

Bill Rea ? Do we need All-Star Games?

There are going to be some who accuse me of raining on the parade of others', but this weekend's NBA All-Star Game, which took place in Toronto, interested me not in the slightest degree.

I have no idea what the schedule of events was, I know not who was taking part, I am not remotely aware of the format of the game, I couldn't tell you who won, I have not yet learned what the winners received (apart from bragging rights) and I have absolutely no desire to know.

I have lots of reasons for feeling the way I do. One has to do with the fact that I don't like basketball and never have. Another deals with a certain aversion to all-star games, as I sit and wonder what the point is of having them.

I know I seem to be knocking the whole event, which is really not what I'm trying to do.

I know this attracted a lot of attention throughout most of North America, and maybe beyond. Whether I like it or not, basketball is a very popular sport. There are many young people in Canada and the United States who hold pro basketball players up as role models. And we all know there's nothing wrong with that.

The fact that Toronto was able to land this spectacle this year is a proverbial feather in the cap of both the city and the Toronto Raptors' organization.

I also realize that it brought a lot of people and tourist dollars to Toronto and the surrounding area. Caledon probably benefitted to a certain extent, although it would have been nice if the weather had been better. Considering the winter we've been having, it's ironic that this was the weekend that we all freeze.

A lot of it, I guess, comes down to a matter of taste and preference. I have met plenty of people who don't like hockey, think baseball is boring and wonder why a bunch of great big guys get dressed up in heavy equipment and kill an hour trying to kill each other by crashing into each other, as seems to be the case in football. Yet a lot of these same people probably go nuts watching that physical soap opera known as professional wrestling.

There were probably a lot of local residents who were indifferent last summer when the Pan American Games were in the area. I personally thought the whole thing was wonderful. Now it is true that I don't live in Toronto, so I would have been spared a lot of the inconvenience that I knew was going to be associated with the Games. In fact, I made a point of staying away from the Big Smoke during that period for exactly that reason. And I got to cover the equestrian events at the games, which was quite a thrill.

When I was a kid, there were people who openly mocked me because I enjoyed watching auto racing.

We all have our own interests and things that appeal to us. Realizing that, I can understand that there are lots of people out there attracted to basketball. That's fine with me. They can watch and follow the game all they want, just so long as I am not forced to do the same.

Like I stated above, I have never enjoyed the game. I recall once hearing of words attributed to the late member of the Toronto sports establishment who apparently said watching basketball is about as exciting as watching a man read a book. Unfortunately, I have never been able to verify the accuracy of that statement, which is the only reason why I didn't name the man who supposedly said it. But I go along with the assessment.

Being a product of the public education system, gym class was part of the regular routine. Like most kids (boys especially), I enjoyed it. Running around a gym, at that age, is a lot more fun than learning spelling.

But basketball was always a regular part of the curriculum from about Grade 7 on, and I came to dread those sessions. I think the main reason was in those days, athletic glory was more a matter of my vivid imagination than any physical prowess I possessed. I don't think my late father, who was a natural athlete, ever quite understood why I didn't measure up, but that was the case. And mastering the intricacies like a layup was a little tough for a guy like me. Even as I think back now to those days, my main memories of playing basketball are of frustration. Why relive them?

I won't deny that the people who play professional basketball are superb athletes. It stands to reason. You don't get paid what these folks make, and get all the adulation that goes with it, if you're not in the very elite of the game.

And there is lots of adulation.

The Raptors were established in the mid-1990s, while I was working for papers in the east end of Toronto. During either the first or second season, one of the local schools was able to get a couple of team members (I remember Jimmy King was one of them) to visit the kids, and the local media was invited. I'll never forget the screams that went up from these kids when the players walked in. I don't think the studio audience at the Ed Sullivan Show made that much noise in 1964 when the Beatles walked on stage.

So I hold a view of basketball that is probably at odds with the opinion of the majority. Nothing wrong with that. If we all agreed on everything, we'd all be bored.

But even if I thought basketball was the greatest game in the world, I would still have to wonder why we have to go through the annual spectacle of all-star games. I don't like them in hockey or baseball (two sports that I do follow regularly), and I avoid watching them if I possibly can.

I guess my main problem is these events break up a season in which the players, not to mention coaches and bench staff, are busy doing the jobs they are very well paid to do, namely trying to advance their competitive advantages toward playoff positions. Fans are following the races; some of those fans can get obsessed with them. Yet everything is put on hold for what is essentially a party. As well, these players are needlessly running the risk of injury, and that only benefits the other teams. All-star games are traditionally reserved for the best players. So losing an all-star player in mid-season can be devastating, especially as the post-season draws near. And to lose such a player in what basically is an exhibition simply adds insult to that injury.

I give my head a shake when these breaks come, whatever the sport, and I seldom watch any of them ? Okay, I sometimes watch the Home Run Competition during the baseball break.

I'm sure a lot of you basketball fans enjoyed watching the activities over the weekend. But I'll bet you couldn't wait for the teams to get back to the action that counts.

