Winning

Reflections on an American Obsession

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Chapter One

THE PROBLEM

Now of all good things, truth holds first
place among gods and men alike.
—Plato, *Laws,* book V

Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at the American spirit. His travels through the country in the early 1800s revealed a people with great ambitions, in constant motion, with remarkable ingenuity, and an appreciation for getting things done. In Europe, people seldom dared to dream. In the United States, where the established social and cultural orders of the old continent had been set aside and everyone had been given a fresh start, people could aspire to great things. A new society founded on equality unleashed fantastic energy, freedom, and movement. When Tocqueville asked an American sailor why the ships of his country were built to last such a short time, he was told that technological advances made any given ship obsolete in a few years. The "great nation" of the United States, Tocqueville reflected, "directs its every action" ultimately towards one goal: "indefinite perfectibility" (Tocqueville 2003: 523).

This may have been too simplistic an interpretation of the new country. But my recent yearlong stay in Denmark helped me see that Tocqueville captured something of life in the United States.

Anyone spending some time in Denmark will eventually run into Jante's Law. The law was formulated by Aksel Sandemose in his 1933 novel *A Refugee Crosses His Tracks*, where he portrays the culture and beliefs of the residents of the small Danish town of Nykøbing Mors. Virtually all Danes are familiar with the ten principles of the law. Many embrace them to a good extent. They permeate public and private life, the education system from kindergarten on, politics, business, sports, family life, and more. Here is what they say:

1. Don't think that you are special
2. Don't think that you are of the same standing as us
3. Don't think that you are smarter than us
4. Don't fancy yourself as being better than us
5. Don't think that you know more than us
6. Don't think that you are more important than us
7. Don't think that you are good at anything
8. Don't laugh at us
9. Don't think that anyone cares about you
10. Don't think that you can teach us anything.

Without a doubt, most of us in the United States are raised to believe exactly the opposite of Jante's Law. We are told to feel special and strive for new heights. Being smarter, better, and more knowledgeable than others are virtues, not faults. And most of us certainly believe, if not pray, that we matter and are good at something. While we do not necessarily want to laugh at others, we work extremely hard to make sure that others care about us and that we, in turn, have something that they can learn from us. Indeed, as recent comparative studies of American and Danish cultures show, Americans "hold unrealistically positive views of themselves and believe that they are much better than average on many attributes." Quite the opposite applies to the Danes (Thomsen et al. 2007: 446). Danes, in turn, "show aversion to conspicuously successful persons," while "Americans aspire to such distinction" (Nelson and Shavitt 2002: 440).

We live in an intensely driven and dynamic society—a life, in the words of Tocqueville, of fervor. But while this is clear, it is also true that we seldom stop to think and analyze what exactly we are after and why. Instead, we subject ourselves with little awareness to the profound demands that our society imposes on us. As Liah Greenfeld recently put it, we are overwhelmed by "busyness" but lack understanding: convinced that the "sky is the limit" and conscious that it is our duty to "find" if not "make" ourselves, we are breathlessly running from task to task, place to place, and mission to mission (Greenfeld 2005a: 331). Max Weber wrote that our Puritan ancestors taught us that idleness is a sin (Weber 2002). One could say that we learned that lesson all too well. We have been running ever since even if—as Weber himself predicted—so much has changed around us.

Nothing represents our restless and confused mentality better, perhaps, than our great love of "winning" and deep fear of "losing." Americans embrace competition. According to the World Values Survey,[1] as table 1.1 shows, our approval of competition is unmatched by any other major industrialized country on earth. Nearly half of our population firmly believes in the goodness of competition. This is much more than the numbers in Germany, Great Britain, and Italy. It is twice the number in France. In Japan, less than one fifth of the population values competition decisively. The figure for Denmark is 27 percent. Indeed, when we consider the whole world, the United States is more positively inclined toward competition than most countries—a fact that is well established among comparative psychologists and sociologists (Nelson and Shavitt 2002). As we shall see throughout this book, Americans also believe more strongly than others in the fairness of unequal outcomes, rewarding those who try and succeed, and leaving those who fall behind to their own devices.

At the same time, despite all this and the pressures it generates, *we have remarkably little understanding of what competition—and winning and losing in particular—are all about*. We use the terms with different and sometimes contradictory, but never explicit, connotations and meanings. We often think of winning as

TABLE 1.1
EMBRACING COMPETITION

	United States	*Germany*	*Great Britain*	*Italy*	*France*	*Japan*	*Canada*
No reservations	29%	16%	12%	18%	16%	11%	24%
Minimal reservations	17%	17%	17%	10%	7%	7%	15%
Total	46%	33%	28%	28%	23%	18%	39%

Source: World Values Survey, Question E039.

the opposite of losing, but we are unsure about how the two concepts relate to each other. We push ourselves, congratulate winners, and console losers—all without knowing why. Indeed, we are not even clear about what, exactly, we are after on any given occasion. Winning and losing have become "taken for granted" aspects of our "everyday reality" about which we know much too little (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 19–21).

We should pause and analyze. According to the World Values Survey, the Danes, with their apparently odd approach to life, rank among the most satisfied and happiest people on earth—well ahead of the United States on both counts.[2] According to a recent comparative study of forty-two nations across the world, happiness decreases as the level of competition increases in a given society (Van de Vliert and Janssen 2002). The United States cannot and should not turn into a Denmark, of course. We are too diverse a society and our approach generates valuable benefits. But those reports suggest that something may be amiss in our mind-set.

The purpose of this book is to explore in detail our ideas of winning and losing. The task is certainly challenging. Tangible things in life, like bicycles or telephones, are relatively easy to take apart and study. With some effort, we come to understand their makeup: their components, how they are put together, and so on. But the values, ideas, and concepts that frame or underpin our societies are more difficult to deconstruct. They are invisible and cannot be held. They are nowhere in a sense, yet also everywhere. We can say that they exist in the minds of people. We can also say, however, that they have an independence of their own and exist separately from each individual consciousness (Durkheim 1965: 269). How, then, should we carry out our investigation of winning and losing?

For guidance, we can turn to the foundational works in sociology of Georg Simmel and Max Weber. They offered two different but complementary methodologies for examining life in society. According to Simmel, social life takes on particular forms (Levine 1971). We come to know any given social phenomenon when we understand how it is ordered or set up: What elements are at play? How do they relate to each other? Who gives what to whom? Parents, for instance, are authoritative figures who provide love and protection to their children. Those children reciprocate by giving their parents joy and affection. Prostitution, in turn, entails an exchange of money and sex between two individuals with asymmetrical power. Simmel urged us to look at the structure of things.

Weber, by contrast, thought that we should pay far more attention to what goes on inside people's minds. People interpret themselves and the world around them. They endow things with significance. Understanding something in society is best done by grasping the meaning it holds for its members (Runciman 1978). If, for instance, we see a mother buying an ice cream for her daughter on the first day of summer, we can understand what is happening when we discover that the mother is motivated in part by memories of her own mother doing the same thing for her years ago. For Weber, our attention should go to what people make of things—to the attributions and thought processes they bring to the world around them.

Both approaches inspired my investigation of winning and losing in America. In line with Simmel, I examine two fundamental aspects of winning and losing. Both have to do with what is at stake or what we *pursue* when we seek victory and try to avoid loss: What prizes do we get or give up? Second, what powers does victory give us over those prizes? How does loss limit us? These are structural questions—they are about the way winning and losing are set up in our society. The answers will reveal a great deal about the hidden qualities of victory and losing as well as what moves us to pursue victory and dread loss so passionately. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 explore the prizes. Chapter 5 focuses on power.

In line with Weber, I explore how we conceive of winners and losers—how we think of them and therefore make them into what they are. Who, in our minds, is a winner? Who is a loser? What do we believe a person must do to earn those titles? Moreover, how do we think about competitive events and the world in general that allows for the existence of winners and losers as well as for their central position in our culture? We are interested in our *beliefs* about the constitutions of winners, losers, and the world around us. This will be the topic of chapters 6 through 9. We will cover much ground. Figure 1.1 summarizes the road ahead. Above all, the analysis will make clear one fundamental fact about winning and losing: they are not endpoints or final destinations but gateways to something of immense importance to us. This is *the affirmation of our place in the world*. We desperately wish to know that we belong to this earth and society—that our presence is legitimate. This doubt is characteristic of modern societies but especially the United States (Greenfeld 2005a, 2005b). Americans, according to the World Values Survey, are among the most preoccupied people in the world about the meaning and purpose of their lives.[3] We are an unsettled people. Behind the drive toward "perfectibility" that Tocqueville saw in America one finds *profound doubt*. In victory we hope to find a positive answer to our questions. In loss, we fear rejection and, with that, the abyss.

Our investigation will also make clear that, unfortunately, we are bound to be disappointed over and over again—regardless of whether we win or lose. This is because, as we compete, we are not aware of what we are really after. It is also because we rely on arbitrary and faulty or inconsistent logic to assess the world around us, to draw conclusions about others and ourselves, to motivate us and interpret events and outcomes. All this creates problems. The intensity of our drives, coupled with our ignorance about what we are doing, ensures that we have a very *obsessive* or compulsive (Fellman 1998) relationship to competition: one that is marked by

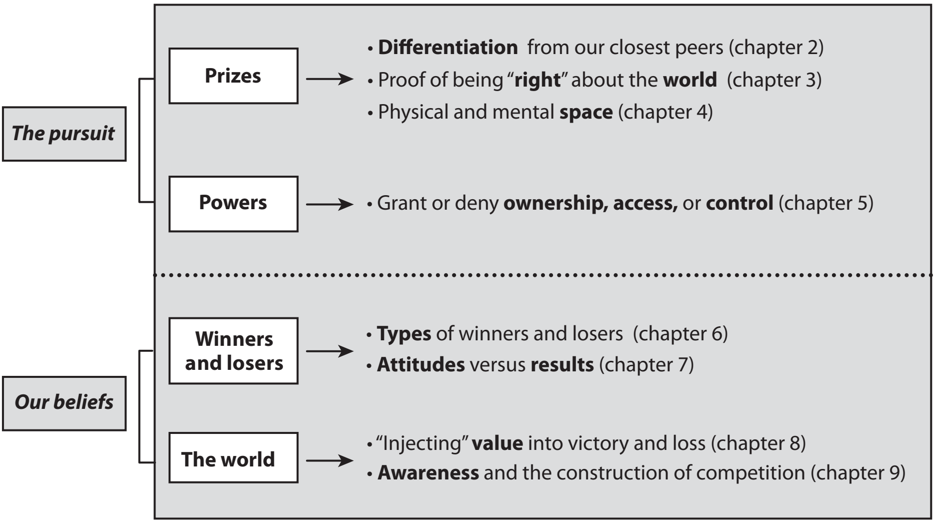
The pursuit
Prizes
• Differentiation from our closest peers (chapter 2)
• Proof of being "right" about the world (chapter 3)
• Physical and mental space (chapter 4)
Powers
• Grant or deny ownership, access, or control (chapter 5)
Our beliefs
Winners and losers
• Types of winners and losers (chapter 6)
• Attitudes versus results (chapter 7)
The world
• "Injecting" value into victory and loss (chapter 8)
• Awareness and the construction of competition (chapter 9)

Figure 1.1. Exploring winning and losing in America.

strong urges, repetitive but never satisfied behaviors, and a continuous need to produce evidence about ourselves.

The bulk of this book is descriptive. But in the last chapter I pursue a very normative question: Should we continue to embrace the language of winning and losing in our everyday life? If winning and losing have become "inflationary" and are, at the same time, very messy concepts, is this not an indication that the time has come to reassess our use of those concepts? Are we depriving ourselves of more appropriate language, of sounder and therefore healthier attitudes toward so many different situations and events in life? Is our approach ultimately *inefficient*? I will propose that there are advantages but also serious problems associated with our current approach to winning and losing. Thus I will close by proposing an alternative mind-set for how we pursue our aspirations and dreams.

I shall end this chapter with three caveats. First, our investigation will not be exhaustive. While the task before us is of the most serious nature, I do not intend to offer a conclusive description of winning and losing backed by a comprehensive set of data. We know too little about those terms for that to be possible. My objective is to offer an initial *portrait* of winning and losing as they exist in our society—to identify some of their most important qualities. This book is not a treatise but an "intervention," an exploration. As I proceed, I draw from an eclectic range of data sources and various modes of argumentation to make my point.[4] The reader looking for provoking and powerful insights will encounter good material for further reflection.

Second, I do not intend to describe how all of us—individually or as members of particular socioeconomic, racial, gender, or other groups—think about winning and losing. There are, of course, important differences across individuals and groups. Some readers will not identify with what the discussion will unveil. Other readers, such as myself, will recognize (perhaps hesitantly) parts of themselves in it. What lies ahead is a particular type of sociological effort. My mission is to shed light on a set of powerful concepts *that occupy a dominant place* in our society and which, by virtue of their privileged position, are incessantly before us as we go about our everyday life. To use the language of Berger and Luckmann, this is a book about two socially constructed ideas that have firmly taken roots in our society and which many, though not all of us, accept without question (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 19–21). We are after what Emil Durkheim called "social facts" that mold in a multitude of ways our reality (Durkheim 1982: 70).

Third, we shall focus on the characteristics of winning and losing, not how those concepts originate from, are maintained by, or stand in relation to broader societal factors. What roles do our political system, professional and nonprofessional sports leagues, education system, and economy—to name a few of those factors—play in the making of our competitive mind-sets? Do they benefit from our preoccupation with winning and fear of losing? Are there significant differences across contexts? I do not systematically answer these important questions. Still, given that I speak to them at various points in the book and that some readers may be looking for answers, I outline here my position.

When it comes to broader factors, we should pay special attention to institutions. Institutions are the formal and informal programs, rules, and practices found in our political, economic, athletic, educational, and other systems. We find them at our workplaces, leagues, the state, associations of various kinds, our schools, and beyond (Campbell 2004: i; Fligstein 1996: 658). Institutions are especially responsible for fostering, supporting, and making possible our approach to winning and losing. Research should turn to institutions when investigating the broader context of our competitive mind-sets. By and large, the organizations, associations, and systems that house those institutions benefit from what they produce: individuals are encouraged to give far more of themselves to any given cause than is reasonable or healthy. More of everything is therefore generated—goods, services, professional and athletic achievements, money, entertainment, to name a few. Matters are unlikely to change fast: institutions are sticky (Mahoney 2000) and cannot be easily dismissed, although each context is likely to have unique dynamics at work. In all of this, individuals clearly find themselves in difficult circumstances. The most promising path for them to follow is a change in their own personal perspectives, as I argue in the closing chapter of the book.

Chapter Two

DIFFERENTIATION

What a way to win, as well, with my
brother so close behind me.
—John Grossman, on winning the 2003
World Surf Kayaking Championship

VICTORY IN AND OF ITSELF is not necessarily what brings us satisfaction. If that were the case, most of us would put ourselves in situations where we would be assured of beating our competitors. Chess masters would play with five-year-olds and professional golfers with people who do not know the difference between a golf club and a walking stick. Instead, quite the opposite happens: we take steps to ensure that we participate in competitive events where we face off against competitors of near equal skill or ability and where the outcome is, therefore, uncertain. In this and the next two chapters, I explore what is behind our love of winning and distaste for loss. What prizes are motivating us?

In this chapter, I identify a set of subtle and somewhat darker things: uncertainty, the thrill of seeing but then avoiding danger, the pleasures that come from seeing others struggle, and above all, the possibility of differentiating ourselves from our closest peers. Close competition provides all of these. We as a society have, therefore, devoted enormous resources, and crafted rules and practices—whether in business, sports, education, or other areas—to ensure that competitive events remain close.

The Competitors

Victory itself is not very interesting. What gives it special flavor is close competition. Without close competition, very few of us would be eager to compete. So, how does close competition make victory thrilling? Figure 2.1 specifies the dynamics at work. Consider each step in turn. Close competition increases the risk of loss. The resulting uncertainty gives victory part of its flavor. We can recall here the words of French sociologist Roger Caillois who, in his classic study of competition and games, stated that "the game is no longer pleasing to one who, because he is too well trained or skillful, wins effortlessly and infallibly" (Caillois 2001: 7). We must be running a risk. If things go wrong, we will find ourselves in an undesirable position; if things go well, on the other hand, we will be quite happy. Because we do not know the outcome yet, we feel excitement. Social psychologists have known this for quite some time: "unpredictability," note two researchers, "is important in creating the tension and excitement for the participants and spectators" (Frazier and Snyder 1991: 380). And "doubt," if at all possible, "must remain until the end," so as to create the maximum excitement (Caillois 2001: 7). But what causes uncertainty? One factor is our opponent. We are facing a partly unknown challenge, one that is potentially bigger than we can handle. Only engagement with that challenge will reveal the truth. A second, perhaps more important cause, is ourselves. To return to Caillois' insight, we know that we are not infallible: "Every game of skill, by definition, involves the risk for the player of missing his stroke, and the threat of defeat, without which the game would no longer be pleasing" (Caillois 2001: 7). We are capable of making mistakes and hurting ourselves. The challenge becomes to see how we perform. We choose situations, then, that test our abilities. We can certainly run faster than a five-year-old. But can we run as fast as our peers?

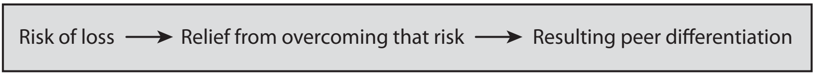
Risk of loss
Relief from overcoming that risk
Resulting peer differentiation

Figure 2.1. Close competition and the thrill of victory.

The risk of loss generates other dynamics as well. We must struggle and exert ourselves in order to overcome the odds. We have to labor for the desired outcome. We must, in other words, make an effort. Such effort implies that we have invested a part of ourselves, that we have taken time to gather our energy, to concentrate, to turn our attention to the task before us. We have not only spent part of ourselves but also dedicated our minds to it. Loss becomes painful because of all that we have invested. Winning vindicates us. Rewards, then, are available only for those who have struggled. And, in fact, psychology experiments confirm this much. In one study, for instance, researchers found that progress in attaining certain objectives at the workplace caused feelings of self-esteem only when those objectives were deemed *difficult* to attain. “Goal difficulty,” wrote the researchers, “emerged as the clearest moderator between goal progress and well-being over a period of 3 years” (Wiese and Freund 2005: 298). The attainment of easy goals generates no real pleasure. Other researchers reported more generally that for most people the attainment of hard goals generates more pride and self-respect than is the case for easier goals (Mento et al. 1992).

The effort-reward mentality is quite central to American culture and its roots. According to the General Social Survey—the most authoritative and comprehensive source of attitudes in our country—75 percent of Americans believe effort to be an essential driver of one’s social standing.[1] Success, they believe, requires and reflects hard work. Our mythologies, in turn, are heavily preoccupied with the close relationship between effort and rewards. Think of Ulysses’ adventures in *The Odyssey*: they are a sequence of challenges and obstacles that are overcome through courage and skill. Ulysses’ reunion with his wife Penelope and Penelope’s own faithfulness in the face of doubt and pressure from numerous suitors are deeply meaningful because of their travails. Tellingly, once back, Ulysses uses a celebratory banquet to get rid of those who, in his absence, had aspired to marry Penelope and replace him in his own home: close competitors indeed! When it comes to Christianity, only those who heed the word of God and avoid doing evil are granted salvation. Eve in the Garden of Eden could not resist temptation: God deemed her unworthy and sent her and Adam away. Since then, all humans have come into this world burdened with original sin. They must toil to survive on this earth: "Cursed is the ground for thy sake," said God to Adam; "in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life" (Genesis 3). And, of course, they must cleanse themselves to reach the heavens.

The second element in figure 2.1 follows closely from the first. Victory confirms for us that, *even though we could have lost,* we have in fact won. We delight in not having lost, with all the terrible consequences that that can bring. Insofar as this is the case, victory is then a sensation of pleasure based, in part, on something that has not taken place: we stand by the abyss that we previously saw and delight in the idea that we have not fallen into it. Without the abyss, the delight would not be there. In terms of uncertainty, victory is then the *elimination* of that doubt. Note, therefore, that the pleasure comes not from the mere absence of that doubt but, rather, from its acknowledged presence and, in a later moment, its deletion. It is the sequence—doubt and then no doubt—that causes pleasure.

There are plenty of studies that show that inordinate pleasure can come from seeing danger and then avoiding it. In a recent experiment measuring the pleasure associated with winning and losing, students at Ohio State University were put before a computer and allowed to gamble money. Outcomes were fixed, so that all participants neither lost nor made money. Yet the paths to those outcomes were different. One group of students was in positive territory until the end. The other was in negative territory until the end. Which group reported the most overall pleasure from the experiment? The one that was losing throughout and then saw the losses go away (Heyman et al. 2004). But we need not turn to experiments to understand this process. The logic is embedded in many of our daily activities and social rituals.

What happens, after all, when we take a shot at a basket? If we knew beforehand that we would make the shot, we would be less interested in taking it. Michael Jordan said on many occasions that he took each shot with the conviction that he would make it. But this cannot possibly explain the joy he displayed on so many occasions when making the shot. The possibility of failure, confirmed by more than 9,000 missed shots and a career's percentage of shots made from the field of 47 percent, had to be always in his mind (Reilly 2002). The realization that he avoided a negative outcome in turn surely was at least part of the pleasure. Much the same can be said of the ritual that takes place every spring with high school students opening their admission letters from the various colleges to which they have applied. The anxiety that mounts in the days before the letters arrive is by and large fueled by students imagining rejection letters in their hands: "What would a rejection from that college say about me, my intelligence, how I rank in the world of my fellow peers?" The arrival of positive news erases those memories and provides much welcome relief. "I am not that person," the student feels, "but rather this smart, interesting person." Parents as well experience positive feelings out of the confirmation that their child is, indeed, not a "failure." Even the best of parents, with the best of children, harbor their doubts and rejoice when the good news erases their fears.[2]

And the same can be said of what happens at the workplace, in the business world, and elsewhere. When we await a job offer, work hard to launch a new company, or wait for end-of-year bonus decisions, we entertain negative outcomes. We engage in thought experiments, contemplating the consequences of failure. What will I do if I receive no offer to join the company? What will a failed business say about me and what I am capable of? How will I communicate to my spouse that I received the smallest bonus in the firm? We work hard to avoid those outcomes. We train, read helpful books, devote extra hours, and sacrifice precious time with families and friends. When good news comes, part of its significance is that we will not have to hear bad news that would make our efforts and sacrifices seem futile.[3]

The third and final component of this process is perhaps the most important. The great psychologist Erik Erikson explored in detail the importance of *differentiation* between human beings. Identity for groups and individuals alike is created not so much by an independent process of self-definition. Rather, it is attained by somehow asserting that we are different from someone else: that we belong to a class or group of people that stands apart from other classes or groups. The very fact of standing apart from someone else *is* what defines us. Erikson calls this tendency toward separation "pseudospeciation"—the artificial (i.e., human-made) setting of boundaries among people:

> The term denotes the fact that while man is obviously one species, he appears and continues on the scene split up into groups (from tribes to nations, from castes to classes, from religion to ideologies) which provide their members with a firm sense of distinct . . . identity—and immortality. (Erikson 1968: 7)

In primitive tribes, individuals and groups attained differentiation by simply decorating their bodies "with feathers, pelts, and paints" (Erikson 1969: 431). In our society, the process of differentiation continues to rely on basic physical signs—such as clothing, physical appearance, and our material possessions. But our reality is also more complex. There are more symbols, a larger number of groups to which we can belong, finer differences between groups, and so on. We also employ a variety of nonmaterial tools to separate ourselves from others. Our level of education is one example: those with a college degree feel themselves different from high school dropouts. Those with advanced degrees, such as physicians, feel that they stand higher than those with "only" a college degree. There are even differences within a given level of educational achievement. A doctorate in theoretical physics, for instance, sends a different message about a person than a doctorate in social work. Education is but one tool for differentiation. The way we speak—our choice of vocabulary, our choice of subject matters, and so on—communicates something about who we are, and who we are not. So do our professions and the way we decorate our personal spaces. In the words of French sociologist Bourdieu, we are constantly "distinguishing" ourselves by our tastes, knowledge, dispositions, and behaviors (Bourdieu 1984).

Americans deeply value differentiation, of course. When asked in the General Social Survey whether their country should promote equal opportunities or equal outcomes, nearly 90 percent answered opportunities. When asked whether the government should be responsible for reducing income differences between the rich and the poor, the majority said "no." Most believe that social (and not only economic) differences in life are "justified." And when they were asked whether people should be allowed to accumulate as much wealth as they can even if others live in poverty, nearly 60 percent of respondents said that they should be. Only 31 percent disagreed.[4] We believe in and indeed crave all sorts of signs of distinction.

In competitive events with close rivals, then, we have the special opportunity to *separate* ourselves from those who, until then, we and others thought to be like us. We have before us *peers*—persons belonging to the same general category of people or groups: colleagues at work and in our profession, our neighbors in the next town over and their children, our siblings, and so on. The competitive arena allows us to set boundaries between ourselves and others—it gives us grounds and tools for making distinctions. This is ultimately what is so special about these events that one cannot find when facing, and beating, far weaker opponents. We seek our equals in the hope of proving to ourselves and the world that they are not, after all, equal to us. We seek to distance ourselves.

The winners in particular obviously benefit from this process. They become different from the losers by virtue of having become the winner: "I won, therefore I am different from you." The winner is catapulted into a new space—a space that is closed to those who lose. But what does this space look like? It is a rarified and, to some extent, mysterious space. One of its characteristics is that fewer people belong to it: it is a selective space. Thus, on learning in 2005 that he had been awarded the prestigious prize of best economist under forty by the American Economic Association, MIT professor Daron Acemoglu felt it "was a great honor" because "the cast of people who have been awarded this is staggeringly strong" (Gavin 2005). With similar language, genetics researcher Marlene Belfort described her joy at the great honor of becoming a member of the National Academy of Science. "One of my kids," she reported "said it was like making the All-Star team." She then continued by saying: "I was very happily surprised . . . it's something that every self-respecting scientist aspires to" . . . but only very few manage to get (Wood 1999). As I win, then, I join the elite group of those "who know," "who can." It is also a place of blessed people: people who—in line with the first two steps of figure 2.1—have lived through uncertainty to be rewarded with the sensation that comes from having avoided the abyss and overcome the odds. It is, therefore, a place of honor and, with that, of some measure of immortality.

For the losers matters are quite different. They, too, undergo a process of definition. But they are left with significantly less information about themselves than the winners. The separation from the winner—so crucial for the winner—equates primarily to a feeling of having been "left behind." Losers are thrown back into a large pool of competitors who aspire to become distinguished but have yet to find ways of making this happen. Their distinguishing mark is that they are *not* the winners. Physiological events that take place in competitors' bodies confirm this. Before a competitive event, players experience a rise in their testosterone levels. After the event, winners experience a further increase in those levels, while losers remain closer to normal. The rise appears to be especially steep when the competitive event was close and the outcome uncertain (Mazur et al. 1992).

Thus, "to come close and lose," said Leon Panetta, a former White House chief of staff under President Clinton, about losing presidential nominees in the United States, "tends to magnify everything the candidate did wrong." The loser's task becomes then "to go back to the drawing board," "re-find themselves," and search for the motivation to aspire again. In the words of Walter Mondale, who lost the presidential elections to Ronald Reagan in 1984, this is exactly what happens when you have the privilege of running for the top political position in the country and lose: ‘‘If you come back and expect to be, quote, the titular head of the party, you’re bound to have a bad day.” Instead, assuming you are a person of character, you have to look around, ask yourself what is next, and find a new path. As Michael Dukakis, who lost to George H. W. Bush in 1988, recently put it: ‘‘I ran a lousy general election campaign. . . . [A] lot of people were upset. I was upset. You can’t expect your party to wrap you up in love and affection . . . but there’s a role you can play” (Leibovich 2006).

Competition among close rivals, then, provides the victor with the opportunity to assert themselves vis-à-vis others thought to be, until then, of equal skill. It is often a momentous occasion. But we should stress that its intensity is even greater when the competitors share similar backgrounds, histories, physical appearance, and other characteristics. Then, the separation that results from the demonstrated skill superiority acquires even more significance: we feel good when we beat a stranger of similar rankings in chess at a tournament, but we feel even better if that stranger is in fact no stranger at all. This is indeed what was at stake in most struggles for secession. The American Civil War saw a close and long fight between one group of states (the southern states) wishing to assert its difference from another group of states (the northern ones) which were quite similar for the most part. For the South, the difficulty of the struggle would have made a victory all so meaningful. But that meaningfulness could not have been separated from the fact that the warring parties shared so much in common.

The same can be said of siblings who, close in skills at a given game or enterprise, push themselves to extremes in order to win. Recent research shows that competitive events among siblings are uniquely charged with emotions and psychological tension (Nickolas and Meyer 2008). There are many reasons for this but one is surely that a hard-won victory gives one of the siblings the license to distinguish herself or himself from the person who otherwise resembles them more closely than anyone else on the planet. What happens at home will, of course, later happen in college. From September to April, otherwise very similar schools stake their grounds and assert their personalities on the football field, basketball courts, and elsewhere. On this point, I recall vividly a conversation with the coach of a NCAA Division III men's basketball team. Without a sign of doubt in his eyes, he told me that his season was not so much defined by the number of wins over losses but, rather, by whether his team would beat the school's two archrivals—both of which were very close in skill but also had nearly identical student populations, rated very similarly in the national ranking of schools, and were located within sixty miles of each other. "As long as we do that," he said, "I have achieved my mission and done my job . . . the rest of the season no longer matters . . . that is what they told me when they hired me."

The Spectators

Most of us enjoy watching competitive events. More than 56 percent of respondents in the General Social Survey reported attending an amateur or professional sports event in the last year.[5] But we are picky. Few of us would go to see a game between the Los Angeles Lakers and a high school basketball team. Many of us would, however, enjoy seeing the Lakers against another professional team, or two high school teams play against each other. Political races where polls predict landslide victories by a candidate seldom generate excitement. Viewers of popular television reality shows such as *Survivor, Fear Factor,* or *American Idol* would be quite bored if it became clear from the start that a certain team or individual was very likely to dominate over all others and win the grand prize.

All this tells us that we, as members of an audience, enjoy a competitive event for reasons that have little to do with strictly witnessing someone win and somebody else lose. What, then, draws us to a competitive event? What rewards do we gain? There are several factors, all of which require that competitors be quite close in skill or level. Research in psychology and sociology suggests that four are especially important, with "differentiation" once again being perhaps the most critical.

Most obviously, as is the case for the competitors themselves, *uncertainty* itself generates a certain thrill. The more the uncertainty, the greater the thrill, as experiments have shown.[6] Here the question is not whether we or someone else will win. Instead, the question is who, amongst these more or less equal competitors, will prevail. Why does this uncertainty cause excitement? The main reason is, again, our fear of uncertainty. In almost everything that we do, we prefer to know what is about to happen in the near and not-so-near future. This gives as a sense of security: we can prepare for the events ahead, plan our activities, and rejoice at the fact that we will be safe tomorrow. Studies in economics and psychology have shown rather convincingly, for instance, that the majority of people are risk averse and, as such, are willing to settle for less with certainty than take the chance to risk (getting nothing or a possible loss) for more.[7] We surround ourselves with routines and predictable environments. Consider, for instance, the music we listen to: the most enjoyable pieces are those we have heard at least once before. Or consider that order and predictability allow children to develop their cognitive, analytical, and emotional faculties (Dumas et al. 2005).

From this perspective, a close competitive event affords us the chance to experience the sense of freedom and possibility that is otherwise so very much missing from our lives. Most Americans, according to the General Social Survey, do not find everyday life exciting. They define it, instead, as routine driven (49 percent) or outright dull (5 percent).[8] For a limited period of time, then, we play with what is otherwise too risky, dangerous, and therefore normally forbidden and out of reach. We enjoy the diversion, recognizing that the competitive event is organized in a way that maximizes what is normally minimized in everyday life. As an astute observer of American football put it:

> The football fan's world of everyday work is generally characterized by limited opportunities for self-expression. In the

> role and status of football fan, and in the passion and meaning emanating from the act of rooting, the football fan can assume a new identity in life. In playing the role of fan, the individual finds a haven for escape from work and a forum for excitement and adventure. (Miller 1997: 125)

The experience is exhilarating and, as a result, we lose our normal composure. We no longer have to restrain ourselves. Some of us scream and shout, jump up and down—very much as we did when we were children. If we are in a group, sensing the power of the collective excitement, we let ourselves go even more. If others are doing it, so can we. Suspended for a moment from the constraints of everyday life, we feel exceptional. Along with our accomplices, we feel that we are stealing time from time itself. These are powerful moments. They remind us of the sense of "collective effervescence" that Durkheim described in what became arguably the most important text of sociology, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*: moments when members of a society, excited by each other's presence, gather around a totem or other symbol of their group and feel transported to an unconventional place where the rules and boundaries of everyday life are no longer in place (Durkheim 1965). Society is a safe place built on the suppression of our darker instincts (Freud 1989: 73). Because of that, it has mechanisms that allow us to explore and express what we otherwise seek to control in normal life.

But to make all of this possible, a second crucial condition has to be met: we must be at a *safe distance* from the event. This means that the outcome of the event cannot have serious consequences for our well-being. If it did have such consequences, we would be resolute in wanting no uncertainty whatsoever.[9] Instead, though it may have a major impact on the competitors, the competitive event is not that important for us, all things considered. The possible damage that might come from the loss of our favorite competitor (if indeed we have one) is thus outweighed by the positive feelings that come from taking a mental vacation from our otherwise constrained and controlled lives. We "play," in other words, with uncertainty. And here we would do well to recall the words of the great Dutch scholar of culture, Johan Huizinga, concerning play and its function for human beings: “Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly” (Huizinga 1955: 13). We flirt with uncertainty, watching it while knowing that it cannot have any real consequences for us. Thus, as we watch, we are likely to be doing other things that are pleasant—such as eating food, talking to our friends, and occasionally taking a break.

There is a third, perhaps darker dynamic at work that accounts for our interest, as spectators, in competitive events. We are watching competitors as they struggle to succeed, react to events as they unfold, and suffer in what is a tense and closely fought battle. We are aware of the enormous pressure that they are experiencing. We examine their eyes, sighs, and body language. We observe their reactions, their emotional ups and downs as the competition progresses. The more drama we witness, the more delighted we are. Missed opportunities, belligerent behavior followed by punishment, and dashed hopes are prime material for our excitement, especially when the stakes are high. Psychologists and economists have documented and researched in detail this tendency of ours to feel some level of pleasure at the sight of others’ suffering (or at very least doing less well than us). Its intensity can vary depending on the observers’ mind-set and the nature of the misfortune (if very serious, we do not feel pleasure), but many of us—whether in the United States or another country—are likely to feel it to one degree or another.[10]

Public excitement thus grew multifold when Alaska’s governor Sarah Palin gave her awkward interviews in September 2008 as vice-presidential candidate on CBS and ABC. The media incessantly discussed her strange statements about Russia and her foreign policy credentials. On YouTube, in early October a search for her name retrieved forty-eight thousand videos. A search for her opponent, Senator Joe Biden of Delaware, yielded only fourteen thousand results. Many of us therefore watched their debate in early October 2008 both out of a genuine interest in the issues at hand but also to "see" how the candidates—and Palin especially—would perform under extreme pressure. Like hawks, we waited for the slip, the error, the wrong statement or choice of words. Then, after the debate, we watched television and read newspapers to find out what others "saw." It was no different in the 2004 debates, when journalists paid great attention to the facial expressions and body language of both Senator Kerry and President Bush. "From the outset," wrote Alessandra Stanley of the *New York Times* about Bush after their second debate, "his clenched jaw twitched, and he blinked repeatedly, like a man whose contact lens hurt" (Stanley 2004).

We are engaging, in other words, in a *sadistic* exercise. We feel a sort of pleasure when we see others struggle. We marvel at the spectacle of human efforts and emotions that are on display. We enjoy seeing players suffer as the tension mounts, the outcome is repeatedly put into doubt, and temporary relief is followed by renewed tension. Indeed, the more the competitors give of themselves, the more we enjoy ourselves. Do we suffer or feel pleasure at the sight of a baseball pitcher hitting a batter on the thigh with a ninety-mile-an-hour fastball? If watching it gives us pain, why do we stretch our necks when the slow-motion replay shows us more clearly what happened? Indeed, why do television networks show such replays? The answer is quite simple: within certain limits, we are interested in seeing others in pain.

Appealing to our sadistic side, after all, is how promoters of competitive events try to lure us into watching this or that event. The advertising for upcoming games in the National Football League (NFL) inevitably shows receivers and quarterbacks getting hit hard—with amplified sound effects—by defenders flying helmet-first into their bodies (ideally, without the victim seeing this coming). Those for the National Basketball Association (NBA) show images of exhausted players rejoicing or despairing after their last-minute efforts to overturn or put closure to a wide open game. Stories profiling the lives of Olympic athletes portray their previous failures, victories, and hopes. And advertisements for presidential debates show snapshots of candidates making errors, being caught off guard, or crushing their opponents with clever one-liners. With all of these, the message is clear: there will be pain and joy, and we—the viewers—will have a chance to witness them.

Close competitive events, then, maximize the chances that competitors will suffer and that we, as a result of that, will be entertained. But there is a fourth, final, and perhaps more innocent and important, aspect of the audience–competitive event relationship. This has to do with the *vicarious differentiation* that comes from witnessing others—especially those whom we support—try to assert themselves and their uniqueness. We often become virtual participants in the competitive event, feeling its ups and downs. We suffer and rejoice with "our" players on the field, sensing their fears, hopes, and if victorious, joy and elation at their successes. Their happiness becomes our happiness. Indeed, we see in their superior performance evidence of our superior abilities, and in their failures our weaknesses, as recent experiments have demonstrated (Hirt et al. 1992). Thus, simply put, we "become" them and join them accordingly in their quest for differentiation.

Our Society

The previous two sections suggest that we have a collective interest in close competition, whether as players or spectators. This, coupled with the other benefits that close competition can generate for society,[11] is responsible for making sure that we are constantly devising rules and practices that ensure that many aspects of our lives—even those that do not require a competitive dimension—unfold in spaces where the competitors will be a match for each other. We, in turn, duly flock to participate or watch. We should be cognizant of what those rules, structures, and policies are. After all, often unbeknown to us, they profoundly shape our lives: our ambitions, choices, sense of self-esteem, relationship to others, and much more.

The world of sports is especially organized and run to ensure that competition remains close. We keep teams and players separated by skill level. At the college level, there are divisions. In professional sports, there are different professional leagues (major versus minor leagues in baseball, for instance). Among children, we separate children first by age (a good proxy for ability) and then ability (varsity versus junior varsity, A versus B teams, and so on). Once we make sure that fairly equal competitors meet each other, we devise rules that ensure that no one competitor can, over time, become dominant. In the United States, draft rules in basketball, American football, and hockey give the weakest teams access to the best new players. Salary caps—introduced for basketball in the mid 1980s, for American football in the mid 1990s, and for hockey in 2005—limit how much talent any given team can buy. In baseball, the recent introduction of revenue-sharing structures provides financially disadvantaged teams with much needed resources, much to the delight of its commissioner, Bud Selig, who recently shared his enthusiasm for what these could mean for the sport: "I had dreams of things getting better but, no, in many ways this has exceeded my fondest expectations. This sport has more parity than ever" (Schmidt 2006).

Importantly, the rules of the games themselves are often designed to keep the competition in any given event or through a series of events as open as possible. In some sports, such as tennis or baseball, a comeback is possible until the very last point, regardless of what the deficit might be. Playoffs involve multiple encounters, such as best of five or seven series. A heavy defeat in the first games does not mean definitive loss; the losing team can still win the series by beating the opponent in the next games by a smaller margin of points (and thus with fewer points overall for the series). In some cases, the good players are penalized: in golf, stronger players start with a handicap precisely so that the outcome may be more in doubt. In some sports, different kinds of scoring can be worth different points; as a result, comebacks from large point deficits are more possible than otherwise. This is true for basketball (two versus three point shots) but also gymnastics, skating, diving, and other sports where athletes can attempt more arduous, though also riskier, routines or moves.

Our education system as well has plenty of measures that ensure close competition among students—in this case less for the purpose of keeping large audiences enthralled and more for the purposes of establishing differences and identities among the competitors. Early on in their educational careers, children of similar intellectual levels are put together in the same classes. On paper, this is designed to "stimulate" and "motivate" those children: surrounded by others of similar abilities, the children will strive to demonstrate to themselves that they are indeed equal to, if not better than, the other "advanced" kids. The possibility that others will perform better pushes those kids to study harder. The results—uncertain until grades become available—provide kids with meaning and a sense of self as well as a good dose of excitement. But here, too, we cannot forget that there is an audience: the parents. They have a vicarious interest in these affairs. Their child—their life's work—"has to be tested," over and over again, for his or her worth to become clear. Each success provides relief but also signals the possibility that the child could go further. New challenges, appropriately calibrated to be within possible reach, are brought on. Thus parents wait anxiously to discover if their child, already attending an elite preparatory school, can further distinguish herself (that is, separate herself from her current peers) by being admitted to a more prestigious college.

Later, colleges continue the formal and institutional segregation of students. This guarantees not only four challenging years with equally capable peers but also easier entry into competitive circles and careers that can guarantee not only a lifetime of productivity and comfort but also close competition. Now in question is not only the parents' own self-esteem but also the child's, who is old enough to appreciate the consequences of differentiation. The stakes are consequently very high. Thus, should there be any doubt as to which category a college belongs, a variety of sources provide us with updated and influential rankings of schools. The most popular source, *U.S. News and World Report*, releases on a yearly basis in late summer its eagerly awaited segmentation of schools. Undergraduate programs are mercilessly divided into "top," "tier

3," and "tier 4" (tier 2 is not used). For each school, the report gives the average scores for the SAT and ACT entrance exams, the percentage of students in the top 10 percent of their high school class, and the rate of selectivity: "Am I among the few, select ones?"[12] What happens for colleges happens again for graduate schools. The best students will go to the best programs in the arts and sciences or the best professional schools—of law, business, education, medicine, journalism, and so on. The weaker students will attend more modest schools. Each student will thus meet his or her intellectual "match" and thus move into a space of calibrated uncertainty and stimulation.

What is true for sports and education is also true for a third, major sphere of social life: the workplace. Most professional fields—medicine, law, education, engineering, healthcare, finance, computer programming, and so on—are hierarchically organized in ways that group people of similar skills and experience together. Those people are then evaluated against each other in a process that causes anxiety but, in the case of positive results, also grounds for differentiation and satisfaction, as well as a fair degree of sadistic pleasure in seeing others run into difficulties. The process of evaluation is highly formalized and in theory objective, so that everyone in principle has a shot at success: there are awards, pay raises, prizes, and other types of rewards that await those who can outperform their peers. Of course, the fact that everyone can in principle win is what makes victory for the eventual winner meaningful. Importantly, the struggle is not only with one's immediate peers but with the profession as a whole and with the task itself, which is rather challenging but within reach. Thus becoming a partner at a law firm is meaningful precisely because it is challenging in several respects: one is fighting against other capable candidates, the legal field itself, and the work that one encounters throughout the years. Throughout we are reminded in various ways of both the difficulty of the task ahead but also the real chances of success. Tenure rates in given academic institutions or disciplines are made public, large financial institutions make known who was promoted to director level, and prestigious management consulting firms, like

McKinsey & Company, remind their employees of their "up or out" policies—according to which somewhere between half and two thirds of second-year consultants are sent packing.

We could discuss additional examples. What is important is to recognize that we have built a society replete with environments where competition is fiercely close. Those environments infuse victory and loss with their meaning. They could certainly be designed differently. They could be less competitive, for instance. Or they could make sure that everyone wins in some way or another. This is what happens, after all, in some children's clubs, leagues, and summer camps, where everyone is recognized for something, and even in some adults' organizations—especially those where the members are suffering from addiction, depression, or other problems. They could even do away with competition as a whole, as Alfie Kohn (Kohn 1986) suggested should happen in *No Contest: The Case against Competition*. There could be no language of winning and losing, comparative performance ratings, prizes for the better performers, and so on. We could instead make wide use of alternative terms and concepts, such as personal fulfillment or professional and client satisfaction. Many of us would certainly welcome such an approach. We have chosen not to follow those paths, opting instead to create a host of very competitive environments.

Conclusion

The primary conclusion we draw from all this is straightforward. We do not have a simple love of winning and dislike of losing—despite what one might think when listening to coaches, parents, friends, colleagues, leading authors, commentators, and others talk about what matters. Much more is at stake. We are interested in the thrill and subliminal satisfaction that come from contemplating but then avoiding danger, the subtle pleasures we feel from seeing others suffer, and above all, our desire to be different and define our own identity—especially vis-à-vis our closest peers. That is what many of us are after, and that is why we are interested in winning (and not losing) in competitive events that are very close in nature.

Several implications stem from this realization. First, we should now be clearer about *why* we take competition so seriously. Second, we should begin to wonder whether competition, winning, and losing are the best venue for the satisfaction of our drives. Third, we should inquire further about those drives. Why, for instance, do we so desperately wish to differentiate ourselves from our peers? If, after reflecting on things, we no longer felt this impulse, we would be free from having to compete or we could change drastically how we compete. These are but the first steps toward a better understanding of what is at stake in our competitive events. The next two chapters shed further light.