

How Competitive Are You?

by Margaret J. Marcuson

Are you watching the Olympics? The Olympic Games are all about competition. It's thrilling to watch the best athletes in the world compete in everything from swimming to track and field to fencing to discus. There is no doubt that the competition raises the level of performance.

Competition has many positives: it's a powerful motivator, spurring people to do more than they would otherwise. Winning a competition provides tremendous satisfaction. In a team competition, deep relationships develop among teammates as they strive to do their best.

Competition exists in many arenas besides sports, of course. I was never in sports, but I was always competitive about grades in school. Siblings compete for their parents' attention. Businesses compete for customers. Sometimes churches compete for members. Competition in all of these arenas, like sports, may be a useful motivator, and give people energy to do important work.

Still, competition can bring out our immaturity. The doping scandals show the disadvantage of the win-at-any-cost approach. Winning can be a very serious matter, and losing can destroy someone who has everything vested in winning. When our sense of identity depends on winning, we can find ourselves in trouble. What happens if I lose? Who am I then?

James Carse, in *Finite and Infinite Games* (Ballantine Books, 1987), suggests, "There are at least two kinds of games. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play." He also says, "A finite player plays to be powerful; an infinite player plays with strength." He is really talking about zero-sum games and non-zero-sum game. In a zero-sum game, there is only a certain amount to be won: only one gold medal per event. By contrast, in a non-zero-sum games, what can be "won" can be multiplied, like building community.

We all experience elements of both games in our lives. In a business, there may be a limited number of customers we could win. A church in a small town only has so many people it might be able to reach. A student can only take so many classes in his or her schedule. Conversely, we can experience an infinite amount of growth in our lives. There's an infinite amount of love. The most important things in life may be about learning from experience and maturing emotionally and spiritually, not about winning any competition

For most of us, being the best in the world is not an option, no matter what our field. Still, I can be the best *me* I can be, competing only with myself. I can play the infinite game with strength, as Carse suggests. I can increase my own strength in a way that isn't at the expense of others. That's in everyone's best interest.

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