

With all due respect

by Susan_Estrich

The purpose of being a columnist is not to win friends. It is not to provoke silent nods of agreement. The goal is to strike a chord, hit a nerve — which is to say, at least sometimes, make people mad. Controversy is good, not bad.

So you write what you think, and if people don't like it, they send in comments or write letters to the editor, which is generally considered a good thing for a column and a columnist. Provocative is a positive adjective in my business. Then you move along to the next topic, whatever it is.

But — and this is my but, not everyone's — it still upsets me sometimes when I offend people and don't mean to, when there is a risk that I've hurt people I didn't mean to hurt, especially if those people are already suffering. I don't care if you think I'm stupid or ill-informed or just plain wrongheaded, but I don't want you to believe that I'm mean. Mean is not OK.

Last week, I wrote a column about the tragic death of Jeremy Lusk, a young motocross driver, a superstar at a sport that I'll be the first to admit I don't get, involving flying through the air and doing tricks while hanging on to the seat of a motorcycle. He died after attempting a difficult and dangerous maneuver before thousands of paying fans in a stadium in Costa Rica.

Many of those who wrote to tell me that I didn't appreciate the sport I was writing about (fair enough) and didn't have any business criticizing it also complained that I had insulted Mr. Lusk and his memory, trivializing his accomplishment and literally piling pain onto his already grieving family.

I did not mean to do that. If I did, I apologize — to his memory, his family and his fans. I extend my sympathies for the tragic loss of a young and gifted man.

Mr. Lusk was obviously a man of unbelievable talent, tenacity and determination. You don't get to be the best at what you do — whatever it is — without not only the physical gifts that many sports demand, but also the grit, drive and discipline to push yourself time and again, over and over, harder and harder to be the best.

He had legions of fans because he was the best in the world at something most of us couldn't do if we wanted to, no matter how much we tried and practiced and worked.

It's the risk piece on which we'll have to agree to disagree: the value of taking risk, the spectator sports

that are based on watching people risk their lives, the lessons we take from them and the values they reflect. Is it any different from what we do when we pull over or slow down at the scene of an accident, the more grisly the better? Is it any different from watching Houdini bury himself, watching boxers bloody each other or, for those of us who are animal lovers, watching horses pushed beyond the limits of their anatomy or dogs whipped to take the lead?

I'm a lawyer; I can do the differences of degree and how differences of degree are sometimes differences of kind. But I'm not sure I'm persuading anyone, much less myself. Where is the line between the danger that is acceptable, that is "sport," and the risk that makes it abuse? Is it the willingness of the individual to take that risk, or are we "who watch, who pay, who create the audience that shapes their judgment" ultimately responsible?

Those are the questions I intended to raise in writing about Jeremy Lusk. I did not mean to hurt his family or fans, or to demean his death. We have much we can disagree about, but hopefully not that.

My sympathies are with those who suffer loss. I have known too much loss in my own life ever to take pleasure in the pain of others, or to want to use it to prove a point or fill space. May he rest in peace. And may the rest of us continue to struggle, with civility and mutual respect, to answer the questions raised by his death.

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