

THOUGHTS ON BEING
NUMBER ONE

Personally, I'm getting a little tired of seeing people wag their forefingers in front of television cameras, and hearing that tired old incantation, "We're number one!", chanted everywhere from the Superdome to Little League ball fields.

Being "number one" has gotten to be a national obsession. And, really, it gets to be a little ridiculous sometimes. The "number one" title used to be associated with national championship contests, or, at least, regional playoffs. But, nowadays, when the hometown boys (or girls)

win any kind of athletic event, be it ever so insignificant, you can see those fingers wagging in the air.

What, exactly, does it mean to be "number one"? When Gordon Johncock came in first at the Indy 500 on Memorial Day, what did that prove? That he was the best driver in the race? Not necessarily.

Consider the fact that Johncock finished just three feet, 36 inches, ahead of second-place driver Rick Mears -- at the end of a 500 mile race. Add to that the fact that Mears' car had collided momentarily with another car while making a pit stop on the 183rd lap. Had that collision not occurred, or had that race lasted another half-lap, the

outcome might have been different.

Johncock deserves a lot of credit for being a skillful driver and having lots of guts. But his victory at the Indianapolis Speedway on May 30, 1982, proved just one thing. He managed to get the front-end of his car across the finish line before anyone else in that particular race on that particular day. Did that make him "number one"?

Well, it depends on the way you look at it. In a sense, the "number one" title at the Indianapolis Speedway belongs to Mark Donohue, who established an Indy 500 speed record that has stood for the past ten years. And Mark Donohue

is dead.

The point is, this business of being "number one" has been exaggerated all out of proportion. Why can't we admire the strength, stamina, and skill of athletes, and the excitement of the contest, without being so hung-up on this "number one" business? Why do fans have to get so obsessed with the idea of winning, that they throw bottles, shout obscenities, curse officials, and do anything else they can get away with to beat the competition?

In the "Special Olympics" this year scores of handicapped persons -- victims of mental retardation and crippling diseases -- competed in

track and field events. But they weren't really competing against one another. Not really. They were competing against their own limitations, proving that they could run a race or do a high-jump against terrible odds.

The front runner in one of those races happened to look back just as another girl fell sprawling on the track. She stopped to help, giving up her lead in the race. As a result, she didn't cross the finish line first. But, in my estimation, she was truly "number one."

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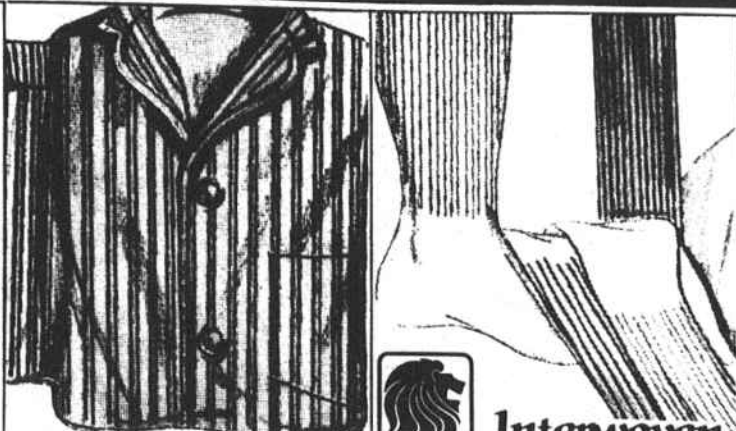
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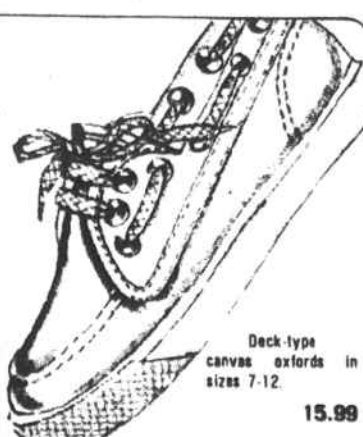
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