

Bill Rea ? Good reason I'm not in Games

I am watching the Olympics.

In am watching young men and women, many years my junior, battling against each other in athletic events, showing a proficiency that I only ever possessed in my most wild of dreams.

A couple of evenings ago, I sat in front of my TV, watching Rosie MacLennan carry the flag of my country into the opening ceremonies. It's rather nice to watch someone I personally know doing that. I've met a couple of other athletes who will be competing in the games, meaning there are a number of events in which I will have a personal cheering interest. And even if I didn't, it's still a major event.

I can understand the desire to be there for the games, even if one is not competing. A year ago last month, I was hanging around the Caledon Equestrian Park, taking in the atmosphere of the Pan American Games.

I have little desire to go to Rio. I can't afford it, and I'm pretty sure my company is not about to send me south for something like that.

But last year's experience was memorable, and I wouldn't have missed it.

I confess to feeling a certain amount of envy toward those who are competing. On the other hand, they are in the Olympics because they deserve to be there. They worked at their particular sports. There is a very good reason why I never made it to the Olympics.

Indeed, I'm at something of a loss to know what sport I might have competed in. Although I tried a lot of sports as a kid, there wasn't any one at which I was even reasonably proficient.

I was rather fleet of foot in my youth. I was certainly not the fastest in my class, but I held my own. Alas, I was always compared to the fastest kid in class, at least when I was in public school. Terry was an incredibly wiry guy who possibly could have gone out for Halloween dressed as a pretzel. Few were the guys who could keep up with me, but none of us could keep up with Terry, so I never received any credit on that score. Sadly, I learned that Terry drowned shortly before his 40th birthday.

And the passage of years have taken their toll. My knees and back are not up to running any more.

I'm a good swimmer, but never tried to be the fastest in the pool. My position has always been if I go into the water, it's for my own personal enjoyment, and not to impress anyone. That's the way things are to this day.

I've always enjoyed diving into water, but from the side of the pool. I've never been inclined to try the fancy stuff from several metres up. For one thing, heights and I are not buddies. And the best divers in the Olympics are determined by judges. I have always had a problem with sports that are settled so subjectively. How do we know everything is on the up and up?

I'm finishing this column Sunday evening, as my wife watches women's gymnastics on TV. I tried my hand at gymnastics at school, propelled into it to some extent by my father, who was a very good athlete. About my accomplishments in that endeavour I am justifiably modest. And in that sport too, the results are based on a judgement call.

Then there is rowing.

I was on the rowing team when I was in high school. That was a sport in which my father participated in his day, as did my older brother. Thus there was a certain amount of family pressure on me to go out too. The practices were early in the morning, so for a couple of months every spring, I would drag my carcass out of the sack at 5 a.m.

There was not a lot of success for me in that sport either, but in my last year (known as Grade 13 in those days), I got to compete in the Canadian Schoolboy Championships in St. Catharines. I was the bowman in a cox four. It was the biggest race of my rowing career, and it is the one of which I am most proud. We didn't win. There were six boats in the race, and we finished fifth.

If I recall correctly, the race was 1,500 metres, and the last 200 metres were physical hell. I well remember screaming in pain with every stroke towards the end of the race. I was in agony, but I was not going to quit on my mates.

There was a grand stand at the end of the course, and I'm assuming it's still there (it's been almost 40 years). The men in the boats (women were just starting to show interest in rowing in those days) had to get their boats turned around and then row back up the course to the docking area. The coxswain (his name was Trevor) was anxious to get back and get out of the boat.

?Wait a minute, Trev,? I remember calling out.

I was busy leaning over my oar toward the starboard side of the boat. The fact is I was absolutely convinced I was about to throw up, and I didn't want the spectators, which included my mom, dad and brother, to witness that.

We eventually got the boat back to the dock. A couple of other rowers from the school had made the trip to St. Catharines to cheer us on. The crew is responsible for getting the boat into and out of the water. But I had no strength left. I had to ask one of the other guys from the cheering section to give me a hand getting the boat out. That is the one part of the event that I don't reflect upon with pride, because I had to prevail on someone else to fulfil my obligations.

But in terms of rowing, that was my signature piece. I knew I had given absolutely everything I had to the cause. I had nothing more to offer.

It was also the last race I ever rowed.

After Grade 13, I went to Brock University in St. Catharines. In second year, I decided to give rowing another try with the university team. Those practices were early in the morning too, so I hauled my can out of the sack at 5 a.m. yet again. But I did it for just one day. I was out on the course in a boat (an eight). But I knew the commitment was not there. And I knew that commitment is essential if you're going to be competitive. I knew I had the commitment the day when I was screaming in agony in the last couple of hundred metres. It just wasn't the same any more.

I didn't follow through with it. I guess I could be accused of being a quitter. But the fact is I was content with the performance I put in when I rowed my last race. I still reflect on that with satisfaction.

I always knew I was not a great rower. There was never a possibility that I would be an Olympian. And it is a fact that some of us were just meant to be spectators.

That's not such a bad thing. If the competition is good, the seats are usually the best place to be. And there's a certain amount of satisfaction that comes from watching the games from your own home.

