The 2011 Super Bowl between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Green Bay Packers was a game between two relatively small market teams. You would think that interest would be stifled for a game like this. But the game has eclipsed last year’s Super Bowl as the most watched television program in history. Everyone loves for his or her team to win; but in this case, most people watching don’t have their team in the game. Why are they watching? Why do they gamble on a game so distant?

Francesco Duina has written a book titled Winning: Reflections on an American Obsession that explores America’s obsession with competition. In examining the concepts of winning and losing, he offers a description as to why we compete, why we watch competitive events, and what advantages and disadvantages result.
Winning hypothesizes that Americans are consumed by competition, and this results in negative consequences for us. But we are not aware of the consequences. Even worse, we are not aware of why we need competition so essentially. The impact of winning and losing is not only destructive but also invisible.

For Duina, America is an intensely driven, dynamic culture that is hollow at its core. Our relentless pursuit of winning comes from a preoccupation to find meaning. Competition is the means that we have devised to help us find our purpose and predictability. The lure of competition is quite great, but we have remarkably little understanding about what it means. This creates an inherent problem with Americans’ obsession with winning.

The author’s point of reference originates with Simmel (1971) and Weber (1920/2002). Regarding Simmel, he examines the structure of competition, with rewards and privileges afforded the winners and denied to losers. Turning to Weber, he examines the more personal focus on the meaning of winning and of our beliefs about winners and losers.

Victory has rewards. But the nature of competition goes beyond the titles and trophies that we win; it opens the gateway to more socially substantial rewards. For Duina, there are three specific ones. The first is differentiation: our desire to stand apart from the crowd. We enjoy beating a stranger of equal skill, but we feel better if we can beat a friend of equal skill. Duina suggests that for competitors, competition in itself is not very interesting; they need close competition. It is the risk of loss that we are drawn to: the more uncertainty or risk, the larger the thrill. The inherent pleasure of winning does not come from the absence of doubt but from its presence.

Americans enjoy winning because it allows them to differentiate themselves from their peers. This fits our implicit beliefs that differences are natural and status is justified. Winning allows us to ultimately discover if our competitor is superior. There is tension, then relief. As Duina suggests when he cites Heyman, Orhun, and Ariely’s (2004) research, people have greater enjoyment in being behind and then breaking ahead at the end than from being ahead for the entire game and finally breaking even. The possibility of failure captures our attention.

For spectators, a close competitive event provides the chance to experience the sense of freedom and possibility that are missing from much of our lives. The experience is uplifting as we get energized by the competitors’ actions and throw off our normal passivity. But there is also a sadistic side; competition allows us to watch the pain, joy, and ultimate disappointment of others. We identify with the winners and use their superior performance as a signal of our own superior abilities. We derive a sense of vicarious differentiation.

Winners also can assert the power of worldview: “I win; therefore, I am right.” Winning gives an affirmation of the truth of one’s worldview. Duina claims that winners use victory to confirm what they already believe about themselves, while losers typically look introspectively to determine why they failed. We can become overconfident, overgeneralizing about the soundness of our positions and our understanding of the world. We can also overgeneralize from the losing position. Defeat informs losers that they are
wrong; therefore, they must engage in some type of soul-searching because they have weaknesses and limitations that require improvement. Loss leads to simplistic explanations and attributions.

One of the most interesting assertions is the claim of a human need for space. Duina hypothesizes that our fundamental drive for competition exists because we want more physical and mental space in comparison with those around us. It is not the absolute amount of space; we just want more than those with whom we compete. This space allows winners to have the opportunity to share more of their perspectives and opinions than do the losers.

When our society evaluates losers, it considers more than just the outcome; the competitor’s attitude is also weighted because there are different levels of losers. We evaluate competitors partly on how they pursue their objectives and on their mental approach to the competition. If they have goal clarity, uncompromising effort, relentless optimism, or a willingness to learn, we tend to improve our evaluation of them. All these affect how a competitor is evaluated upon losing because society believes that mental attitudes affect victory, and victory is not enough to declare someone a “winner.”

But the victory is more than the final score. We inject additional value into the competitive outcome. Americans can take a simple competitive event like winning an election and detrimentally turn it into an indicator of prestige, honor, and power. Victory is not an endpoint: It is a gateway to the higher values we want. The author illustrates this with a “prize ladder” that shows how prizes are abstracted from the competitive event as one moves up the ladder. The prizes become more nebulous notions; they tell us about our worthiness, not only when it comes to the competitive realm but also generally about us as persons in general.

The first rung of the ladder is associated with actual prizes that accrue (i.e., points, votes, or trophies). As one moves up, the outcomes become more elaborate and are injected with more intangible things like honor and position in the community. At the top of the ladder, the prizes are most abstract, including access to money and power, which ties back to our worthiness as a person.

Competition for Duina is not confined to the sports arena. Although athletics is the most obvious showcase, the context of winning and losing is present in academics, the workplace, and intimate relationships. The author suggests that a radically different perspective of winning/losing needs to be taken. At the aggregate level, he acknowledges that our individual achievement translates into significant personal and societal accomplishments but at the cost of higher levels of exhaustion and dissatisfaction.

*Winning* provides an in-depth review of the anecdotal sociological factors that contribute to America’s obsession with winning. The author does not use fundamental research. Instead, he relies on “social facts” and contemporary examples to buttress his explanatory theory. There are three main themes that dominate the book:
1. We have a profound fear of having nothing to do because our life is short of something. The pursuit of something that we do not currently have is the signal that we feel deficient. This sense of deficiency explains the determination of competitors. What is important is that we are pursuing something; what we pursue is of secondary importance.

2. The pleasure of victory comes from our knowing that we have won what others want for themselves. Winning amounts to the appropriation of something abstract at the exclusion of others. Part of the pain of losing is missing the opportunity to possess something. Competition is a defense against aggression: Rather than attacking our neighbors on the street, we battle them on the links.

3. Competitive contests become regulated events in which our darker drives and instincts are allowed to emerge. The contests become emotionally charged because they are the conduits to highly prized rewards. The rewards transcend the event, but they are mistakenly generalized to the event itself. The contest is of instrumental value, not terminal value.

Duina effectively explores the sociological embeddedness of competition from which winning and losing arise. As Americans, we live in its web: snared in its silk, striving to escape, but doomed in our efforts. Duina suggests that only by understanding what drives our need to compete can we fulfill our deepest desire: to recognize and meet the need to live a life of purpose. This is true for relationships from the societal perspective as the contest creates a forum of competition for what are otherwise unconnected individuals. We do not live through experiences. Instead, we interpret and attach meaning to make sense of events. Competition and its consequences stem from our mind-set. For Duina, this is where answers lie.

The issues that are introduced have great interest for those teaching within social psychology or practicing within consulting psychology. It would be interesting to explore how Duina’s considerations relate to locus of control, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, achievement and aspiration level, and even behavioral economics. The author does mention Kahneman and Tversky (1979), but the research findings on loss aversion could have better provided a counterpoint to the issues examined.

References

