

Baseball,basketball,hockey,football and soccer are first compared and then ranked based on twenty criteria.

**Soccer Vs. Baseball. A comparative commentary on American major games against the backdrop of soccer**

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# 1 *SIMPLICITY*

It is commonly said that to understand America one has to understand baseball, an assertion clearly implying, in a given context, that America is baseball and vice versa. This, however, is demonstrably false, as demonstrated by the French writer De Tocqueville, who displayed in his book *ADemocracy in America* a remarkable understanding of this country ten years before the publication, in 1845, of baseball's first codified rules. He understood America perfectly, well before the formal existence of what baseball is, and this understanding of his remains valid in many respects to this day. This would, indeed, have been easy to do, even if baseball was already underway, because to understand America is a piece of cake compared to the grasping the intricacies of baseball.

Freedom, democracy and the pursuit of wealth are far easier to understand than pitches, balls and outs. America, with its matter of fact tendencies, is simple, like soccer, whereas baseball is complicated. Hence, in the ranking of our five games, with respect to simplicity, Soccer will be first, followed by basketball, hockey, football and then baseball.

If aliens from another planet came to Earth and were asked to watch just one game of each of our five sports, it is a safe bet that their degree of understanding each game would mirror this ranking.

Soccer has enjoyed great success in spreading the world over in large part because of its simplicity. It is simple to understand, to play and to watch. Its object, and how to accomplish it, is easy to understand as well. that the same is true of basketball which is, next to soccer, the least complicated of our games. Basketball is almost as widely popular in the world. It is played virtually everywhere, in no small part because of its simplicity. It, too, is a simple game, easy to understand and easy to play.

Following basketball, we have hockey, whose simplicity is as smooth as the gliding for which it is mostly known.

Football, on the other hand, though not in the same class as baseball, is, however, not a very easy game to understand. At least not as easy as, say, basketball, in small part because of its gladiator-like uniform. For a new eye watching the game,

attention is first, and mostly, caught by the helmets. Then, and of great significance, there are the scoring lines, which comprise the entire end of the field, making the existence of a net not feasible and thus grasping the method scoring not easy. Of no small relevance are the three downs B first, second and third B and how they come to be. Once the game is fully understood, these notions are rather easy to grasp, but to a newcomer they are a mystery.

Soccer, hockey and basketball all have a net behind the goal line or under the basket, which makes the scoring in these games relatively easy to understand. The object in each of our five sports is to score more points than the opponent, and it can be said that just how simple the scoring of points is for a spectator to follow makes understanding a game much easier.

After what must have been a thousand tries, through years of sometimes interested watching, most especially during the playoffs, I couldn't understand baseball at all until I finally unlocked the crucial key, namely scoring. In fact, and in a bizarre way, the scoring in baseball is by far the easiest part of the game to understand. Running from home plate to home plate through first, second and then third base is, indeed, simple to understand, as simple as anything in, say, soccer. I call it Apure scoring@ in this baseball context, because it must be distinguished from the mind-boggling indispensable accessories such as Aouts@ and Asafes,@ Aballs@ and Astrikes.@ These notions make sense to me now, but I will never forget the frustration of trying to figure out what was going on in a baseball game.

Writing a book with baseball as one of the two main subjects, which entailed reading literature related to the game coupled with support for the local team, The San Francisco Giants, greatly increased my desire to watch the game more attentively and thus increased my understanding. I was into the games I was watching, and thus it became necessary to understand whether or not my adopted team was winning. This, in turn, prompted a certain patience with the count, a more vigilant view of how this is supposed to be done. In addition, scoring proper had to be scrupulously monitored, and this alone speeded up the process.

Concerning simplicity of a game, then, baseball is, without a doubt, the least friendly, and it trails all the others. It, alone, has an unbelievable feature, namely the strike zone, the location of which, though somewhat defined, is nonetheless imaginary as it can and does change from one official to another. One can only begin to imagine how many soccer fans would revolt if such a thing ever existed in their game. The imaginary, and therefore cruel, strike zone can be trouble for a new eye, but not as much as the closely related balls and strikes, their sequences and, most

importantly, how officials call them. Similarly perplexing are the all directions throws for the purpose of getting a player or players out. They are fantastic in their ability to perfectly blur any understanding of the game. The most remarkable B those that this writer likes to call mystical plays, owing to their extreme difficulty to understand B occur when two basemen are trying to get a runner out who is running back and forth between the bases occupied by these basemen in an attempt to be safe.

Once understood, however, all these plays make baseball a very interesting game, but before that they are nothing but a pain in the neck.

An amazing sight at a baseball game is the number of children watching, which may mean that they understand it rather easily. It is as if the game was akin to a language that is easier understood by children.

More accurately is the fact that American kids are born with an understanding of their games, baseball or otherwise.

Another angle from which simplicity can be viewed is that of the solo game, i.e. how easy it is for a casual amateur to play the game alone, without a teammate or a team. Of the five games, two stand out in this regard, basketball and soccer, as they can be enjoyed all alone with great pleasure. Basketball slightly beats soccer in this regard as shooting hoops alone is a more satisfying experience than juggling a soccer ball. When juggling a soccer ball there is no scoring involved, one does not score a goal, and even if one did, it would be against an empty goal. A legitimate scoring in soccer must involve the presence of a goalkeeper, otherwise it is not real scoring, and that is simply impossible while playing alone. By contrast, shooting hoops in basketball involves direct scoring. A person who is shooting all alone is also making points.

He or she does not need the presence of anybody else, but can rely on the stroke alone and have plenty of fun. Playing basketball alone involves dribbling and the like, but it is the shooting and potential scoring that is far more interesting. When one adopts a basketball stance, with the ball in one's hands, and shoots, if the ball makes a swish in the net, it is as if one is playing in an actual game. The pleasure and satisfaction from making a basket is palpable and experienced right away. Points can be run up infinitely by scoring and scoring. And, again, each score is a pleasurable moment and makes basketball the undisputed simplest and best sport out of our five to play solo.

Soccer comes next, with the juggling of the ball, which can be an enjoyable

experience. Even though there is no proper scoring involved, it is possible to just play with the ball, dribbling and juggling while having plenty of fun. Hockey shares some of the same features with soccer in this matter, as with respect to scoring, another person is needed. It is very difficult to find legitimate instances of natural solo playing in any of the two remaining games.

But solo playing is, in a sense, not on par with the ideal of sports that put an emphasis on the value of teamwork. So it is in that respect, as related to playing with others, that both football and baseball become very simple and as enjoyable to play as any sport. Two people with a football in hand can have good, simple fun just throwing passes at each other. And baseball, for that matter, is renowned for its ability to strengthen the bonds between a father and his child, one throwing, the other catching. As for the ranking, with respect to simplicity playing with others, it is a five-way tie.

**Ranking: Simplicity**

1	Soccer
2	Basketball
3	Hockey
4	Football
5	Baseball

**Simplicity to play solo\***

1	Basketball
2	Soccer
3	Hockey

\* Baseball and Football cannot be ranked

## **2** *BEAUTY*

Beauty is said to be in the eye of the beholder, but we may assert with certitude, and do so independently of subjectivity, that when it comes to sport, any sport, there is none that really lacks it. Every sport is beautiful, if not to the person who is watching, then at least to one who is playing.

Beauty in sports is not the same as beauty in art, though they both please, and insofar as the former is related to the latter, as far as our commentary is concerned, it is only by analogy. There are forms in sports that are beautiful and please as if they actually were art, even though they are not. That said, we are concerned here only with the five major American sports and what is usually called the Aworld game@ and let us just say that five of them put together will be ranked based on what I call the beauty scale.

The prize for the most beautiful goes to hockey, primarily because of its pace, for if we were to consider play by play beauty, it would be difficult to rank this game higher than the other four. Hockey is constantly beautiful, and, consequently, has no need for single, spectacular plays. In sport, the factor most associated with beauty is motion. A thing in motion seems to suspend our imagination more than anything else, in addition to show forms that catch the eye. If it is a painting, we might be moved from within, carried away trying to fill our mind with the represented message. Or if a beautiful catch, our senses are taken by the changing forms. When this motion is done with esthetic gliding, in the manner of figure skating (which is a sport on its own account, generally agreed upon as beautiful), the eye is captivated. And in hockey, players are constantly in motion, all the time sliding, moving. These moves sometimes make one feel like one is watching a ballet, and this sentiment is heightened by what truly makes the sport beautiful, namely the speed with which its athletes move about. So it is not only that they skate, but that they do so with such speed and in all directions. Speedy motion then, when associated with athletes, and provided that the forms created are not ordinary, is a thing of beauty, and hockey is nothing but beautiful motion. Except when the puck is not in play, hockey players, except for the two goaltenders, and an emphasis must be put on this fact, are constantly moving and are at high speed almost all the time.

Many commentators will call a sport they prefer, or strongly promote, one of constant motion, though when we look closely there is actually plenty of standing

around. But in hockey, everybody is moving, and, more often than not, in endless quick motion, and the eye is taken, riveted and pleased.

Why hockey's beauty does not match its popularity can be explained by many factors, the chief of which may be the fact that it is hard for one to follow a game that one cannot, or has never, personally played. The mere thought of skating makes many people shiver with the thought of what it would feel like to land on all fours. Even if I wanted to, I could not play it because whoever cannot skate is excluded by definition. But this does not diminish one bit the clear fact that hockey is a very beautiful game, more than all others in this book.

Of the remaining four, it is a tough competition because they all do have flashes that are simply incredible for the eye. We already have a sport which we have called the most beautiful here based on the combination of speed and motion, and I think we should use that as our guidance in judging the other four. That said, baseball will have to be declared the comparatively least beautiful of the four remaining right away. In baseball, speedy motion is experienced, but followed, or preceded, by excruciating slowness, or, in the case of our language here, ugliness. Time and time again players stand and stand watching the pitcher who, in turn, looks around, standing motionless. While hockey serves constant motion to the eye, baseball has only to offer what Howard Cosell once called A occasional action.@ And that lands it dead last here, clearly less beautiful than soccer. In soccer, the action is continuous, players are in constant motion, sometimes speedy, sometimes not, but always moving. However, there are instances when, the action being far away due to the length of the field, players can be seen on the opposite side standing around or moving slowly. There are occasions when players stand around, though at no time when the ball is in play does everybody actually stand still, not to mention the ball itself, which is very rarely at rest while in play. The same can be said for basketball, where players are in motion at all times when the ball is in play. In this game, players move up and down the court, sometimes at high speed, always active. Here, too, what was said about soccer can be repeated, that is, there are occasional instances of players standing around watching, but not to the same degree as in baseball.

Then there is football, which is a beauty once the ball is in play, as every single player on the field is in action. As soon as the ball is handed to the quarterback, players move all around, some in sprint-like speed, some just moving, and those whose motion is not evidenced by much distance are engaged in a kind of wrestling match. This sumo-like activity that occurs in football is worth mentioning because those who do not like the game, mostly outside of the United States, criticize the fact that some players involved in it, namely those who play on the line of scrimmage, can

go an entire year without touching the ball in play. Before I became a fan I also had the same view, especially before I fully understood the game. Now that I both understand and love it, I can expertly say that few athletes in any team game are as crucial, work as hard and are as under appreciated as football players who line up across the line of scrimmage. Their battles have their own appeal, and the fact that they do not always touch the ball does not harm football's beauty.

Thus, hockey, basketball, soccer, football and then baseball, with respect to ranking them based on beauty. Least beautiful does not mean no beauty, as beauty is in every sport.

Let us then look at them independently of each other in term of general beauty, starting with baseball, which has two distinct parts, the ugly and the beautiful, or the inactive and the active.

In the first case, or the standing around phase, even many a baseball fan will acknowledge that it is boring, or in other words lacks action. This part can be called boring baseball. But such is the peculiarity of this game that one of the most dramatically beautiful feats in all sports, namely great pitching, can happen during it duller moments. And, in fact, once a person immerses himself or herself into a game, giving it total attention and keeping up with counts and things, the boring in this part of baseball goes out the window and the game is viewed as lively across the board. More specifically, during the playoffs, provided they be of the 2002 or 2003 caliber in terms of drama, there is no scintilla of a bore in baseball. But the playoffs are special, a season when the level of competition is very high.

Everybody stands doing nothing, but then the pitcher, well rested by inaction, albeit short, unleashes the ball with a mean and vicious velocity. The fly of the said ball is close to artistic, and therefore superior in beauty, as it sails to, and then by, a player who mightily aims his bat at it, only to swing through the wind. Great pitching is beautiful, but a pitch is almost artistically beautiful when the ball's trajectory is curved. Here, velocity is mixed with bending space, and both are a treat for the eye. Because of this velocity, at least for a new eye to the game, the beauty of a pitch can best be admired in slow motion on a TV screen. Unless someone is very familiar with the game, i.e. Americans in general, it is almost impossible to tell a pitch trajectory with the naked eye. The ball travels so fast it is quite difficult to tell, but not for lifelong baseball fans, who can easily see from a distance whether it is a ball or a pitch, though now and then a player and an umpire, despite being the closest persons to the action, will completely disagree. The player vehemently says *Apitch@* while the umpire powerfully and firmly calls *Aball@*



In slow motion on a TV screen, curved pitches, and the multiple ways they break, are beautiful. A pitch that seems to go in one direction, say at the batter, and then at the last moment breaks in another is artistic beauty, especially if, in the process, it causes the batter to duck in order to avoid being hit, only to see the ball sail, unchallenged, through the strike zone.

So with the ball being in play, but with most everybody not in action, baseball can intensely please the eye when great pitching is going on, provided, of course, that one is fully immersed in the counts.

In its second phase, the active one, action starts from the get go and does not let a spectator's attention get away. This happens when the ball is hit. The half sleeping game comes to life and we have organized pandemonium. When the ball is hit, what happens next is captivating and exciting, these feelings staying steady or rising to even higher levels depending on where the ball goes, how it becomes dead. The home run is outright beautiful, though the degree is limited, as, in fact, everybody slows down as soon as the feat is accomplished. When the ball is, as they say, @outta here, @ the entire scene B the hitting, followed by the flying ball, which sometimes actually lands completely outside the stadium, a feat seen only in baseball B makes the home run one of the most spectacular plays in sports. On the other hand, when the ball safely lands in fair territory, is then picked up and must be thrown back toward the infielders, a sort of pandemonium ensues. Baseball ceases to be slow and secedes from its inaction, with players in action throwing, catching, running, sliding head or feet first, all of this at speed. It is hard, if at all possible, to find a period of time loaded with so much activity in any other sport, with athletes running in so many directions at the same time. At this moment, the most captivating of all plays, but also one of the most difficult to understand for a novice eye, is when the ball is thrown seemingly in all directions. Called the double play, or its cousin the triple play, it is indeed a remarkable one in terms of action, speed and, therefore, beauty. Unfortunately, the triple play happens only on extremely rare occasions, which is a real annoyance for a new eye, and makes one wonder if it really exists. Perhaps there should be a law requiring every baseball team to post a triple play at least once a year, that way those who doubt the game's ability to generate great excitement will doubt no more, and those who do not believe that the play itself exists will at last believe.

Moving to basketball, it may be said that in this game, where players constantly run up the court and, depending on their talents, baskets are made almost at the same pace, beauty is everywhere. Depending on the ability of the players, if a minimum of talent is there, enjoyment is guaranteed. Non stop. Meaning whether it

be children playing, adult amateurs or professionals, with a specific mention for street ball. Before the ball is in play the eye is well treated to the spectacle of balls swishing through the net, watching players taking turns aiming at the basket for the purpose of honing their ability to make shots. Up in the air, make a curve and land in the basket. Then, once the game proper is on, the spectacle of balls landing in the basket becomes more enticing because the pressure is increased, and with it the degree of difficulty. The continuous scoring which presupposes an equally continuous action, comprised of dribbling past an opponent and dribbling between the legs. Of changing direction, passing along the ball, sometimes between the legs, behind the back, or without looking. In addition, the game has its own most spectacular play which, unfortunately, only the most athletic of its players can perform at its beautiful best, namely the dunk. Though every player in the NBA can dunk the ball using solely force, only very few do so with particular beauty, combining both power and flair. Unless, that is, one is watching a brand of basketball simply called street ball where, as the name seems to indicate, the main purpose is purely entertainment. The seriousness that comes with professionalism is voided here, and almost everyone who is playing has the maddening ability to produce absolutely spectacular dunks. A player soaring high, ball in hand, performing acrobatic moves in the air, such as rotating himself 360 degrees then smashing the ball through the net, is irresistible. When this is done without rotating himself, but instead jumping over another player, it is memorable. Basketball showcases its beauty many other ways, such as long passing, from one end of the floor to the other. Or, again, pure shooting, within a game, from long distance. Dribbling, passing, everybody running down, everybody running up, everybody defending, everybody attacking, are things that keep a person who watches this game wanting to watch even more.

If in basketball everybody attacks or everybody defends, that is not the case in football, where each offense faces off with the opponent's defense. In this case it may appear that it would be difficult to find an enticing play from the defending side of a ball game, but that is not so. Defenders make what is sometimes called a beautiful hit. One might ask if there is such a thing as a hit which is pleasing. Clearly hits in football, though an integral part of the game, cannot be called beautiful. They are not like art, but rather accepted acts of intense physical contact or even barbarism. That they do not give pleasure does not make them uninteresting to see. Just like boxers throwing punches at each other, they have an undeniable and irresistible appeal. They fail to procure joy because there is no possibility of a pleasing rapport between the feelings of a player who has just been hit, the one who hit him, and that of the spectator who is watching. The first is experiencing pain in some way, the next one may be feeling satisfaction and the last neither of those two emotions. Now, the reaction may vary from one spectator to another, but generally speaking, for most

people, hitting another human being is not beautiful, in sport or otherwise. But it is addictive, though only in sports, and it can be said that football would not have the same appeal if hitting was not a part of the game. What is sure beauty in this game are the catches, the throws and the dazzling runs while avoiding tackles. When the quarterback retrieves the ball from the center, pulls backward, looks around, spots his target and unleash a fifty yard bomb, the suspenseful moment delivers pleasure. This sensation continues to climb higher and either just satisfies normally, in the cases where the intended target catches the ball, just catches it, or else does so with moves that are more likely to be seen at a ballet than on a sports field. All this in mere seconds, meaning that just like in baseball, football has its windows plays, where players move extremely fast, where speed is in great display. Frankly, the ballet-like catches in football, as well as one-handed ones, are very beautiful to watch, and may be the plays that bring the most pleasure to the eye.

Moving to hockey, which has already been ranked as comparatively speaking the most beautiful of all games considered here, it must be said that this sport particularly makes the point when it is watched during its post season period, where only the best are meeting. During these matches, the naked beauty of the game is completely displayed, as evidenced by the excellence with which players are passing and gliding over the ice. They move with great speed, and move constantly, changing direction, passing the puck, shooting and providing intense fun.

To complete the tour with soccer, what Pele called the Abeautiful game@ has plenty of moments when it is exactly that. There are times of mesmerizing beauty, when the ball is rapidly passed around with precision, which is difficult to do using only the feet, and this fact makes an American criticism of soccer an actual strength when analyzed closely. For it is much easier to throw a ball with precision than it is kick it. And soccer players, the great ones, develop such an enviable foot dexterity that they will sometimes place the ball exactly where they intend it to go, and when this is followed by another precise pass, and another, and so on, the sight is beautiful to watch. Then there is the control of a long ball by a receiving player, which, no matter the original speed, sees its velocity brought to zero with a simple move. The universal soccer signature beauty play is the goal scored with the bicycle kick with the back facing the goal, which is closer to genius painting or irresistible beauty than anything else. Another thing of beauty in soccer is the particular form each goal has, as every score has its own characteristic. One will hit the upper bar, the other the side, yet another sail through from thirty yards or more.

This, it is clear, is a limited exposition of what can and does make these games beautiful to watch. But beauty is not the only characteristic of sports. As a matter of

fact, just as every sport can be said to possess beauty, it can be argued that sometimes they are perfectly boring and display ugliness, a fact that some ultra fans of one game are usually good and quick at pointing out about another. It is not necessary to rank our games based on ugliness, but we can say that each one of the games in this book can easily display great aloofness.

Every sport is inherently beautiful, at least to one who is playing. Every sport is also boring, some openly, some in a hidden fashion. Baseball has an outright, in your face, boring side. This is when there is interminable standing around. Soccer cannot be left aside, as sometimes an entire game is a perfect bore and a punishment for the eye. And basketball, hockey and football all have those games that can cure an insomniac by putting them to sleep faster than any pill.

**Ranking: Beauty**

1	Hockey
2	Basketball
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