Final Score: Rendell versus Swann  
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In assessing the late if not much lamented Swann-Rendell gubernatorial contest, one confronts a blunt truth: the contest was patently unfair--Swann never had a chance. Had it been an athletic event, it would have been called off early in the contest. Rendell defeated Swann by a whopping 60 to 40-percent margin.

It wasn’t unfair simply because Ed Rendell had substantially more money, or because Democrats ran a better campaign--although there is substance in both of those notions. But it was unfair because of a far more fundamental reason. There was only one Lynn Swann running, but five different Rendell’s who lumbered onto the playing field during the campaign. Swann was not merely double-teamed, he was the victim of a political gang tackle that was too much even for an all-pro NFL superstar.

Consider the many political personas of Ed Rendell that manifested themselves in 2006: Rendell the Incumbent, Rendell the Magician, Rendell the Opportunist, Rendell the Martial Arts Master, and Rendell the Savvy Professional. Swann may well have been a match for any one or even two Rendells. But five all at once was too much for any mere mortal.

- **Rendell the Incumbent**: Rendell played the incumbent in 2006, and incumbency has made the difference in every gubernatorial re-election since 1974. Rendell, like his predecessors since Milton Shapp, accomplished most of his first term agenda. His relatively solid record on education, economic development, and the environment left Swann few real political openings, at least few that mattered to most voters. Rendell’s record--coupled with a decent state economy, relatively low unemployment, no state program cutbacks, and a scandal-free administration, made him difficult to beat. After a shaky start, by August, Swann had become a good candidate, one who demonstrated a solid understanding of the issues. But the election was never about Swann, it was always a referendum on Rendell’s incumbency. And as such, it was a replay of every election featuring an incumbent governor in modern Pennsylvania history.

- **Rendell the Magician**: The role reversal achieved by Rendell during the campaign evokes memories of vaudeville fast change artists who could transform themselves into just about any character desired with a quick visit to the wings. Rendell, the let’s make a deal and kiss a little "legislative butt" to succeed governor, is the consummate pol and experienced insider. But in a wink he metamorphosed himself into Rendell the born again reformer, running against the Harrisburg establishment, calling for term limits, advocating a smaller legislature, and even opposing his own pay hike. Meanwhile, poor Swann couldn’t seem to keep up with the wardrobe changes. While Rendell was reinventing himself with some unsurpassed political legerdemain, Swann was, for much of the campaign, unconvincing as a reformer. He failed to connect with voters on property tax reform because his own plan was too complicated, and he failed to exploit the pay hike issue, partly because his own party had hatched it.

- **Rendell the Opportunist**: Swann had a four month window after his high profile announcement in January, when the race was by consensus reasonably close. This was, in retrospect, his time of fumbled opportunities. A time when he failed to follow through on a trio of red hot issues: property
tax relief, pay raise anger, and legislative reform, but, instead, demonstrated little knowledge of state government, campaigned among largely Republican groups, and did not raise sufficient money to buy TV time. At the same time, Rendell, with the cunning of a Machiavelli, turned Swann’s missed opportunity into an opportunity for himself. He began a sprint to the finish, bought mega millions in TV time, and coaxed the legislature into adopting a state budget that spent the $800 million dollar surplus on state government programs. The net effect was that a close race was transformed into a huge double digit lead by the beginning of summer for Rendell, one he never relinquished.

- **Rendell the Martial Arts Master:** In 2006, Rendell converted his greatest weakness into his biggest strength. It was a feat of political jujitsu that turns on its head the conventional wisdom about the role of Philadelphia in state politics. Rendell has bridled over the charge that he’s been “the governor of Philadelphia,” a charge made not infrequently outside of the Southeastern part of the state. But Rendell won in 2006—not in spite of his ties to Philly—but because of them. His ability to dominate the Philadelphia media market, including the city, its suburbs, and the Lehigh valley was decisive. Almost 40-percent of Pennsylvania voters live there and Rendell took more than 70-percent of their vote. His supposed Philadelphia liability became the asset that ensured his re-election. Old conventional wisdom: hailing from Philadelphia is the kiss of death in state elections; new conventional wisdom: when Philadelphia and its suburbs vote the same, it is a short election night.

- **Rendell the Savvy Professional:** Note to GOP Bigwigs: sometimes having a party primary is okay, in fact, sometimes it is necessary. And 2006 was one of those times. The GOP’s furious resistance to a party primary is a vestigial artifact of their many years avoiding internal party division and struggling against a voter registration deficit. It made sense then. It doesn’t now. Had Swann had a successful primary this spring, he would have been a more experienced and better known candidate running against Rendell this fall. He would have been less likely to make the rookie mistakes he made early in the race that effectively ended the contest before it started. And he would have had much more resilience than he did when the sledding got tough. This is not the first time Pennsylvania Republicans have grievously wounded themselves avoiding a primary contest. It’s become a bad habit.

Was this an election Swann could have won and Rendell could have lost? Certainly, the Swann campaign made some mistakes, but the best evidence suggests Swann could not have won under any plausible scenario. In the end, a potent array of forces determined the election outcome; in particular, Rendell’s incumbency, the lack of a GOP primary, and the force of the Philadelphia media market.

From the beginning, it was never a question of whether Rendell would win re-election—but only a question of how big his victory would be. Had Swann run a better campaign or had Rendell run a worse one, it might have ended closer; but it wouldn’t have ended differently.

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