

HEAVY SIGH: CRYBABY MENTALITY QUICKLY GETTING OLD IN THE SPORTING WORLD

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We live in a crybaby society, one in which the bitch-and-moan approach is the way to go. Rather than accept reality, there is a sad tendency these days to point fingers, whine and assign blame. In school, Little Johnny couldn't possibly have underperformed. It must be the teacher's fault. At work, William couldn't possibly have fallen short on an assignment. The client didn't have realistic expectations.

In sports, the blame game is never far from the headlines, athletes and coaches routinely suggesting they were cheated. Didn't win? No problem. Blame the officials. Blame the playing surface. Blame the schedule. Blame the fans. Basically, blame anything – except yourself. Very often, responsibility is a missing characteristic.

The sport of swimming hasn't been immune to the "I got screwed" storyline. Flash back to the 2008 **Olympic Games** and the 100 butterfly final. More than anything, that race is remembered for its historic finish, **Michael Phelps** taking an extra half-stroke at the wall to defeat Serbia's **Milorad Cavic** by the slimmest of margins, a mere hundredth of a second.

Cavic and the Serbian camp, though, didn't accept the loss with grace. Despite images from legendary *Sports Illustrated* photographer **Heinz Kluetmeier** confirming Phelps' triumph, the Serbian camp filed a protest, claiming Cavic was the rightful winner of the gold medal. When that attempt failed, it became vogue for Cavic and Co. to blame the touchpads for their inability to determine the proper finish.

So, as early evening in the United States rolled around on Saturday, it shouldn't have come as a surprise that an intense display of unsportsmanlike conduct highlighted the sports landscape. A part owner of **California Chrome**, the thoroughbred trying to become horse racing's first **Triple Crown** winner since 1979, **Steve Coburn** went into the **Belmont Stakes**, the final jewel of the Triple Crown, hopeful that his horse would exit the race as an immortal. Instead, he left the track looking like a Jackass – and all of America knew it.

After winning the **Kentucky Derby** and **Preakness Stakes**, California Chrome stood on the precipice of history. Not since **Seattle Slew** and **Affirmed** went back to back for Triple Crowns in 1977 and 1978 has a horse put together the required three victories over five weeks required of the Triple Crown. Many thought California Chrome would get the job done. Coburn, far from the blue-blood owner typical in horse racing, was confident his charge would deliver.

Instead, California Chrome finished in a tie for fourth, the race won by **Tonalist**, a horse which skipped the Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes and, as a result, was fresher for the challenge at Belmont. When jockey **Victor Espinoza** asked Chrome to produce his normal surge, the horse had nothing and the sport went a 36th year without a Triple Crown.

More than 100,000 fans who made the trek to Belmont Park were disappointed, their desire to see history squashed in only two and a half minutes. But the drama of the day wasn't over yet, thanks to a Coburn interview with NBC which revealed the true nature of the man – a sore loser. Just after the conclusion of the race, Coburn embarked on an arrogant rant which accused the owners of Tonalist, the winning horse, of cheating, and blasted the setup of the Triple Crown races. On Sunday morning, Coburn had the chance to backpedal on his remarks, but instead went on the attack.

Never mind that the connections of Tonalist were well within the rules of running their horse when they pleased, in this case solely the Belmont, Coburn didn't care. Instead, he branded the owners as cheating and having an unfair advantage. True, Tonalist was a fresher horse, but Coburn owes the Tonalist crew an apology for the cheating accusations, as there was no such wrongdoing, and for calling them cowards.

As for the claims that the format of the Triple Crown races is unfair, Coburn missed the mark there, too. Sure, his horse was more worn down than the horses which raced just one or two legs of the Triple Crown. But winning the Triple Crown is not supposed to be easy and Coburn knew the setup before the Kentucky Derby started in early May.

Meanwhile, his argument that the format needs to be changed – for fairness purposes – is also beyond ridiculous. If additional weeks were added between the Derby, Preakness and Belmont, how would that be fair to the likes of the last three Triple Crown winners, **Secretariat**, Seattle Slew or Affirmed. They all managed to win three races in five weeks and also faced horses which didn't race in all three legs. A change to the system would only be a backhand to tradition and history, and a smack to what the Triple Crown pursuit is – a damn difficult challenge.

So, why all of this horse racing talk in this swimming setting? Well, what unfolded over the weekend in New York relates to all sports and society in general. When things don't go our way, it's time to complain. We see it often and it's getting old.

What Coburn suggested after the Belmont Stakes is akin to this scenario. At the 2008 Olympics, when Phelps entered the final of the 100 butterfly, it was his 16th race. And like California Chrome, he was chasing history, namely a record eighth gold medal in a single Olympiad. In Cavic, his prime rival, Phelps was facing a fresher opponent, one who had raced 13 fewer races than Phelps. Cavic was like Tonalist.

How did Phelps respond? Simple. He dug deep and reached into his vast bank of talent and mental strength and pulled out one of the great victories of his career. Had Phelps not won the race, do you think Phelps would have cried foul? No. Would Phelps' coach, **Bob Bowman**, have whined that Cavic had an unfair advantage by not being as beaten down? Absolutely not.

The beauty of sports, whether two-legged or four-legged, is the fact that it presents all kinds of scenarios from week to week and year to year. Sometimes, you win. Sometimes, you lose. That's part of the deal.

I'm in my mid-30s and surely possess an old-school mentality. I'm proud to have that outlook, and thank my father for it. Maybe I belong in a different era, when accountability was more prevalent and the notion of bitching and moaning was frowned upon. Maybe I just wish today's athletes/coaches/owners would close their mouths and give a tip of the hat when appropriate, instead of throwing the hat on the ground, breaking into a tantrum and blaming anyone/anything in sight.

I won't hold my breath.