

Bill Rea ? I won't watch basketball

There are a lot of people out there (maybe some of you reading this) who are sports fans.

It could even be argued that I'm one.

And then we come to matters of degree. Some people enjoy just about any and all sports, while others tend to be more selective.

And there are people who are devout in their interest in sports, and then have it wane.

That happened to me several years ago. There was a time in my youth when I followed a lot of sports, but my interest fell off over time.

In some cases, my athletic heroes passed from prominence to colour commentary or some other level.

In my high school years, a good boxing match on TV (described by the incomparable Howard Cosell) was a great way to pass an evening, especially if the great Muhammad Ali was an active participant. But time passed, and so did Ali's dominance. I was able to cheer for a while for Larry Holmes, but it wasn't the same. I have vague recollections of wasting about five minutes in subsequent years watching one of Mike Tyson's fights, but whatever magic there might have once been in the sport was history, or



ce the Greatest was gone.

There was also a time, even when I had very little use for sports, that a good auto race on TV could make my day, especially the Indy style cars.

My late father was well aware my interest in that particular sport, and never completely understood it (I think he believed those race car drivers were basically suicidal maniacs). I think the closest he ever came to appreciating the sport occurred early in 1979.

I was watching the closing laps of the Daytona 500 on one of a couple of TVs in the house. Donnie Allison was defending a very slim lead over Cale Yarborough, and at the speed those guys were moving, slim leads are measured in nanoseconds. In the final lap of that 500-mile race, Yarborough evidently realized he had reached that 'now or never' moment, and acted accordingly. The result was both his and Allison's cars ended up in the wall, meaning neither man won the race. Fortunately, neither was injured in the crash, although I can't say for sure if the same can be said about the fistfight that ensued in the aftermath. While the TV coverage was rather poor (remember, I was used to watching fights involving Ali, and speed sport journalists are more accustomed to wide-angle coverage), it still caught my attention, and that of my old man, who had evidently been watching in another room. He strolled into the room in which I was sitting in a couple of minutes later, with a rather mischievous grin on his clock, asking me what had I thought of the fight.

My interest in the sport continued as long as I could cheer on the great Mario Andretti. Sadly (for me, at least) he retired. For a while, I thought I could transfer my attention to his son Michael, but again, the same magic just wasn't there.

There were other reasons for me dropping my interest in sports as I got older.

It is true that girls started becoming a more interesting diversion than the Leafs (especially considering the records they have compiled over the years). The reality was that until my wife and I started becoming an item, there were few females in my circle who were interested in sports, and even Beth's interest is limited (I haven't even bothered to try and interest her in the Indy 500).

There were other things, like the demands of work, that caused me to lose track of who was doing what in any particular sport.

But there were really two particular factors that all by killed my interest.

I lost my use for professional athletes after all the strikes and lockouts that disrupted so many schedules.

I found I had little use for gifted athletes living a reality I had only dreamed of making a couple of times my annual salary for essentially a day's work bellyaching that they were getting a bad deal. And I am very mindful that the labour-management turmoil

that characterized last year's NHL schedule was management-driven, meaning a lockout. All of these guys are rolling in dough and they keep trying to nickel and dime each other, while their loyal fans get the hind end of the deal. Thus I lost patience with the whole concept of pro sports.

I was able to maintain some interest in amateur sports for a while, but that only lasted a couple of years. That stupid soap opera involving American figure skaters Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan in the 1990s turned me off the whole thing.

But such feelings do tend to be cyclical, and I have found my interest in sports returning over the last little while.

These days, when I get home after working late, I frequently walk in the house calling out to Beth, "Who's winning??"

If I don't see the Leafs on TV when I approach it, it can only mean two things - either they're getting clobbered and Beth, in frustration, found a "chick flick" to watch (she's very good at finding such things), or the Leafs aren't playing that night (I'm not yet into it enough to regularly check the schedules).

I watched several events in the recent Olympics, and actually felt a bit of frustration that there were some events my work schedule kept me from watching.

I find myself looking forward to the coming baseball season, once the Leafs have finished, and that all depends on how far they get in the playoffs (notice the underscored confidence I express that they'll get in the playoffs).

And indeed, despite my rather cynical views about what the sporting world had come to, I still maintained some interest. I haven't actively followed the NFL in about 30 years, although I might turn on the odd game if I have some time to kill on a Sunday afternoon. Despite that, I usually make a point of watching the Super Bowl, usually with Beth's permission. She's not really into football (not to the level of hockey, baseball or figure skating), and she will occasionally ask me for clarification of what's taking place on the field (I reply, pretending that I actually know what I'm talking about). But the lady can appreciate the hype that is the Super Bowl with the best of them, and she can accept the fact that I might have some passing interest in the contest, especially if the Pittsburgh Steelers are involved. Besides, there's also some compromising when it comes to Super Bowl Sunday. I get to watch the game with little objection, and I forget to raise a fuss about her watching the half-time show, something I seldom could care less about.

And I have usually tried to make a point of being near a TV when it looked like the Stanley Cup was going to be presented, regardless of how mad I might have been at NHL labour and management.

But there are some sports I could not possibly care less about, basketball being one of them. There's a major tournament involving university teams south of the border that's currently drawing substantial attention. That's fine with me, as long as I don't have to watch it, read about it or hear about it. The fact that I'm currently writing about it caused me a certain amount of grief. I always hated the game as a kid, dreading when it came up every year as part of gym class, and there is very, very little that could get me interested in it now. True, it is basketball that sparked the idea for this week's column, but I personally am impressed that I was able to wait until the last paragraph to mention it.