

OPINION

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In Sports, Is a Culture of Excellence the Antidote to Mediocrity?

Published 10/16/23 10:30 AM ET | Updated 10/16/23 10:51 AM ET

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Organizations espouse the benefits and value of excellence. Whether it is striving to be “number one,” or reaching some lofty reputation and status, seeking the highest level of performance is ingrained in our culture.

Yet, in spite of such noble ambitions, mediocrity is ubiquitous, and in some cases, contagious.

One of the challenges is the cost to attain excellence. Not all organizations have the resources to be the best in their field. Yet, money alone cannot consistently produce excellence.

Then, there is a degree of luck, which may be unpredictable, at best, or simply confusing in many situations.

Mediocrity is a path of least resistance as organizations atrophy, either by resting on their laurels or not adapting to constantly changing conditions.

This is most clearly seen with professional sports teams.

Every such team strives to win. This means assembling rosters through drafts, signing talented free agents or trading to fill team needs. All such transactions are executed with the goal of competing at the highest level.

Businessman and principal owner of the New York Yankees [George Steinbrenner's deep pockets](#) allowed him to transform the team into a perennial World Series contender, winning [four championships between 1996 and 2000](#), a record of winning that will likely never be matched again.

This is because [football, basketball and hockey all place salary caps on teams](#). The outlier, baseball, instead uses a "[competitive balance tax](#)," often considered a [luxury tax](#), which simply penalizes teams for spending too much. The net effect

is that wealthy team owners can no longer simply buy a championship or will pay an enormous price for trying to do so.

In today's professional sports climate, championships must be crafted with skill and acumen. Great players are necessary, but not all championship teams have a roster full of stars. In general, this would be too expensive, and for leagues with salary caps, impossible to assemble.

What championship teams do have are a culture of excellence that infects every player, so that everyone's performance is collectively elevated. This means that the total value of the team is greater than the sum of each players' individual value in the organization.

This sounds so simple.

Yet, some franchises go decades without winning a championship.

There are [12 NFL teams that have never won a Superbowl](#). There are [10 NBA teams that have never won a championship](#). There are [six MLB teams that have never won a World Series](#). There are [11 NHL teams that have never won the Stanley Cup](#).

Every one of these teams wants to win their respective championship — but every one of them has consistently fallen short.

Much like how success breeds success, the same can be said about failure.

It may take just one bad apple on a roster to derail the best-laid plans for success.

What this suggests is that building a culture of excellence that fosters success on the playing field is difficult. Allowing mediocrity to seep into the player's dressing room is easy, unless efforts are made to counter such forces.



Tom Brady #12 of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers hoists the Vince Lombardi Trophy after winning Super Bowl LV at Raymond James Stadium on February 07, 2021 in Tampa, Florida.Patrick Smith/Getty Images

NFL quarterback [Tom Brady](#) was highly successful for the New England Patriots, winning six Superbowl rings with them. He then carried his winning culture to Tampa Bay Buccaneers and gave them their own Super Bowl victory. His penchant for excellence helped transform a [7-9 Tampa Bay team in 2019](#) into a Super Bowl winner in 2020.

This may explain why in part repeat-champions have become relatively rare in some sports.

[New England](#) was the last repeat Super Bowl champion, winning in 2004 and 2005. The [Yankees](#) were the last World Service repeat winners, in 1998, 1999 and 2000.

The [NBA](#) and [NHL](#) have been more successful in producing back-to-back winners. In the NBA, the Golden State Warriors (led by [Stephen Curry](#)) was a repeat winner in 2017 and 2018, as were the Miami Heat (led by [Lebron James](#)) in 2012 and 2013, as well as the Los Angeles Lakers in 2009 and 2010 (led by [Kobe Bryant](#).)

In the [NHL](#), the Tampa Bay Lightning won the Stanley Cup in 2020 and 2021, as did the Pittsburgh Penguins in 2016 and 2017.

Overall, the [NHL](#) (23) and [NBA](#) (15) team rosters are smaller than [NFL](#) (55) and [MLB](#) (26) rosters, which may contribute to these results by concentrating talent on a smaller pool of players.

Excellence is the goal of every team, yet the headwinds of mediocrity are often omnipresent, and contagious. That is why building championship teams is so difficult, while settling into mediocrity is effortless.

Finding the right player or core of players who can inject excellence into a team's performance is less about money, and more about culture. This is what also builds momentum that wins championships and energizes fan bases, creating the necessary synergy for success. And with such a culture, winning can become the standard, keeping mediocrity at bay.

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