

# Superstars competition: Phony sports, real money

By Joe Lapointe

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ROTONDA, Fla. — This tiny community, located a moist breeze inland from the Gulf of Mexico, is the Islip, N.Y., of the 1970s.

Islip gained fame by hosting televised demolition derbies in the 60s, Rotonda, a bit off the beaten path of tourist traps near Sarasota, greets you with a "Home of the Superstars" highway sign.

For the fourth straight year, athletes of varying abilities and diverse sports have made this condominium community a mini jock colony for an event many still find suspect as legitimate sport. The money is real.

"Hey, it's a chance to enjoy yourself and pick up some bread," says Mike Schmidt of the Philadelphia Phillies. Schmidt and 13 fellow athletes will share \$122,000 in prize money (for the finals alone) by competing in sev-

en of 10 events other than their specialties.

The format is somewhere between Olympics and the sack races and egg tosses of the company picnic. It is anathema to sports traditionalists, a made-for-television promotion.

But "Superstars" is at least as legitimate a sports event as was Muhammad Ali's "championship bout" pummeling of the pathetic Jean-Pierre Coopman. And admission for fans, the studio audience, is free.

ABC television claims "Superstars" is a ratings success. "We knock the hell out of NBA basketball," a spokesman said.

The men's finals will be televised live for the first time at 1 p.m. Sunday (Channel 7). The women's finals will be held Monday and Tuesday with a taped showing at a later date. Anne Henning, the Northbrook (Ill.) speed skater, is the favorite in that group.

After Saturday's competition Kyle Rote Jr. of the Dallas Tornado led with 21 points. A

surprising second was actor Robert Duvall (he played the lawyer in *The Godfather*) with 17 and Lou (Mr. Universe) Ferrigno was third with 14.

Neither Rotonda nor "Superstars" existed a few years ago. The community was founded by real estate interests. The athletic competition was invented by Dick Button, the former speed skater and current ABC commentator.

Supposedly the format determines the best all-around athlete by pitting people like Dave DeBusschere against Dave Kingman in tennis, Rote against Lynn Swann in bowling and Ralph Boston vs. Mr. Universe in a one-mile bicycle race.

Such pairings, say the critics, have as much bearing on total ability as a hand of poker. A theatrical atmosphere prevails and the scene is not without great commercial overtones.

But it's a major sports happening in lush southwestern Florida, where sports like dog racing and jai alai get equal time on the TV newcasts with basketball and hockey.

For the athletes, "Superstars" is a good bit of fun. Schmidt insists he's thrilled to meet and compete with Ralph Boston and Rafer Johnson, "people I used to hear about on TV."

The life of the party is Swann of the Pittsburgh Steelers, who caught all those acrobatic passes in the Super Bowl. "He's really cool," said six-year-old Brett Bolden who lives in Rotonda.

For a guy like Swann, who earned \$15,000 in a single football game, the financial incentive is less than for others like shot putter Brian Oldfield and water skier Wayne Grimditch. For them it's a chance for exceptional earnings and national exposure.