman, it’s clear from just a cursory review of the honorees that one of S.I.’s principal aims has been to celebrate American sport—and with an almost unabashed patriotic bent. Pele, for instance, the biggest giant in the world’s most popular game, was never honored; but in 1999 the U.S. Women’s Soccer Team won the award. And other standout foreign athletes who have been overlooked include former tennis great Steffi Graf, who won an unprecedented “golden grand slam” in 1984, car racer Michael Schumacher, who broke virtually every Formula One record during the course of his unparalleled career, and Annika Sorenstam, whose success on the golf course rivals that of her male counterpart, Tiger Woods.

But if singing the praises of athletes who don the red, white and blue is truly what the magazine is most after, it’s befuddling how the voters continually overlook both the individual and team performances of U.S. swimmers year in and year out, particularly in Olympic years.

Case in point: the 1976 U.S. men’s team won twelve of thirteen gold medals, eleven in world record time. All told, they captured 25 out of 33 possible individual medals. With apologies to the 1992 U.S. basketball squad which included Messieurs Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson, Charles Barkley, the 1976 men’s team was perhaps the Olympic Games’ original “Dream Team.”

But Team USA's success in the pool has not just been limited to one, two or even a handful of Olympiads. American swimmers have displayed a remarkable, tireless dominance in the quadrennial competition, earning well over 450 overall medals since the Modern Olympics were created, including a whopping 203 gold medals.

While some might argue that it was Peter Ueberroth's marketing genius which rescued the Olympic movement in 1984, anyone who has spent any amount of time crunching the numbers might likely conclude that it's been USA Swimming's enormous success at the Games which has sustained it. NBC Sports figured out a long time ago that "us" versus "them" makes for riveting television viewing here in the U.S., but only if the "us" is on the winning end of the stick more often than not. American audiences, they've made it perfectly clear from their programming choices, want nothing more than to hear the "Star Spangled Banner" as often as possible during each Olympic Games. And nowhere has that anthem been repeated with such regularity than at the competitive swimming venue.

In 2004, the entire U.S. Olympic Team won 36 gold medals and 102 overall medals in 28 different athletic events. Swimmers again accounted for the lion's share of those podium visits, checking in with 12 gold medals and 28 overall medals. No other sport came close to achieving that kind of success.

On its face, it might seem that since S.I. is merely in the business of selling as many magazines as possible for its corporate conglomerate parent, Time Warner, it's only natural for the publication to have an unspoken bias toward so called "Olympic sports." After all, these sports supposedly lack broad appeal. Such prejudice, though, simply doesn't exist. Other track and field athletes who have been recognized by the magazine over the years include Rafer Johnson, Jim Ryun, Mary Decker and Edwin Moses. Other Olympians who have made the grade include gymnast Mary Lou Retton and speed skater Bonnie Blair.

So, again, what gives with our swimmers?

Is it conceivable that either Phelps or Brendan Hansen can win the award this year? All Phelps did during the 2006 calendar year was again display his brilliant versatility between the lanes, especially at both the U.S. National Championships and the Pan Pacific Championships. At the latter, Phelps won five gold medals and one silver medal and set a world record in the 200 I.M. And Hansen? He set three world records over the course of the year and won gold medals in all of the events he contested in Canada. In other words, the breaststroker extraordinaire pretty much had the equivalent of a perfect season—and he did so with his usual grace and humility.

There's no question that both Phelps and Hansen epitomize what S.I.'s "Sportsman of the Year" award strives to honor—"the athlete or team whose performance that year most embodies the spirit of sportsmanship and achievement."

But the problem is that if no competitive swimmer has managed to capture the award during an Olympic year, how can one possibly do so during a non-Olympic year? The year Spitz ran the table in Munich, Billie Jean King and John Wooden shared the award. When Thorpe, Misty Hyman and Pieter van den Hoogenband worked their magic in Sydney, Tiger Woods got the nod. And when Phelps swam his way to an astonishing eight medals in Athens (six golds and two bronzes), it was the entire Boston Red Sox team which was the toast of S.I.'s town.

One begins to wonder whether the only way a swimmer will ever win the award is if he or she displays an uncanny ability of walking on water.

Phelps, admittedly, was surely hampered by his DUI arrest in November of 2004; the timing of his indiscretion, in fact, couldn't have been worse. But questionable behavior certainly didn't prevent Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa from being named co winners of the award in 1998, even though there were suspicions galore about the methods they'd used to achieve their record breaking homerun totals. And while the fuzzy warm story of the Red Sox capturing their first World Series championship in a gazillion years was undoubtedly newsworthy, the truth remains that the entire sport of professional baseball was, and still is, under a sky sized dark cloud regarding the use of performance enhancing drugs.

One possible explanation as to S.I.'s blatant annual oversight might very well be that USA Swimming's success in Olympic competition has been so beyond reproach in the eyes of voters that it's practically a given that each quadrennial the Americans will scoop up the bulk of the medals. The mystery is never really whether Team USA will again rule the competition pool, but rather to what degree.

In other words, while the feel good Bambi beating Godzilla saga of the U.S. Olympic Hockey Team in 1980 is award worthy stuff in the eyes of S.I. voters, King Kong's rampage through the land of the Lilliputians is not. That is, of course, unless you're Tiger Woods, who has won the award twice, in 1996 and 2000.

Another explanation may be that since the United States produces so many swimming heroes at each Olympic Games, our top athletes tend to cancel one another out in the eyes of those trying to reach an annual consensus. In other words, Amanda Beard takes votes away from Phelps, and visa versa. Gary Hall Jr. takes votes away from Natalie Coughlin and Aaron Piersol, and so on and so forth. The obvious solution, of course, would be to name the entire team as "Sportsman of the Year." It's not as if S.I. has never bestowed such blanket recognition.

There's been a boatload of discussion, of late, about the I.O.C. and FINA's decision to kowtow to NBC Sports' request to change the scheduling of the Olympic swimming finals in 2008 to coincide with prime time viewing in the United States. It begs the question as to whether sports such as boxing, track and field, gymnastics, and wrestling were also contacted about adopting such drastic measures. And how about basketball? Was FIBA, that sport's international governing body, asked to reschedule the medal round of the Olympic basketball tournament to dawn to coincide with prime time viewing in the U.S.? Doubtful, given the American hoopsters' abysmal performances on the hardwood floor over the past few years.

Essentially, NBC is constructing roughly one half of its coverage (and a very large chunk of its original \$5.7 billion investment) around USA Swimming because the network is banking on the fact that not only will American swimmers be mounting the awards podium with the usual regularity in Beijing, but also that they will do so while exhibiting their customary youthful vigor and wholesome values of sound sportsmanship.

It's a shame that while our sport can command that much respect from NBC Sports, it still can't garner the same from Sports Illustrated.

[Editor's Note: Michael Phelps finally became "Sportsman of the Year" two years after the publication of this story.]