

The Sweet Science and Beyond

By James N. Myers for the Literary Club (May 12, 2014)

It is not a contest that you have heard about. You won't see it on film. It is 1947, outdoors on a hot, humid South Buffalo summer day, a match between two young Irishmen whose names are obscure in the annals of boxing. They are rail thin, featherweights whose skills and judgment are overshadowed by their ferocity and intensity. It has been agreed that the event is to be a fight to the finish, until one of them goes down once and for all.

At first the two pugilists circle one another carefully, each one looking for an opening, jabbing, occasionally taking a wild swing meant to be the punch that might end the match. One goes down and gets back up, and then the other. Round and round they go this summer day, ducking and weaving and finally cutting loose and just bashing one another until at last one drops his guard at just the wrong time, takes a shot to the head, and goes down hard. He doesn't move. He doesn't twitch.

Had you been there that day in South Buffalo, there are a number of things that you might have noticed, had you noticed at all. The boxers weren't fighting in a ring, but on grass, on one of those postage-stamp size front lawns so common in urban neighborhoods where the two-story houses had been built in the 1930s. They were about 6 or 7 years of age and their boxing gloves were oversized and soft, like pillows. One of the contestants, the one still standing, had but one arm, one boxing glove, having left the extra glove on the porch steps.

So, my friend David Gallagher was on the ground. At first, I thought it was a joke, and I began to laugh. But he didn't laugh and he still didn't move, and I became convinced and a bit proud that I had knocked him out. Finally unnerved, I attempted to revive him, and I noticed that his head was resting on a pipe protruding from the ground. There was blood. Frightened, I summoned his mother, who sent me home.

I never saw those boxing gloves again; nor did David. He did survive with a couple of stitches in his head, and, of course, we remained best friends for a while.

There is something important to me about sport, about competing in some physical contest. It isn't that I don't understand how unlikely success is for someone like me. Success is winning. What else is there but winning? But somehow, failure is not the worst thing. Not competing is the worst thing. I have written this paper to explore for myself how I feel about sport, given my infinitesimal chances of winning.

Yes, I am aware that there are sporting contests organized to give athletes like me a chance to win: Special Olympics, Paralympics, and Cincinnati's Blaze Sports, among them. I have always shied away from these. Perhaps it is the typecasting that they imply. Some years ago, I signed up for a golf clinic for amputees. Ever since, I have been

receiving invitations to play wheelchair basketball. Why does this annoy me so grievously?

I remember very clearly the first time that I failed utterly in a physical contest, and I remember how I felt about it. I was ten or eleven and there was a gymnasium with poles hanging down from above. Each of us children was standing at the base of one of the poles and we were instructed to climb the poles, hand over hand using our legs to help grip and propel us upward. At the signal to “go” everyone started climbing. Undaunted, I gripped my pole as well as I was able with my chin, and my arm, and my legs wrapped around. I never got off the ground. I knew that I wouldn’t make it up the pole, but went on trying until given the signal to quit. I suspect that in an age of helicopter parenting, I wouldn’t have been permitted to try this exercise. I might have been told that I could try something different at which I could excel. In the long run, would I have benefitted from the concession? I don’t think so.

Then there was swimming. Some years later, there was a new public swimming pool built a couple of miles from my home. Because the new pool was so popular, it was necessary for recreation officials to run two daytime sessions, all summer long. To save the ten-cent bus fare I would walk to the pool each morning, in time to be near the front of the line for the first session. Then, being forced to leave, I would exit as quickly as possible, go to the end of the line for session two, pay a second nickel, and swim until the pool closed for the afternoon and then walk home.

It isn’t easy learning to swim in a pool full of thrashing ten to twelve year olds, but even more difficult than that was to summon the courage to appear in public without a tee shirt to cover my chicken wing of a stump and the surgical scars from a lot of pointless operations that had been meant to fix me. The choice was clear and somehow I did learn both to swim and to ignore the staring.

After that, I learned to dive. Learning to dive was painful, of course. Landing flat on your back off a one-meter board hurts a bit. Making the same mistake from the three-meter board is excruciating. But eventually, I managed to learn a simple back flip and a rather ragged one-and-a half. I don’t quite know how I went from reluctance to be seen to shameless exhibitionist, but I could tell that I was being watched, so to top off the day’s performance, I would dive off the three-meter platform, swim 30 or 40 meters underwater through the maze of children in the shallow end of the pool, and exit, imagining that my audience was still standing there waiting for me to come up from the diving pool.

Then table tennis took over my life. At age 12 or so, I became an altar boy, and every Saturday morning the altar boys all got together in the Catholic school’s basement to brush up our Latin and such, after which we had access to several very fine ping pong tables.

Learning to play table tennis with a single two-fingered hand and virtually no gripping power is not a simple task. The gripping part I accomplished by using the lightest possible paddle of a single ply, of which I bought many, because they break. But my grip was still imperfect and now and then a paddle would fly in the direction of my opponent. There is some unfair advantage over an opponent who fears decapitation, I admit. Distracting, I would think. My brothers insist that I do it intentionally. Others take my word for it being accidental. I have not yet gravely injured an opponent.

The next problem that I faced was learning to serve legally. My friends at first allowed me to do what rank beginners often do: let the ball bounce on the table and then hit it across the net. But, as I have explained, I hate such concessions. A legal serve requires a toss, no bounce, and for the ball when struck to hit both sides of the table. After repeated tries, week after week, I worked it out. I held the paddle under my chin, tossed the ball, grabbed the paddle, hit the ball and, with a lot of practice, the problem was solved.

Then, of course comes the hard part – putting it all together. The rule where I played was that would-be challengers came to the table and called “I’ve got the winner.” You might be third in line, but eventually you would get to play the winner, who would probably sit you down quickly by beating you 21-6 or so, and then the process would start again. Winners got lots of practice, while losers got precious little. I played with the altar boys, and then with the church youth group on Thursday evenings. I played at the Youth Center across the street from my house and anywhere else that I could. And, believe it or not, I became quite good, often won, and went on to play in city and township tournaments.

When I was 16 or 17, I reached the singles final of the township tournament (in Tonawanda, New York) to play against a friend of mine, who was a better player than I was or ever would be. We had played hundreds of times, always, I think, with the same result. I wanted to win that tournament about as much as I could have wanted anything, but I wanted to win it legitimately. So, as Dan and I were shaking hands before the three-game tournament final, I said quietly, “Play hard, Dan.”

This would be a better story if I had somehow pulled some strength from the depths of my soul and beaten Dan Wolski that day. But the truth is that the contest was never in doubt.

My youth is filled with similar stories. There is the time when I made a narrow escape from a kayak overturned in Lake Erie. A lesson from this might be that if you have a difficult time squeezing your legs and you butt into a kayak, you will have a similarly difficult time extracting said legs and butt after you have turned it upside-down in the lake. Then, there is basketball (at which I broke one of my two fingers, had them taped together to finish the game). There is hockey and soccer and football and softball. These stories would be pretty much the same and, anyway, in sport, there is always the next challenge.

In the early 1980s I worked in the libraries at Stanford University and it seemed that everyone there ran or jogged except for me, a two-pack a day smoker. To make things worse, the boss ran marathons: Boston, New York, wherever, -- a sixty year old three-hour marathoner. I had tried running while I was still smoking, but the results had been mostly meager, except for liberal amounts of coughing and hacking. But there I was, surrounded by athletes.

One Friday afternoon after work there was to be a "Trot to Zott's," a two or three-mile jog to Rozotti's Restaurant (now the Alpine Inn) through the hills up behind Stanford for a few beers with co-workers at the end of the work week. I was in my early forties. How hard could it be? So I brought shorts, a tee shirt, and running shoes to work that morning.

A group of about twenty of us started off from the Old Library steps and headed off campus and into the hills. It wasn't long before I started to fall behind and before I discovered that the hills were steeper than I had remembered. I soon lost contact with the group ahead and was being passed every few minutes by a late starter. Man, woman -- it didn't matter. They all passed me. But I trudged on, hoping against hope that my directions were correct and eventually arrived, exhausted, sweaty, humiliated, coughing. But, to put a positive spin on it, in every race, someone has to finish last. I had a couple of beers and a burger on the gravel paved patio before absolutely everyone had left, and was fortunate enough to snag a ride back to the University to retrieve my car.

I had long been thinking about smoking cessation when my secretary created the appropriately dramatic moment for such a momentous occasion. I was meeting in my Stanford office with another multi-pack smoker and, when he opened the door to leave, my secretary, not a shrinking violet, said from her seat outside, "Your smoke is killing me." That was it! I reached into my desk drawer for the remaining two or three packs and threw them out the door, saying "I quit." I also announced, "I think I'll run a marathon."

Before I had time to prepare for a marathon, however, I had moved to Philadelphia where I had the most wonderful place to run along each side of the Schuylkill River, from the Art Museum to the Falls Bridge and back. It's called "the loop" and it's a beautiful run up West River Drive, from which you see Boat House Row and then the grass and trees and the quiet, lazy flow of the river itself. Then, a bit short of five miles out, you cross to the east side of the river, and there's more traffic along Kelly Drive, more people, statuary, benches, shouts of "on your left" as bicyclists and skaters flash by. It took some time, of course, before I could run the entire loop and run up the Art Museum steps like Rocky. But I did get to that point.

My workday running plan was to run the loop two or three mornings a week. I would set the alarm for 5:00, get up, dress, and leave the house by 5:15, and cross the bridge by the Art Museum shortly after that. It was not uncommon to see no one or just a few stray cars, as I would run up West River Drive toward the Falls Bridge. Halfway to the bridge the endorphins would kick in and the run became easier, even pleasurable. South on Kelly Drive I would see signs that the city was waking. I loved those morning runs, even

most of the winter ones. I would be back home by 6:30 or so, take a shower, catch a thirty-minute nap, rise, dress, and walk to the subway for work at Temple University.

I have never calculated the number of times that I ran the loop, but it must have been hundreds, because I found after a while that I was anticipating the patterns of cracks in the sidewalk and tree roots sticking through some of them.

One morning, as I ran on my regular schedule, I noticed on the other side of West River Drive, over toward where the World Exposition had been held so many years before, a pack of 8 or 10 dogs slowly running southward. They ignored me and I ignored them, but I had seen them, and remember the hair on the back of my neck going a bit stiff. A week or two later, I saw the dogs again in the same area, but this time they saw me, too. They turned and began to chase me. I was a few hundred yards ahead.

You think quickly when you are about to be mauled by a pack of dogs. One armed man, tee shirt, running shorts, sox and running shoes. I took inventory. I had to decide on a plan and I could only think of two. Plan 1: Find a picnic table to climb up on – there were a few scattered here and there – perhaps I could fend off the dogs by kicking them if they attacked. Plan 2: Kick off the shoes and dump the shirt and sox and dive into the river. I don't know what you might have done, but I chose Plan 2: diving into the river. But before doing that, I turned toward the dogs, who were now about 75 yards back, and I lunged toward them shouting: "STOP!" as loudly and sharply as I could. They stopped in their tracks, paused a moment, turned and trotted away southward. I watched them go until I was sure they had lost interest in the chase, and continued on my run – the last run on the west side of the river at that hour of the morning. Yes, I did run the Philadelphia Marathon, twice.

My parents met on roller skates, and were formidable roller skaters even into their eighties. In contravention to doctors' orders against skates and bicycles, they had bought me a bike and taught me to skate. So, well into my 40s when I discovered rollerblades, I was excited beyond measure.

Now rollerblades are to roller skates as a Ferrari is to a Volkswagen Beetle. They are very fast, and speed was my craving, and the loop was to my mind the perfect course. Even better was Sunday morning, because the roadway of West River Drive was closed to traffic on Sundays and open to skaters and bikers and runners. There was a hill there, descending southward from the Falls Bridge, and if you started down it with a good head of steam and then tucked down in a squat over your skates to cut down on wind resistance, you could reach an astounding speed. I had skated this course for a number of Sundays, and was two-thirds of the way down one Sunday, when I noticed that there had been some road construction that resulted in a short break in the pavement ahead. I was too close to stop when I noticed the break, and I had not yet learned to jump on rollerblades, but jump I did, landed upright and lived to skate another day.

That other day, however, my last on rollerblades, was the day I skated the sidewalk along West River Drive with my friend Jack Nelson. Jack was a bit wobbly on the skates, a second pair of mine that he had borrowed, so I decided to take advantage of that and to show him my speed. He was keeping up surprisingly well, when I got an unwelcome surprise in the form of an unanticipated encounter with a tree root growing up through the sidewalk. I was suddenly airborne. Perhaps you, too, have had the strange feeling of time slowing down in moments of terror, as I felt then. I still remember flying, body horizontal over the sidewalk, calmly trying to decide how to land. When you have only one arm, there is a strong urge to protect it, but then again there are other body parts that cry out for protection as well. There was no way to avoid the eventual landing, so I turned right shoulder down and landed first on it. I remember how it felt, as my shoulder caved in like a bag of popcorn, and I felt a sharp pain. And there I lay, unable to move my arm.

It was late on a Friday and there was no one else around, except for a few cars driving by. Jack took off my skates and helped me to my feet, and we started walking. Then we came to a pay phone (remember those?). We had no change, but I said, "Call Vicki collect, at St. Joseph's," and I gave him her number. An officious Philadelphia Bell employee explained that St. Joseph's University had a policy against accepting collect calls. I asked Jack to put the phone under my chin and explained my position. No deal. Then I explained again, "I have only one arm. I am in the middle of Fairmount Park and I have injured myself so that in effect I now have no arm, and either you are going to put me through to my wife, or I'm going to sue your ass off." "One moment sir, that won't be necessary."

Vicki came and drove me to Temple University Hospital where the team doctor for the Philadelphia Eagles redundantly explained precisely what I had learned as I was falling, that I had no way to effectively protect myself in a fall. Shortly thereafter, I gave both pairs of rollerblades to Jack Nelson and have not skated since, although from time to time I have regretted the decision.

Sailing -- everybody loves the idea of sailing, with perhaps the single exception of my wife, Victoria. Maybe her aversion to this sport relates in part, at least, to a trip we took almost thirty years ago. Victoria and I went to Jamaica on one of those all-inclusive vacations in which the bar opens around ten o'clock in the morning and closes after the last guest goes to bed, the drinks are free, and yet no one ever gets drunk. Where do they get alcohol like that? I was not much more than 40 years old at the time, but felt a bit like a chaperone for a group of twenty-year olds.

There was sitting in the sun, swimming, and beach volleyball, and I won the weekly table tennis tournament. I had noticed that the resort had a number of very small sailboats available for guests and announced that I intended to go for a sail. I knew better than to suggest that Vicki join me in this endeavor. One might have thought that I had announced that I was going to take up alligator wrestling. She was not in favor of my risking my life on the high seas.

Undeterred by her excessive caution I sidled up to the gentleman in charge of sailboats and such, hoping that he might not notice that I might find it difficult to sail on my own. If he did notice, he never mentioned it and we were soon pulling one of the boats across the sand and into the water, and I climbed onto the boat and said, "I'll take it from here." It was about then that I started to recognize some difficulty in my situation. There was a sail to be controlled and there was a rudder with which to steer the boat and these, as I understood the problem, needed to be controlled with some degree of coordination. It occurred to me that since the sail had a rope hanging down from it, I might control it with my foot, leaving my hand free to control the rudder. So, I wrapped the rope around my left ankle and tied it for good measure, adjusted sail and rudder so as to catch the wind, and I was off – so to speak.

I turned outward from the beach, nodded back to Victoria to let her know that I had things well under control, and sailed toward the open ocean or Cuba – or whatever it was out there. It was really quite exciting and I was zipping right along, with people on the beach becoming smaller and smaller. What a beautiful day for a sail.

After a few minutes of this, I decided to turn the boat and sail back toward shore. You know, that's not as easy as it looks in the movies. I did manage a turn, but I turned away from rather than into the wind and over went the boat. Here's where I might want to impart a little advice. If you ever plan to tip over a sailboat, you might consider the wisdom of having your leg tied to the sail. But let's leave me swimming upside down under the sail, trying to free my foot, while we check what is going on ashore.

Meanwhile, Victoria had been watching my every move, and as proud as she must have been to see her sailor boy smoothly sailing in the bay, she was horrified to see the boat go over and she single-handedly roused the lifeguards, the boat man, and several bystanders. A number of small boats and half a dozen swimmers were immediately headed in my direction.

Back under the boat, I managed to come up under the sail for a breath or two as I worked at the knot I had tied, and finally I worked my ankle free and swam to the surface, and held onto the overturned sailboat while I caught my breath. It was then that I saw the armada and recognized the humiliation that I was about to suffer. "Let me help you into my boat," the first fellow said. "No thanks, I'll swim back. Sorry for the trouble."

I swam for shore, for the farthest corner of the shore where I would be least likely to be seen exiting the water. Victoria met me there with lots of helpful advice about what I should do the next time I might get a crazy idea. I don't know about you, but I really appreciate advice at times like this.

There does seem to be something about sailing that finds me in the water, and in a difficult situation. Some years later, I was sailing as I often did with my philosopher friend Jack Nelson of rollerblade fame, in his much larger sailboat. We had been sailing about the Chesapeake for the day, and a great day it was with rail almost in the water as we raced along. And now we were anchored in a small bay for the night. Jack and I had broken out a bottle of gin of which each of us may have had a small glass or even two,

when I said to Jack, “Don’t you think it’s a bit warm?” and dove over the rail into the green and soupy Chesapeake water – not my favorite sort of pool. In any case, Jack, too, dove in, and we splashed about until it was time for another drink.

Jack clambered up the rope ladder that hung over the side of the boat, and I followed – to a point. I got my feet onto the lowest rung of the ladder, and grabbed onto the right hand rope as best I could, when something quite surprising happened. The left side of the ladder turned away from the boat, and turned me with it. I tried several tactics to climb that damned ladder, but each time I was thwarted by the laws of physics. (As I did my extensive research for this paper, I found on the Internet a very helpful article on climbing a rope ladder. It explains precisely where to place each of your hands, to maintain balance.)

Jack and I had a short discussion of my dilemma, and eventually he simply lay down on the deck, hanging over the edge, and lifted me off the ladder with brute force. Problem solved, we shared a little more gin as we cooked a delicious dinner of green pasta, Italian sausage, and cheese, asparagus on the side, with which we may have had just a touch of red wine – It was a scene of utter contentment.

What is it that makes otherwise rational men (a logician and a library director) so silly and reckless at times like these: A day in the wind and sunshine? The gin? The wine? The Italian sausage? In any case we were lounging about after dinner, discussing Greek irregular verbs or quantificational consistency in truth trees (I can’t remember precisely), when I got the irresistible urge to go back into the water. I was over the side and once again into the soup.

Jack followed me in, and as we swam around the boat we had a discussion of how I might exit the water this time, which discussion Jack cut short when he had a brilliant idea. He got back on deck, attached some rigging to the main sail boom, turned the boom over the side and dropped a boatswain’s chair, more of a harness really. Back in the water, he strapped me into the harness, then he was back on board, and, using a winch, he reeled me up like a beached whale, and swung me over the deck. I was finally convinced that I had swum enough that day. The next day, we took the boat back to its slip, and returned to the relative sanity of the academic life.

As some of you know, I retired at age 55 to become Victoria's househusband in Dayton and in my spare time to try out pursuits that I had not tried before and to figure out how to do things that had always seemed to me impossible to do.

One of these latter pursuits was golf. I had always been fascinated by golf and had tried to swing a club with no success at all. One night as I lay awake, I came up with an idea. I often come up with brilliant ideas in the middle of the night. There are two problems with this mode of invention. First, not all these ideas are very good. Secondly, Vicki doesn't always want to hear about them right then while they are fresh and need to be discussed. In any case, the idea was that I would purchase a wrist guard, the kind that

more rational rollerbladers use, I would have some sort of pipe cut up its length so that it would slip over the shaft of a golf club, but hold when it was raised to the level of the grip. I would hire a welder to cut the pipe and to attach a flange to the back of it, and finally, I would hire a shoemaker to attach the flange to the wrist guard. There was nothing to it, really. And so I did it. In fact, the shoemaker himself treated me to an outing at his favorite golf course. Sounds perfect, doesn't it?

Well, the idea was good, but the execution was flawed. The pipe part was too long, as I had tried to explain to the welder, who wanted the project to be over, so that he could go back to his drinking. The wrist guard was too floppy -- nobody's fault. The result was that at the end of my first golf outing my arm was bleeding profusely from the back and forth motion of the device rubbing against it. Also, I had discovered that although a golf ball is at rest, and never moves on its own, hitting it is nevertheless quite a trick. So, I did what most other red-blooded American men would have done. I gave up.

Several years later, now moved to Cincinnati, Victoria noticed an article in the newspaper concerning a golf clinic sponsored by a local prosthetist. At her urging I called him to discuss my invention, and he informed me that it was a very good idea, but that someone had beat me to it, with an even more sophisticated prosthetic device, which he could and did produce for me. It was really quite wonderful. But now, I had called my own bluff and was compelled, in part by the cost of my new prosthesis, to play golf.

After a few shots with a whiffle ball in the park, I drove to a driving range up in Evendale, near to my favorite bridge club. I purchased a large bucket of golf balls to hit, found a secluded booth to hit them from, and set out to find out how difficult golf really is.

My lack of success at making solid contact with the golf balls was annoying, but it was not as annoying as the fact that a rotund man about ten years my senior, with a very bad left leg, had found my secluded spot and had sat down to watch. After a few minutes, during which I was steaming at the clubs, the balls, and my audience, he limped over closer to me and asked, "Mind if I give you a little advice?" His name was Ron Curran, he said, and he was a golf teacher by trade. He sent me an email that very night offering to teach me, so long as I would not insult him by insisting to pay for the lessons. He was a very hard bargainer.

Ron, it turned out, had always wondered what it might be like to teach a one-armed student to play golf, or at least, that's what he told me. He presumed that because there would be no wrist in my golf swing, I would not be subject to the novice golfer's primary mistake, i.e., trying to get the club under the ball, which doesn't work because something's already under the ball, that being the ground. Ron had written one golf book and was at work on another, so we worked a deal, free golf lessons for free editing -- his grammar and spelling were atrocious. He thought of these failings as his "boyish charm."

I never did become a very good golfer and Ron never became a good writer. He discovered that my swing suffered not just from one problem of poor golfers, but it suffered from all of them. The trouble in his leg was cancer. It was a source of continuous but unmentioned pain and it was spreading rapidly. But somehow, my bad

golfing and Ron's bad writing meshed perfectly into a wonderful friendship -- the one-legged teacher and his one-armed student¹. For a long time we played almost every week as he fit me in between lessons. I will never forget the sound of his voice on the occasion when I might make a good shot, say over water and onto the green: "Who loves ya, Jimmy? Who loves ya?" He would shout. We played all the local courses and when winter made that impossible, we drove to Knoxville to play on warm winter days, and one day we even played with Paul Daugherty and Lew Gatch, both of whom were Ron's students.

Ron died in 2011. We weren't able to play as often toward the end, but when Ron felt well enough we would play a few holes and when he didn't we had breakfast together once a week at Frische's. Just like on the golf course, we would talk about the important things: marriage, kids, relationships, and golf. No matter how Ron felt, even up to his last few weeks, when I would ask, "How are you today?" he invariably would say "Terrific, Terrific, Terrific."

So, what's next for me?

Several years ago, I was walking along the Ohio River watching the Paddlefest rowers go by, when I spotted a Hobie kayak. It was propelled by foot pedals – no hands required! I ran to the Public Landing to meet it as it came in, got the details, drove thirty miles to the Hobie store, and came home to explain to Victoria the new adventure I was planning. Surprisingly, she was not enchanted with my new-found enthusiasm, and, in fact made many telling arguments against it, among them safety, practicality, storage. So I haven't bought a kayak - yet.

¹ I believe that this phrase or something much like it should be attributed to sportswriter Paul Daugherty, who wrote an article about the two of us.