

POLITICS AS USUAL: Fastest Man?

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

I decided to take a bit of a break from all things political this past week as I had had my fill of folks talking at each other about ?facts?, ?fake news? and competing narratives about what is objective political reality.

At this point, I don't think the different sides actually listen to each other. They prefer their respective echo chambers instead so as to ensure they only hear what they want to hear.

We have gotten to the stage where we cannot have a reasonable discussion about politics because, regardless of one's political viewpoint, the other ?side? is necessarily wrong, stupid, or worse. Thus, swaying someone's now entrenched opinion through the use of reason is pointless because reason and logic don't seem to have a place in modern political discourse.

People can't even agree on what is logic or reason ? or whether it even matters. So, an in depth discussion about policy that is based on a foundation of reasoned argument is a futile exercise.

Liberal, conservative or other, no side owns the truth though they all seem pretty sure that they do.

So, instead of politics, I decided to indulge my passion for sports.

And it just so happened that the first two weeks of August is the biennial festival of sport ? the World Track and Field Championships. Aside from rowing, Track and Field events are my favourite sport to watch (yes, I love Tour de France too, but I would choose a running race over a bike race any day).

My favourites are the distance races as they are a testament not only to strength and speed but to tactics.

Watching runners think on their feet about how to best their competitors while at the same time pushing themselves to the absolute physical limit is just thrilling to watch. I cheer them on, screaming wildly as I watch them jostle each other, and push towards the line.

Mo Farrah, of Great Britain, has the most amazing finishing kick I have ever seen. He seems super human the way he can just turn on the jets and sprint to the line, leaving everyone else sputtering. Just amazing.

But, distance races aside, the marquee event is always the men's 100m. The race that determines who is the fastest man alive.

It is always a thrilling race. Canada has had some amazing sprinters ? Donovan Bailey, Bruny Surin and now Andre De Grasse, Canada's triple Olympic Medalist. I was very much looking forward to his race against the great Usain Bolt. My enthusiasm for this year's IAAF World Champs was dampened considerably with the news of Andre De Grasse's hamstring injury.

The looming epic showdown between the Canadian sprinting star and the soon to be retiring fastest man alive, Usain Bolt, fizzled out. No showdown. Drat.

Usain Bolt has won virtually every 100m race he's contested over the past 8 ? 10 years. He is simply incredible. And what's more incredible? Nary a word about being a drug cheat. No failed tests. No sketchy results that have been shushed up. He runs clean. So someone to cheer on, even if he isn't Canadian!

As I settled in to watch the races, I was looking forward to Bolt destroying the field, getting another gold and retiring on a high note. I was a bit alarmed by his somewhat sloppy semi-final, where he was piped at the line by the American kid, but it was just a semi so big deal. The other semi was won by Justin Gatlin, a two time drug cheat that was booed by the crowd every time he stepped up to the line.

The final was decidedly not the expected ending.

Justin Gatlin won and Usain Bolt was third. Bolt was gracious in his loss, congratulating the American. But the crowd was most definitely not gracious, even booing Gatlin as he received his gold medal.

Now, there were other runners at the line who had had doping offences ? Johan Blake of Jamaica has served a suspension for failing a drug test for example - so why the animosity for Gatlin?

Because many feel he shouldn't be at the line at all given that he has had two doping offences. The rules are supposed to be, one failed test? Serve a suspension, learn your lesson and come back. Two failed tests? You are banned for life. Gatlin has failed two tests and yet is allowed to race. That simply isn't fair.

Ben Johnson was banned for life for two failed tests. He continues to be the poster boy for drugs in sports to this day despite his many efforts to make amends. And yet, many others after him ? including almost the entire field of runners who went to the line in that 100m final at the Seoul Olympics alongside him ? have been found to be massive drug cheats ? Marion Jones, Tim Montgomery, the entire Russian track team to name just a few.

So, why is it that there is this exception? Ah, because there are politics in sports.

In fact, sporting and athletic achievement serves as a proxy for national aspirations.

It is vitally important for certain nations to demonstrate their dominance, as it were, in sports. It's the reason why there is a tally of which nation has won the most golds.

Individual athletic achievement is great, but national achievement is what counts. Why else would countries like the former East Germany, Soviet Union, China, etc., engage in state sponsored cheating? To demonstrate that they are the strongest.

But getting back to Gatlin's win, as someone who is still an active athlete (I just raced at Canadian Henley this past weekend), I can tell you that having a known cheater in my race would be infuriating.

I lost my race this weekend by just 2.78 seconds (talk about infuriating), If I knew that the person who beat me had failed two drug tests, believe me I would be protesting the results. (That didn't happen, of course, I am just illustrating a point!)

There are supposed to be rules ? to which everyone is supposed to be subject. Not just those that don't have good lawyers. Either apply the rules or abandon them entirely. The sporting public will respond accordingly.