

February 23, 2018

The BIG Winner At the Winter Games

In August, 2016, I wrote one of my all-time-favorite *Last Word* posts, titled “In Praise of DSS Athletes.” I have attached it here, just for fun, for those who weren’t subscribers then to see (and for the old-timers to read again!). I had planned to do something similar regarding a DSS version of the Winter Olympic Games.

It wasn’t easy sorting through the Winter Olympic sports, looking for parallels to the DSS world. Perhaps it is a function of where my head is at these days (or where the field is at?), but I kept coming back to issues of animals on campus and managing the mess that is ESAs. There was the slalom race, where skiers must zig zag back and forth through a whole series of gates that they must pass through before they reach the bottom... and their victory is sealed, not in doing everything right, but in what everyone else does. It certainly seems that no matter how well we manage the ESA issue or how careful we are in assuring that everything has been done correctly, we can still have a disappointing result if someone else steals our thunder (or doesn’t respect our hard work).

Likewise, the downhill isn’t decided only on the skill of the skier, but also the determination of those around them. The difference is that the downhill goes at a faster pace and from a higher elevation, so the athletes feel as though they are hurtling downhill at a tremendous pace, and they can crash and burn at any point along the way (sound familiar in the discussion of ESAs on campus?).

I thought about drawing parallels to cross-country skiing, where the battle is largely one of endurance, and some of the course is uphill (now THAT sounds familiar in the context of ESAs! GRIN). But cross-country skiers compete side by side with competitors and most DSS providers don’t have a whole lot of people around – either those who support them or those who don’t. I thought about looking for some kind of a parallel with curling – and getting pushed around on thin ice. I even thought about ice dancing, and the importance of being always in touch with your partner (you get out of step with that college attorney, and you definitely lose points).

While I was thinking about all this, Ester Ledecka happened.

For me, the most memorable thing about the 2018 Winter Olympics will always be Ester Ledecka. Ester is the Czech woman who won the women’s super-G race last week. She is a snowboarder who also skis. She is ranked #1 in the world in her snowboard event. She was ranked 43rd in the world in super-G. She started out of the 26th position in the race. A win from that position is unheard of. This wasn’t an upset. This was a friggin’ miracle!!!

I was watching the coverage on NBC while the event was being held. The commentators made a huge deal of the fact that it was highly unusual for anyone past

the first 15 skiers to make it to the winner's stand. Then the 16th skier, Anna Veith, from Austria, skied down the hill and took first place. They rated it a *huge* upset, prattled on about how surprised they were that someone that far back in the crowd could make it to the top – and then they cut away. No one in the US was watching when Ester Ledecka came down that hill.

It gets better. It turns out that Ester was using borrowed skis (from Michaela Shifrin). And even SHE didn't expect to win. She was confused when she got down to the bottom and saw the scores posted. Thought it was a mistake. How's this for modesty? Ester kept her goggles on throughout the post-run interviews with the press. Why? Because she didn't figure she was going to be interviewed for any reason. She hadn't bothered to put on any makeup!

Now THERE is a parallel to the DSS world that I can latch onto.

Most DSS providers are not very high up in the institutional food chain. I know folks who are well respected within DSS circles, but who get very little recognition for their efforts on their own campus. The fact that Ester Ledecka wasn't very visible in the field of competitors doesn't mean that she hadn't trained hard to get where she was. She was ranked 43rd in the world. IN THE WORLD. You don't get that kind of ranking without working for it. But it doesn't bring you much recognition. I know way too many DSS providers who work VERY hard to make sure they are doing right by their institutions and the students with disabilities they support – but still don't get much credit for their efforts.

Like Ester, most DSS providers don't expect a lot of recognition or accolades for what they are doing. She competed in the downhill because she has a love and dedication for the sport and she chose to show up without any real hope of medaling. There are hundreds of DSS providers who show up for work every day without any expectation of those efforts being noticed by anyone. Oh, we get noticed when something goes wrong, but rarely get credit when everything goes right.

The fact that Ester's triumph happened off-camera seems particularly poignant to me. By now, of course, everyone has seen that run (because SOMEONE was still filming the later racers and NBC scrambled to get access to it!?!). But at the point in time that Ester Ledecka was making history, nobody was watching. And at the point in time, day after day, that DSS providers do all the important things they do, generally there is no one watching. Ester wasn't wearing makeup because she didn't think anyone would notice or care that she was there – but she still showed up. Now THAT is what I call a role model!

On Saturday, in Pyeongchang, Ester Ledecka will compete in the snowboard parallel giant slalom event. If she wins a medal there (and she is favored to do so), she will become a member of a VERY small group that have ever medaled in more than one Winter Games sport. And I'm willing to bet that, this time, NBC isn't going to cut away until the event is complete!!! The world will be watching when Ester competes. That

coverage will be on US television this evening (Friday), and you can bet I'll be sitting in front of my screen, cheering her on.

And to all the DSS providers out there – thank you for your determination and dedication. Thank you for showing up to do your job without thought of recognition, but just because it needs to be done. And don't forget your eyeliner. You never know when someone will notice you, and be impressed. As they should be...

Janie

Would you like to know your future? If your answer is yes, think again. Not knowing is the greatest life motivator.

Sometimes the most scenic roads in life are the detours you didn't mean to take.

The unexpected moment is always sweeter.