

From the sidelines

Playing sport is one thing. But just spectating? Fanatical follower **Ricky Onsman** and uninterested bystander **Hazel Flynn** weigh up the pros and cons



HE SAYS

I LIKE TO WATCH. Sport, that is.

Don't get me wrong, I'm no couch potato. I've played some form of organised sport for most of my life. The most constant of these – which I still play – is football (by which I mean the soccer kind). This also happens

to be among my favourite spectator sports.

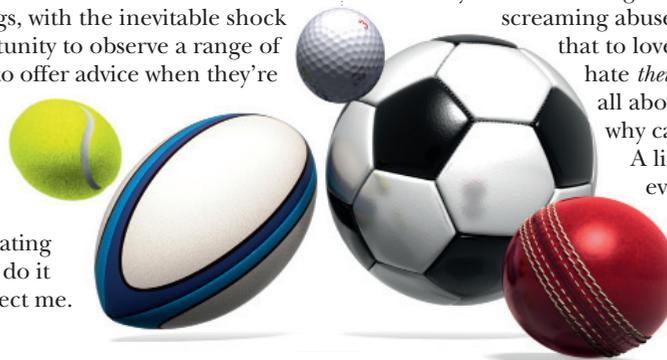
I say “among” because **I have quite a few favourites. And quite a few more second favourites**, followed by an awful lot of third, fourth and fifth favourites. In fact, there are very few sports I don't enjoy, either live or on TV. I've never warmed to synchronised swimming. It's hard to follow the ball in squash. Professional (sham) wrestling and its horror offspring ultimate (real) fighting both leave me cold. For the rest, bring it on, no matter how unlikely. Yes, I will watch curling, the winter sport in which a 20kg stone slides slowly towards the target house as sweepers brush ice off the sheet. Fascinating. The jargon's good, too.

For me, **a big part of what makes sport compelling to watch are the rules**, which set the boundaries on what players can – and must – do to win. That creates real drama. Cricket: bowl as fast as you like but don't step over the bowling crease. Boxing: hit as hard as you like, but not below the belt. And if there are rules, there must be people to enforce them. **Umpires, referees, judges... they are the sport spectator's true opponent.** They reflect the authority figures in daily life that stop us winning – and having fun.

Then there's the joy of seeing physically coordinated people give their all. The identification as competitors struggle to achieve personal bests. The drama of favourites versus underdogs, with the inevitable shock results. There's the opportunity to observe a range of strategies and tactics, and to offer advice when they're imperfectly implemented – advice that's rarely taken up, I notice.

And then there's the sheer gut-wrenching, breathless, insanely aggravating ecstasy of knowing I could do it all better, if only they'd select me.

What's not to like?



SHE SAYS

SPORT IS USEFUL. For many, it's an effective and, apparently, fun way to get the exercise your body needs to keep on keeping on. But spectator sport? I just don't get it.

Sport is the thing you flick past in order to find something worthwhile on TV. It's what comes on the radio during a long freeway drive, causing you to despair at the fact that you forgot to load up the music player.

It's the conversation-killer at barbecues. Well, actually, it seems to spur men who've only just met into a frenzy of matey chat. It just kills any interest I might have had in the conversation.

I know the arguments people put up to justify the vast amounts of money and coverage that professional sports attract: that they encourage normal, non-freakishly gifted types to follow suit and get active; that they represent one pinnacle of human achievement in the way great writing or painting or science does; that they create a unique bond between those doing the watching. I know the arguments, I just don't buy them.

One look at a typical crowd of spectators at a sports event will tell you that **the only activity many of them engage in is lifting hand to mouth.** And while I readily admit that being able to run 100m in less than ten seconds is highly unusual, I don't think it expresses something innately creative, collaborative and human in the way artistic or scientific achievements do. Cheetahs can run fast too, you know.

As for sport's ability to bond those doing the watching, I'd argue that **few things outside of war itself are more effective at encouraging ugly tribalism.**

Have you ever seen a group of dedicated fans screaming abuse at “the enemy”? It seems that to love your team, you have to hate *their* team. But if it really is all about celebrating greatness, why can't you admire both?

A little touch of the Olympics every four years is more than enough sport for me. In the meantime, if I crave athleticism, teamwork and amazing timing, I'll watch a musical.

