



INSPIRATIONS

Winning ways



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It's the time of year when fate separates the winners and losers in politics and, in the northern hemisphere, in sport. In the UK we are reaching the climax of the soccer season. Towns up and down the country are engulfed by joy or anguish as the local team is promoted or relegated. (Except in rugby-loving Wales, where there are only enough soccer clubs to fill one league.) In Leeds our suspense will be prolonged as our team, a shadow of its former self, is involved in lower-division play-offs. Far to the west, the epic struggle between Manchester and Liverpool for English soccer's top spot will have been decided by the time you read this. I guess Manchester will edge it, but who knows?

In South Africa your general election has come and gone. I gather there was little in the way of nail-biting uncertainty about the result. In the same month India, Indonesia, Iceland and Ecuador held general elections, but none received as much global attention as yours. People everywhere are still in awe of South Africa's transition, remembering those television pictures of queues of voters on 27 April, exactly 15 years ago as I write. And this month there was the silent presence of Mr Mandela, the world's most revered ex-president.

But watching other people's politics is frustrating. You never know what is really going on. This is true even at close quarters. In Ireland political parties with exotic names battle for weeks before and indeed after a general election (proportional representation takes a long time to deliver a result), while we Brits look on in bewilderment. You may be experiencing a similar feeling as you host the Indian Premier League cricket tournament.

A two-party political system, like Britain's or the USA's, leads to a cup-final atmosphere on election night, with the winner usually becoming obvious well before the final whistle. Already, though, when we think of the 2008 US presidential race, what stands out is not the final campaign between Barack Obama and that other decent chap but the brutal slugfest between the two Democratic candidates to become either the first woman or the first African-American to run for President. Now they're the best of pals, apparently. That's politics for you.

The wave of emotion that swept the world after the Obama victory was mixed with apprehension here in Britain. We felt the same excitement in 1997 when Tony Blair became Prime Minister, but we remember how we turned against him. It was the same in 1979 with Mrs

Thatcher. We British don't like any politician to be at the top for more than a decade, no matter how charismatic they are, or how popular overseas. We have a deep and well-founded suspicion that all power corrupts and that politicians soon take power for granted. And of course we are famous for our dislike of successful people and our sympathy for the underdog.

As far as sport is concerned this is a sympathy I don't share. My sporting heroes are those who can stay at the top – a much more difficult task than getting there. My compatriots would like to see Manchester United beaten at the last gasp in the Premiership, but I'm rooting for their legendary manager, Sir Alex Ferguson. It's not just because we both originate from the same corner of Scotland or because we both considered retiring at 60 and then decided to keep going a bit longer. It's because his winning ways began in the 1980s when he won the Scottish League, several times, with a small club (Aberdeen), and I'd like to see him go on as long as possible.

Mind you, I'm not completely alone. Last November in Nottingham a statue was unveiled to Brian Clough, another football manager ruthlessly dedicated to success. Like Ferguson, he took two small clubs to the top of the league, and with Nottingham Forest achieved the incredible feat of winning the European Cup twice in successive seasons. But Clough died in 2004, so now we're happy to make him a national treasure.

Critics will point out that times have changed since his heyday. Big-time soccer is now run by big money, like certain other Premier Leagues I could mention. Nevertheless many a sport-loving billionaire has learned to his cost that cash can't buy success, though it does help. I don't envy Tiger Woods or Roger Federer their millions, because every time they perform they know they may fail. Politicians can create their own reality but sportsmen have to deal with the world as it is – just like us doctors. So my instinct is to cheer for the champions. All of which leads, I'm afraid, to the logical conclusion that when the Lions meet the Springboks in a few weeks' time I should support the current world cup holders. Maybe I will, but let's make it our secret, please.

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