

# ***Sporting Life: In a competitive world one truth prevails - evolve or step aside***

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Nothing is safe in sport. Not form or confidence. Nothing is inevitable. Not victory or place in history. Nothing is enough. Not the tactic you own or muscle you've built or trophies your nation has.

Just ask the All Blacks.

Nothing you did in December is good enough in August. Nothing said in praise of you lasts in the heat of competition. Nothing is guaranteed in sport except that there's someone plotting to take you down right this minute somewhere in the world.

Just ask the gifted Loh Kean Yew.

Nothing is certain except that your dream is not the only one. There's a line from here till Pluto of people chasing the same thing you are. If you're not patient, they will be. Competition is thicker than any encyclopedia on greatness.

A South African won the Women's British Open, the first Major winner from her nation in 34 years. Ashleigh Buhai is 33, turned pro in 2007, had never won an LPGA Tour title, has been buffeted by the high winds of sport but stayed the course. "This game has a way of giving you a hard time," she said. "I'm just so proud of how I've stuck it out."

Nothing stays the same in sport which is why Loh is in the process of adjusting, adding, learning. He knows that if you're not fitter than everyone, it's only your fault. If you don't have a plan C, there's no one to blame. If you can't take the weight of the moment, there's no one to hold your hand. Nothing in sport ever allows you to be comfortable.

Nothing is as precious as the ability to evolve. Tiger Woods never had a swing he didn't want to tinker with while Rafael Nadal is a masterpiece always under construction. In 2005, he was a one-dimensional, forehand-heavy, average-serving, baseline-rooted defensive fellow who ran for everything. In 2022, he has a sharper backhand, wicked serve, a point-amputating volley, an aggressive spirit and still runs for everything.

Nothing is as deadly in sport as complacency. No one concedes they are and yet it leaks in and corrodes talent. You think you have time but you don't. You think your ideas are sound but they may not have aged well. You think the game is in good hands till you can't catch a pass.

No one trembles any more before dynasties, they're just inspired to end them. When the All Blacks, this great wall of sustained brilliance, lost a single match it was enough to spill your beer. Two consecutive losses warranted a panic. Now it's three in a row – the first time since 1998 – and time for a national inquiry.

According to the School Sport NZ Representation Census 2021, change is under way. In 2000, 30,621 students represented their school in rugby union in New Zealand and 16,471 in basketball. In 2021, it was 24,299 for rugby and 24,850 for basketball. The point is the All Blacks' resurrection is a little more complicated than a new coach.

Brazil lost its grip on football – one World Cup semi-final in the last 20 years – and the West Indies on cricket. Dynasties topple in slow motion and it is agonising to watch and yet oddly beautiful. We mourn the end of domination yet embrace the coming of the new.

Nothing is as heartening for us, and scary for rivals, as the multiplication of talent. At the 1998 Commonwealth Games, 34 nations won medals. This time in Birmingham that number is 44. That sound which athletes hear, it's a wider world breathing as they close in on them. It's Teong Tzen Wei of Singapore in the 50m butterfly and Avinash Sable of India in the 3,000m steeplechase.

The steeplechase had been turned into a Kenyan-members only private club. They went 1-2-3 at the 1998 Commonwealth Games and repeated that feat in 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2018. Then Sable, a farmer's son from India, which has no history in the event, shadowed three Kenyans in Birmingham. He overtook one, passed the second and almost caught the third at the line. For anyone who thought the world was out of reach, this was hope in a blue vest.

"I had to prove," said Sable to India's The Sportstar, speaking almost on behalf of anyone from a country who's been overlooked, "that at the international level we aren't any lesser than anyone be it the Kenyans or Ethiopians. Nothing is impossible."

Then he added something profound.

"Nothing is bigger than effort."

And as the sporting world turns meaner, harder, scarier, deeper, where everyone's dissecting you, breaking you down, studying your stats, solving you, criticising you, demanding of you, effort is really the only thing in an athlete's control. So reset the alarm. Get up an hour earlier.

Nothing is stopping you.