

Bare Knuckles (c. 1870) by George A. Hayes

# *Endangered Pastimes*

*Sports are among the greatest of human pleasures and, in the age of Shaquille O'Neal and Emmitt Smith, constitute one of America's biggest industries. They are also, as the sociologist Norbert Elias observed, an essential part of the "civilizing process." Scanning the contemporary world of sports, our contributors explore the human value of athletic competition and discuss the challenges posed to sports by celebrity, money, performance-enhancing drugs, and technology.*

# WHY SPORTS MATTER

BY WILFRID SHEED

It's hard to say exactly when the new era began, but at some point lost in the smog of the 19th century, sports went from being officially a bad thing to being a very good thing indeed, virtually a pillar of state. England, where it all began, was coming into its maturity as an imperial power and the Industrial Revolution was turning country boys into city boys overnight, and society's guardians began to look at all forms of entertainment in the light of these developments, but especially at sports.

Thus preachers, who had previously considered sports the devil's work, open invitations to brutishness and gambling (how times have changed!), gradually perceived that they might be rescued and cleaned up in the service of the Lord—and what was good for God was good for England; likewise schoolteachers, who had once punished idle play, decided to join, not resist, and they began to enforce organized sports with such severity that some children grew to loathe and fear the very word "recreation."

And finally the last, because they had the most to lose, holdouts—Dickens's mythic factory owners, along with more-humane businessmen—came round too, on the understanding that if the workers must have some time off, there were worse ways to spend it than in a rule-bound, open-air, referee-dominated contest of skill and strength.

But perhaps the greatest benefit of all, to judge from the fuss that would be made about it, was that sports not only outlawed cheating but drilled its devotees to detect and despise it in each other and by exten-

sion in themselves. This was crucial. A nation on the verge of great transactions—a nation also in the midst of a population explosion that might have reduced it to Third-World, or at least downtown-Los Angeles, status overnight—needed a citizenry it could trust. Indeed, the English would go on to make such a fetish of fair play that it became an international joke. Yet the empire was sustained by this fetish at least as much as by force, and the British sportsman's knack of combining slyness and decency continued to baffle and frustrate more cynical nations right to the end.

But in promoting sport so zestfully, the powers that be had unwittingly unleashed a small monster of their own, albeit a wholesome one. By the '90s of this century, sports worship had grown and taken on a life of its own, beyond the wildest dreams of Thomas Arnold (1795–1842), the English public school headmaster who might be considered the founding father of the Sports and Character movement. And the educational establishment, having faithfully drummed sports into its charges, must now pause at some point to tell them—and itself—that "it's only a game," and prove it to them, or else watch sports grow and grow until they bury both the establishment and its schools: a force that can take on Sex can easily roll over Education. The president of a major university, writing in the *New York Times* op-ed page a few years ago, said that he wanted academics to be on a par with athletics at his place, a strangled cry which suggested that the monster was already standing on his chest close to his windpipe.

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Thus, too, the clergy must worry about idolatry and the sin of False Worship, and the business community about the sheer waste of time and emotional energy committed to sport. A fan, perhaps even more than an athlete, who gets some of his obsessive energy out of his system by playing—can become so psychologically enmeshed in sports that the rest of life seems like a rather boring dream that must be gotten through somehow. Thus transfixed, one can sleep-walk one's way through anything from a dull job to an oppressive regime to a marriage that could possibly use some attention.

**T**he good and the bad of sports are exquisitely balanced even at the best of times. Victory and defeat induce respectively a joy and despair way beyond the run of normal human experience. When a politician says he hates something viscerally—whether it's John Major on terrorism or Senator Windbag on flag-burning—one doubts his insides are much disturbed: as Dr. Johnson might say, he will eat his dinner tonight.

But a sports fan who has seen a sure victory slip away in the bottom of the ninth, or the work of a whole season obliterated by a referee's call in overtime, is disconsolate beyond the power of description, although Sophocles comes close. This author experienced such grief over the defeat of the Dodgers by the Cardinals in 1942 as an 11-year-old should not be asked to bear. An adult inflicting such pain on a child would be thrown in jail.

Yet I got over it, and was all the better for it, recovering sufficiently to root for the Cardinals over the hated Yankees in the World Series. This cycle of make-believe deaths and rebirths can actually be the healthiest thing about sports, or the most dangerous, depending on how you handle

it. At its worst, it can cause riots and death, but at its best the pain of defeat is cleansing and instructive, a very good rehearsal for life.

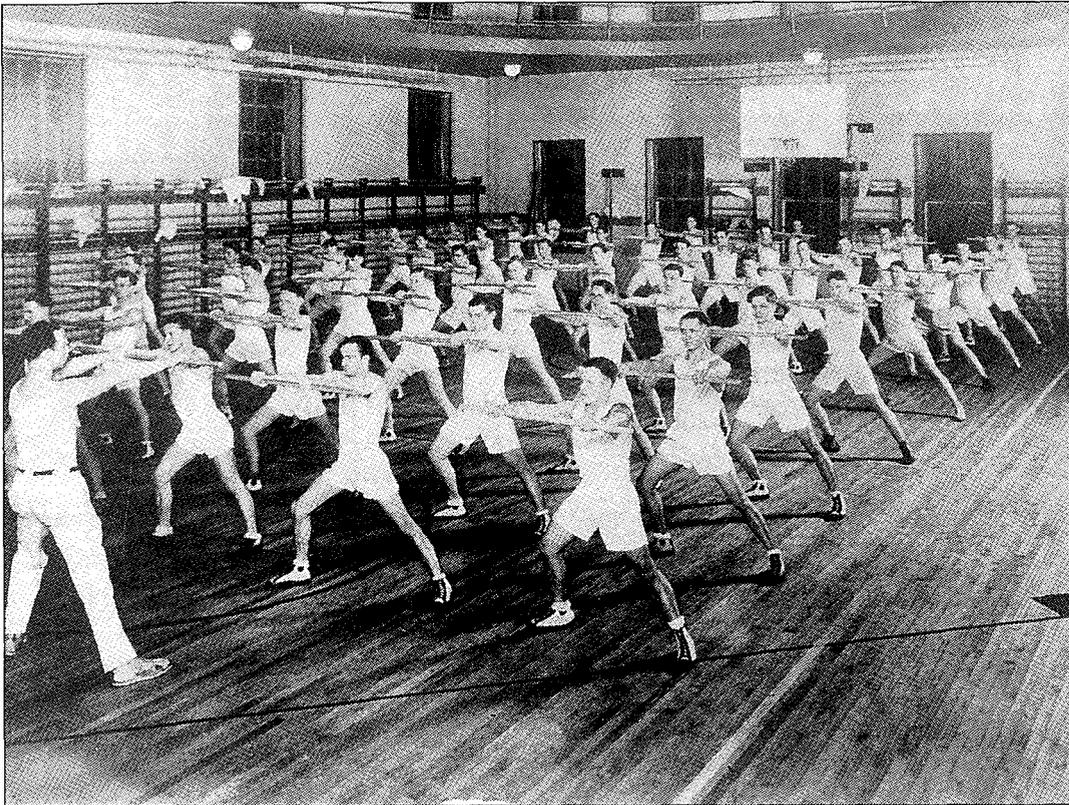
Upon reading the second volume of William Manchester's life of Churchill, *The Last Lion* (1988), I was struck by the fact that the lion in question was splendidly imperturbable about such matters as the rise of Hitler and the fall of Poland, but was completely unstrung by any blow to his vanity, such as losing a by-election or failing to get a cabinet appointment. But if sports teaches you anything, it is that less important things can hurt more than important ones—but that they *are* less important, and that there are tricks for dealing with them: absorbing the pain and putting it in perspective, almost reflexively.

One of the glories of the human imagination is its capacity for alternative realities and its ability to live other people's lives to the emotional full, whether they be Oedipus or the Chicago Cubs (and that's another distinction for the civilized individual—art and sports). But if you don't learn that crying over something doesn't make it important—if you forget which reality is which for too long, or can't find your mental way out of Wrigley Field when the game is over—you might be better off if you'd never heard about sports to begin with.

**M**eeting with triumph and disaster" (Rudyard Kipling would have made a, well, interesting football coach: "I want you men to go out there *and treat those two impostors just the same*, do you hear me?") is only one of several things that sports teach, and teach better than anything else. The problem is that in school, where many of the lessons of sports are learned, sports increasingly interfere with other lessons that must be learned.

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*Wilfrid Sheed is a critic, essayist, and novelist. His many books include The Boys of Winter (1987) and Baseball & Lesser Sports (1991). His new book, In Love With Daylight, will be published by Simon & Schuster this winter. Copyright © 1995 by Wilfrid Sheed.*



A YMCA workout, circa 1900. The idea that sports build character owes much to the 19th-century "muscular Christianity" movement and the Young Men's Christian Association, founded in 1844.

A coach's discipline is different in kind from a regular teacher's, because the coach wants the same thing the class wants—to win. There is no such clear goal for a regular teacher. Whether a student pays attention in class is pretty much up to him. It's a one-on-one affair between student and authority figure, with the student, if anything, holding the edge, surrounded by allies, most of whom have no special desire to go where the teacher is going and are only too happy to keep the pace slow.

But the coach starts out with his class already at white heat: these kids will work for him to a degree unimaginable in a classroom, and with an eagerness and excitement that only creative kids in school ever experience. An English teacher looking at a football drill or a pep rally must overflow with envy: if he could capture just one

ounce of such energy for his poetry class, his students would be the wonder of the nation. But in the classroom, the teacher is the only one who works as hard as that—like a coach doing solitary pushups and kneebends, while the students look on idly, waiting for something to interest them.

Yet sports don't have to be the teacher's enemy. At least the young athletes have learned discipline from *somewhere*, and there are no harder workers than jocks or ex-jocks if they can be made to see the point of it as clearly as they see the point of sports. Arthur Ashe, the great African American tennis player, once suggested that if making the team were made to depend entirely on one's grades, the grades would be achieved somehow or other by these highly competitive spirits.

Above all, every kind of athlete knows what many other students never will, that

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nothing can be learned without discipline. The words are synonymous. And in the pursuit of what they want, athletes are already used to policing themselves and, if necessary, each other.

So all that seems to be required now is for the schools to show that they think that an education is as desirable as winning, if only by granting the student-athletes sufficient time to study and get one. The games themselves need not be a problem, providing as they do a God-given carrot, a natural incentive to cooperate with whatever the school really wants. The real problem, and it keeps coming back like a toothache, is that there is no such thing as moderation or cool judgment once you sign on for a big-time sports program. You must either keep growing helplessly with the others, or pull the plug on the whole thing, as Robert M. Hutchins did at the University of Chicago more than 50 years ago when he took his school out of the Big 10 for keeps, to a flourish of headlines. The lonely grandeur of that gesture tells you how unreal it would be to expect many more of them.

If it was hard to leave the table back in 1939, when you had nothing to lose but a few alumni contributions, it would be just about impossible to do so today with so much TV money floating around. And the TV money has also made it that much more difficult to slip any real moral wisdom or spiritual balance into the student-athlete's regimen. Since the players tend to have the impression that the school is already making a lot of money off their backs without paying them for it, except in devalued degrees, the school is the last place they are going to turn to for moral guidance.

**M**any years ago, a famous Yale coach told his team that playing in the Yale-Harvard game that day was the most important thing they would ever do in their lives, and he has been laughed at for it ever since. But subjectively he was right: in the

make-believe part of one's psyche that thinks games are important enough to work and suffer for, it was the most important thing and always would be. Until the next Big Game.

But any way you read it, no story could tell one more about the difference between sports then and sports now. In the old days, the players were paid in nothing but glory, so the authorities laid on the glory with a shovel. But no up-to-the-minute coach today would dream of telling his team to do or die for Old State U. since he knows that some of them are barely on speaking terms with the place, and it's a bit much to ask someone to die for an institution where he hasn't completed a single serious course, or made one civilian friend, or even had time for the glee club.

If all that the new athletes are getting out of a college is the privilege of wearing its colors—and presumably making them look good—simple justice demands that they get paid real money for their pains, as many people are suggesting these days. If the Big Game is just another payday, and if the most important thing about it is the scout in the stands, and if the fight song just sounds like bad music—pay the man.

But this is a counsel of despair. Outside of the mare's nest of pay scales and competitive bidding and other uncollegiate games it would open up, professionalization would also make the athlete's isolation official: whether he would henceforth be looked up to as a professional or down on as a hired hand (it would probably depend on his value to the team), the one thing he would never again be is a regular member of the student body, which emphatically does not get paid for what it does between classes. The class distinctions that universities usually try so hard to keep outside come back with a rush the moment you institute a payroll.

To which, of course, a critic might retort that the athlete hasn't been a regular member of the student body for some time now

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and isn't about to become one, so calling him a student-athlete just provides a hypocritical cover for not paying him his share of the proceeds. And the critic may be right. But if so, and if we follow his lead and give up on the very possibility of scholar-athletes, we should be clear about just what it is we're giving up.

**T**he school that pays its students to play games for it not only loses some of its integrity as a school (i.e. as a self-sufficient exchange center for academic goods and services, ideas, and values), it is also saying some very peculiar things about the nature of games themselves and their relationship to other college activities across the board.

It is saying, for instance, that playing in the band at half time is still fun (no one has ever suggested paying the band), but that throwing and catching a ball is work—and that even this depends on what kind of ball

you're using. A football equals work, a volleyball is only play. Appearing on television is obviously work, but even here distinctions are made: players work, cheerleaders have fun. Shooting baskets is work, helping to clean up afterward is its own reward.

The greatest chasm of all would open up between sports and the whole outside world of student activity, including such strenuous matters as staying up all night for a month to put the yearbook to bed, rehearsing the class play till your eyes cross, or working overtime in the lab. All of these tortures are considered so much part of the college experience that you actually pay the place to let you undergo them. But basketball is different. For basketball, the college pays *you*.

I have lingered over this hypothetical threat not simply because some strong voices are urging it but because it is so close to being here already. Collegiate athletes are already a quite distinct caste leading a



*Soccer, born in Britain, spread rapidly around the world at the end of the 19th century. South American teams developed a distinctive style of play, dominating international competition for many years.*

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charmed but precarious life not unlike that of commandos in wartime, who live both better and worse than the regular army, but always apart. College athletes already have in many cases a potentially adversarial relationship with management. It doesn't take much to turn a sports team into a trade union, complete with grievance committee and perpetual chip on shoulder, and the latest TV packages would seem very close to being enough to do it.

Under the circumstances, it seems quixotic to talk about moral instruction at all—except that moral instruction is inevitable. Sports teach, it is their nature. They teach fairness or cheating, teamwork or selfishness, compassion or coldness. A coach who runs up the score against a weak opponent has taught his team plenty. And so did the much maligned Lou Holtz when he jerked two useful players out of Notre Dame's lineup on the eve of an Orange Bowl because, in his view, they had shown contempt for the team by skipping practice. Of course, the players may have wanted the time to study. (I didn't say the lessons were simple.)

Schools and colleges also teach something by their very natures, which is that you are now playing for a whole community and not just yourself, and that if you win, the community will join you in experiencing a kind of crazy collective joy that used to more than make up for not getting paid. Although even to talk about such things now sounds anachronistic and sentimental, over the years this particular experience has helped to define the American style of sports as much as any single factor—the simple fact that even the superstars once played in front of and in the name of cheering friends whom they saw in class the next day.

To the extent that we are losing this, if we are, we are losing a real natural resource and killing a lot of fun. But the possibility of plunging the athletes back into the community without disturbing the college sports juggernaut too much edges us some-

what beyond sports and into race relations. On many campuses, blacks apparently want no part of the white community anyway, sports or no sports, and in fact the sports teams are probably the most integrated thing on campus. So the logical next move would be for the *athletes* to teach the student body the values they've learned from sports—but I doubt if the juggernaut could spare them long enough for that.

Anyhow, whatever the academics may add or subtract, the sports lesson goes on like a machine that can't be turned off, affecting the whole style of the society around it in ways the society may not even be aware of. Concerning which, I call upon my first overseas witness.

A few years back, I flew to Port of Spain, Trinidad, with my father to watch a cricket match between Australia and the West Indies. (My father would have flown to Mars if the mood was on him.) The match was over early and we found ourselves with three days left to kill, so we decided to spend them at the law courts where an acquaintance of ours happened to be presiding as judge.

The weather inside was stifling, and the ceiling fans only seemed to make things worse as they dragged the wet air slowly round and round the room. Yet both the judge and the lawyers wore wigs and winter-weight gowns, and the law they practiced hour after sweltering hour was as fiendishly sharp and serpentine as anything you'd hear at the Old Bailey on a cold day in London. And one couldn't help making the connection between the decorous aggressiveness of the law court and the figures in white we'd seen the day before playing cricket in the same heat with their own brand of courteous savagery. The surface of cricket is as silky smooth as the rules of court or the opening of a classic detective story: voices are subdued, clothes are immaculate. But at the center, the atmosphere

is murderously intense. Where Americans prefer to intimidate with noise and rudeness, the English and their erstwhile colonials go for silence and tyrannical politeness, such that the incoming batsman feels he is on trial for his life.

Obviously the connection is no accident: it is one of the great imperial clichés. First we'll show you our games (says Colonel Blimp), and then perhaps you'll understand our other institutions. What was striking about the above scenes was that Trinidad had triumphantly thrown off British rule several years before, yet maintained both the game and the institution more wholeheartedly than ever.

Anyone who has encountered Trinidadians, or Jamaicans, or Barbadians, will recognize a distinctive style—polite, ironic, tough—a style that has nothing to do with race and everything to do with culture. And while only a fanatic would attribute the style totally to cricket, only an equal and opposite fanatic would ignore altogether an activity to which the area's small fry have devoted more time than they have ever spent in church and more attention than they have ever paid in school. When a local Muslim ran amuck a few years ago and tried to stage one of those hostage-holding protests common to the rest of the world, a local professor observed, "We don't do things like that in Trinidad. We are a cricket-playing nation"—a remark no Englishman has made in 50 years.



## LORD'S

ST. JOHNS WOOD STATION  
BUS ROUTES: 2, 13, 48, 53, 74, 121, 153

June 30—July 7 & 8

M.C.C. v. OXFORD UNIV.  
July 4, 5 & 6

M.C.C. v. CAMBRIDGE UNIV.  
July 9, 10 & 11

OXFORD v. CAMBRIDGE  
July 12 & 14

ETON v. HARROW  
July 18, 19 & 20

MIDDLESEX v. LANCASHIRE  
July 23 & 24

ROYAL NAVY v. THE ARMY  
July 25, 26 & 27

GENTLEMEN v. PLAYERS

## OVAL

OVAL STATION

BUS ROUTES: 3, 5, 36, 58, 59, 67, 133, 134, 136, 143, 159, 536

TRAM ROUTES: 2, 4, 5, 10, 16, 18, 22, 24, 33, 40, 54, 58, 72

June 30—July 2 & 3

SURREY v. AUSTRALIANS  
July 11, 12 & 13

GENTLEMEN v. PLAYERS  
July 18, 19 & 20

SURREY v. HAMPSHIRE  
July 28, 30 & 31

SURREY v. KENT





*Cricket lost popularity in its native land, in part because it remained a sport of the upper class—the Gentlemen on this late 1920s schedule.*

In a sense, cricket was the demonstration sport of the whole Victorian ethos: the game that instilled the most patience and the most discipline and was, for long stretches at a time, the least like fun and the most like work. The fact that it is now played best and most authentically in the lands of calypso and sun is proof positive of the power of a sport to make its own way and impose its own style anywhere it takes root unless another sport got there first.

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This last fact, in its turn, has recently taken on a global significance, as markets open up everywhere like spring flowers, and in each of them thousands of new TV sets are turned on to find out what the rest of us have been up to all this time and what interests us. And the latest word from America these days is sports, to an extent that might astonish the non-sports-minded, who probably think it's still things like movies, rock music, and fast food.

Each of these has served a turn at selling America, for better or worse, but our movies have been around so long by now that foreigners half-think they made them themselves. Rock music can be more or less produced locally, and McDonald's is already a cliché. (The real breakthrough will be enough food, never mind the speed.) American culture has triumphed so thoroughly that people scarcely know it's American any more.

But what's still new and different out of America is the Super Bowl, which, thanks to the extraordinary telegenic charms of American football, has swept the globe with the force of a new art movement, or at least a new dance craze: people stay up all night to watch it in Europe and Australia, and London betting parlors make book on it.

So another window opens on the American soul, and it may be the most revealing one since jazz, which introduced American blacks to the rest of the world back in the 1920s as something other than slaves—as masters in fact. Sports will do the same. But in introducing black musicians, jazz also introduced the black problem, and sports will do that too. Foreigners contemplating our football and basketball teams for the first time can only marvel at the number of blacks who seem to get a college education over here. Our problems must be solved, no?

Well, not quite. Sports serve to remind the world that there are a lot of blacks in America. But they also remind it that it

doesn't see that much of them the rest of the time. People observing American blacks playing a great deal of American music and sinking so many American baskets must wonder where they keep themselves between engagements.

But race isn't the half of it. How a nation plays can tell you something crucial about how it lives. Hitler's worldview, his aesthetics, and by implication his intentions were never more eloquently or hauntingly expressed than by the Berlin Olympics of 1936, or by Leni Riefenstahl's movie *Olympia* (1936); and one look at the East German swimmers in the last years of that nation, perched on their diving boards all swollen with steroids and joyless, told one how easily communism had back-slid into a form of National Socialism (if it had ever left) in which winning really was the only thing, beyond anything the theatrical Vince Lombardi ever had in mind.

For another kind of corruption closer to home, witness the ecstatic savagery of British soccer crowds, riding a violence high into Europe and getting banned from the Continent for their pains during the late 1980s, like a disease or a rabid animal. This, from the mother of parliaments, and of cricket, gives one special pause and is worth a longer look, because it shows where another strand of the great Victorian sports adventure led.

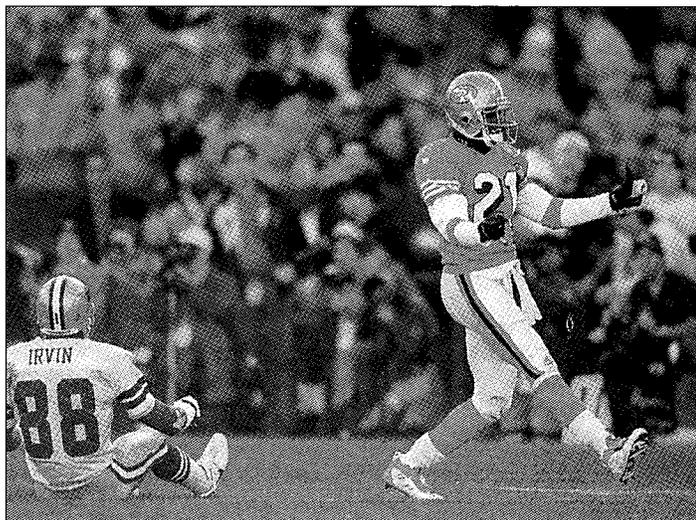
Sports hooliganism is actually not so much a new development as a regression or atavism. According to legend, the original game from which soccer, rugby, and, by extension, American football all derive was a primeval affair in which one village attempted by fair means or foul—legend says nothing about rules—to move an object (nothing so fancy as a ball, I imagine) to the far end of another: it was total war, with everyone pitching in, and while it sounds kind of jolly now, we know from records that the earliest English school games were just plain bloody, and had to be toned down

again and yet again—from kicking allowed above the knee, to kicking allowed *below* the knee, to no kicking at all—before they could begin to do the godly work that Thomas Arnold had in mind for them. (If the Battle of Waterloo really was won “on the playing fields of Eton,” it must have been as much thanks to the brutality learned there as to the sportsmanship.)

Interestingly enough, Charles Dickens’s description of a village election in *Pickwick Papers* (1837) makes the politics of the period sound like a not-too-distant cousin of the mythic village Game: rough, corrupt, and of course jolly, always jolly.

At that stage cricket was actually more refined than voting, as a match described in the same book indicates. It was the country sport, in ethos, as football was the town one, but throughout the century both sports would grow side by side with elections in both sophistication and popularity, matching strides and suiting each other very well, with sports teaching the democratic virtues of fairness and team spirit, and democracy feeding back its own lessons: whatever the rest of life says to you, this game belongs to you, the players. The rules, however mystifying at times, have not been imposed on you from above, but have grown out of the sport itself and are designed to give you the best possible game each time out, so it’s in your simple best interests to obey them. (The idea of shaping the rules to suit the spectators, and eventually the TV cameras, was far in the future.)

One can exaggerate the usefulness of sports to democracy, and many people have. Nothing could better illustrate how the same game can produce radically different effects in different settings than to com-



*“Neon” Deion Sanders, the exemplar of a new generation that is challenging old ideas of sportsmanship, celebrates after breaking up a play.*

pare India with the West Indies. When Rudyard Kipling wrote about “flanneled fools at the wicket and muddied oafs at the goal,” he may to some extent have been voicing the exasperation of a myopic, sportless man, but he was also quite legitimately aiming at the smug insularity of the English, buffered on all sides by their playthings, their cricket and football and the rest. Kipling’s first experience of this must have been in India, where members of the British Raj were wont to set up their wickets and disappear into cricket for years on end. Presumably, their servants would learn democracy by fielding for them.

**I**n Barbados, which inch for inch has probably produced the finest cricket talent in the world, the game actually served to introduce the slaves to their masters, and to keep them on speaking terms through the squalls of emancipation, and leave them friendly afterward. A retired schoolmaster whom I met at the Bridgetown Cricket Club, surrounded entirely by blacks, assured me that the transition from white to black rule was as painless as it could be and that if there is such a

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thing as a color-blind society, Barbados is it. And both sides agree that cricket had at least something to do with it.

This is further proof, if proof is still needed, that sports should not be left on automatic pilot, but require intelligence and breadth of vision at every turn to be of any use at all. In Barbados, the white minority has learned its lesson well over the years: a society that plays together had better do a few other things together as well, whether that society be a former colony or an American university.

But finally, it comes down to what a society wants its games to do for it. The English who settled in Barbados *wanted* a stake in their new country, so the Game became a sort of preliminary town meeting; the Anglo-Indians, contrariwise, were perched on the fringe of a vast country, doing their damndest *not* to get sucked in too far: a colonial officer who Indianized was no use at all. So the Game was just a transaction, a handshake, a one-afternoon stand, if you will. Afterward one withdrew to the club to reorganize one's Englishness.

So when the roof finally fell in on them in the 1940s, many Anglo-Indians knew almost as little about the country they had been infesting as they had on arrival. Sports, if pursued too exclusively, can narrow the imagination and sap the curiosity. At the end of a good day, one feels drained and satisfied, and certainly in no mood to learn anything, let alone reform it, and the Anglo-Indian cricketers had hardly even had time to see the countryside, let alone talk to it.

It was in this sort of sense that sports failed even Mother England. (Sports can do only so much.) The British ruling class thought it knew its own people the way colonial officers thought they knew the natives, because they had played with them. But they had only played with some of their own people, and they had only played in a certain way.

Cricket reflected neither the rest of England nor even the century it was in. With

exceptions, British working-class boys didn't consider cricket their game at all, but if anything, a symbol in the class war. When I lived in Britain in the early 1950s, the crowds at Lord's cricket ground seemed as different in tone from the crowds at the Queen's Park and Fulham soccer grounds as a first-class railway carriage was from third class, or the saloon bar from the public one. (The English could divide *anything* into classes.) Sports did not resolve the class problem but if anything hardened it, and soccer remains, vestigially, the sport of resentment, the outsiders' sport.

**S**o sport is not necessarily a force for good, just a force, and its value as a barometer is that it is not like the changing of the guard or some other ancient ritual that tells you all you need to know about a country 300 years ago. It is more like a kitchen window flung up on the present, showing how the neighbors go about getting what they want *right now*, at white heat, in the most competitive conditions they can devise.

Other countries, other messages. In his splendid, funny book, *You Gotta Have Wa* (1990), Robert Whiting describes a form of baseball so arduous and fraught with painful possibilities that one wonders why anyone bothers to play it at all—if play is even the right word. In fact, Mr. Whiting compares a typical Japanese mound conference with a Mitsubishi board meeting.

What they are discussing on the mound at such nerve-racking and momentum-destroying length is the imperative to avoid disgrace, both personal and collective. Nobody wants to make a decision that will embarrass himself or his colleagues, and besides, so long as they are out there, they are not only avoiding the worst, but cementing and advertising their *wa*, or team spirit, which is an even more precious substance than victory. In the same vein, the Japanese place a premium on full attendance at practice sessions, which they insist on holding in their entirety even after

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rain delays and even if doing so means postponing the game itself.

It has always been easy to laugh at Japanese manners, which Americans are peculiarly ill-equipped to understand these days, and it would be a mistake to believe that this farcical surface tells the whole story. What you see is practically never what you get with the Japanese. But so far their philosophy of baseball has not proved very effective against American teams.

Baseball is the most individualistic of team sports, such that a side which played entirely for its various selves might easily beat one which played only for the collective. (How many bunts can you use?) In other words, our national sport is, appropriately enough, tailor-made for Americans: individualism, with just a dash of cooperation and a great deal of tolerance for the other individualists, who can break your heart. And it's an enduring puzzle that the Japanese, with all their capacity for superficial imitation, can't seem to grasp the value of this, or don't want to.

But surely there are also subjects for satire in a country such as ours, where the players are so bereft of *wa* that they use a world championship not to build another one but simply as a bargaining chip to raise their own price. Although everyone contributes to an American championship in a spirit that could easily be mistaken for *wa*, the gang tends to break up the next day as everyone rushes his piece of the prize to the pawn shop. In other words, the cooperation is strictly ad hoc. No one wants to get bogged down in it.

It is like two parts of the same joke, or comedy routine, with the Japanese taking the virtues of cooperation to hilarious extremes, while the other comedian agrees to carry his independence and self-reliance as far as the law allows in the other direction. Americans have always doted on the image of the free lance, the hired gun who arrives just in time and leaves before civilization, that is, team work,

gets there; and we also like a man who is willing to bet on his own value. The ballplayer who holds out for the moon is putting his heart and his nerves on the line as well as his talent, because if he doesn't deliver, he can't hide in a corner with the money; he has to go out there each day and field his position in front of thousands of noisy, quick-to-anger fans, whose sympathy he has willingly forfeited.

Americans love an underdog, but this is a top dog, setting himself up to be hated for the sake of a challenge. Half the sitcoms made in America seem to be about the mighty being humbled one way or another—the celebrity going unrecognized, the father not knowing best; it is a source of endless delight in a democracy. So the athlete who draws a crowd by baiting this taste is playing a part in a ritual game as traditional in America as the tea ceremony is in Japan.

But as with all rituals, there is a right and a wrong way to perform it. Lately we have had such a slew of empty boasts and champions who didn't really mean it that it is hard to remember the excitement of a genuine challenge, or the little bit extra it could add to an event, like a huge bet being placed at the last minute. Muhammad Ali's trumped-up feuds and Falstaffian boasts not only filled seats but affected the intrinsic nature of his fights: his opponents were always fighting a myth, his myth, created and directed by him, from the name on down.

By now, everyone should be getting used to the mad dances that follow touchdowns these days and the wild hugging and pounding that greet the most routine plays in football—effusions of high spirits that distract the hell out of one and deform the game's symmetry, like the banging of tin cans in a symphony, but at least remind one that these things are played for fun, and that those heavily armored automatons out there have not quite had the life drilled out of them. It's a fair exchange—perfection for humanity—

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anyway, it's the way we do it these days.

But there is a less attractive side to these displays that also tells something about us, and that is the extent to which even team sports have become vehicles for self-assertion and promotion. At times everyone out there seems to be selling himself, as indeed many of them have been since grammar school. Just as large fleas have smaller fleas, nowadays there is no level of sports competition so low that some observer from a slightly higher one may not be scouting it and checking the talent ad infinitum. So life becomes one long quest for the phantom scout's eye.

In discussing sports, one must constantly resist the temptation to label as evil that which is merely silly. Foreigners may never grasp the extent to which Americans can have fun and sell themselves at the same time. Anyone can sell himself, of course, but to do so exuberantly and without manifest cynicism or a trace of whorishness—that's us.

But it's finally self-defeating. A stadium full of salesmen, of carnival barkers hawking their wares, will not only not provide the best football game or whatever they're playing today, it will not even sell anything.

The same overkill has overtaken Joe Namath-like boasts that don't come true, most especially in the case of the mega-boast inherent in asking for the most money in history to play your game. At first the deal used to be, "Give me the money and I'll prove I'm the best." But this has degenerated into, "If I get the money, then I must be the best, and I don't have to prove a thing."

The only hole in this reasoning, and it's big enough to drown a whole sport in, is that market value is determined by what draws a crowd, and crowds are drawn by all sorts of things besides skill.

The world is thus getting a mixed bag with the current American athlete, as it is with our values in general. The figure of an ingratiating megalomaniac is a far cry from the 19th-century ideal of sports, or from the reasons we play games in the first place. He, or she, is also something of a caricature, and

a warning. The fact that we still have so comparatively few of such megalomaniacs is a tribute to the innate healthiness of sports under the incredible pressures of a celebrity culture.

A sports team is a tiny parliament operating on a war footing. And what holds it together and makes it work is the much maligned cult of winning. An interviewer once asked Senator Bill Bradley (D.-N.J.), late of the New York Knicks, whether he didn't think we rather overdid our mania for winning, obviously expecting the liberal Bill to agree with him heartily. But Bradley knew too much, he had been in the trenches himself where false pieties are as useless as they are in real warfare, and he said in effect "No—if you don't emphasize winning over everything else, players tend to become selfish."

A team trying to win will clean itself like a cat of anything that slows it down. So the athlete who wants to show off must find ways to do it between plays, or between games, and in such a way that he doesn't hog the limelight totally and leave his teammates, who may also want to show off, in shadow. Thus we arrive at a breed of disciplined exhibitionists, affable egotists who like nothing better than to be photographed congratulating their *teammates*, or to be interviewed in the same capacity ("I guess I knew the Babe better than anybody")—a mixed bag indeed.

But these players are interspersed among perfectly normal young people who will probably represent their country in the sports era as attractively and accurately as anything the world has seen of ours since the GIs of World War II—who were also a mixed bag. But what is attractive about them will be precisely their unspoiled pre-money, pre-television essence, or whatever remains of it, a folk quality that sports keep alive against the odds, like an old religion in a modern



*Running the 50-yard dash near Detroit in 1911 and the 200-meter run at the Seoul Olympics in 1988. Florence Griffith-Joyner took home three gold medals.*

country. TV may change the look of it, and the cost of it, and even the way some of the athletes feel about it, but if you were lucky enough to see the American ice hockey team upsetting the Russians at Lake Placid in 1980, with the achievement gradually dawning and settling on the players' and fans' faces, you saw a sporting print of America as it was a hundred years ago and will be tomorrow if we don't mess up, next to which a political convention seems by now utterly contrived and synthetic, and untrue to its own nature.



**W**hile it is tempting to say that what an athlete gets out of his sport and his life is his own affair and no special business of anyone else's, it is in fact a

matter of considerable public interest that he get as much out of both as possible, because the gap between what a fulfilled athlete can get out of life and the blinkered world of the hacker is dangerously wide,

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and there are more young citizens playing around on the edge of it right now than ever before in history—ours or anybody else's.

A player who is simply going through the motions is a loose cannon even within his sport. Since he isn't quite sure why he's doing this, he leans towards the primary explanation: it must be for the money. And why not? That's why the coach is doing it, with his contract on the side with the shoe company, whose products our guy has to play in every night. And that's why the school is doing it, as it angles to get into the big-bucks tournaments and appear on TV, cutting his class time to nothing, if need be, in order to do so.

**F**ortunately for everyone, the best way that he, the player, can make some money too is to play the game as well as he can. And this is why the system seems to work despite itself. But, as I say, a player thus motivated is a loose cannon. Because if he doesn't get that money, or some kind of payoff outside of the sheer joy of playing, the best you can hope for is a malcontent, the worst a cheat, and the usual, a dropout.

American sports are more and more geared to make it seem that everything you do is aimed toward something else—the game toward the tournament; the tournament toward a better tournament next year; toward a better high school, college, pro team, winning pro team, more money with the pro team or I'll go to another one, never mind which; endorsements; agents; job opportunities—so that it's hard to say at any one point that *this* is what it's for. The American dream as currently construed is more like an order to keep moving until you fall off the continent and don't you dare stop dreaming.

One constant throughout this is, of course, money, which appears in every chapter like Woody Allen's mysterious character Zelig, reassuring the dreamer of some continuity at least. The psychological

significance of this character may be judged by the intensity with which ballplayers bargain for meaningless additions to already vast salaries in order to make the most money at their particular position: if money is what you've always played for, you can't stop now, even though who gets the most depends on whose contract has come up most recently, so you can never rest there.

The other constant through every phase of the sports branch of the American dream is the game itself—baseball, football, whatever—which, like some improbable 18th-century heroine, has usually come reeling through this maze of temptation and corruption with its virtue more or less intact, if only because no one has yet thought of a profitable way of corrupting it. Unlike movies and the other arts, games are never more commercial than when they are played exactly as they should be. Of course, if any little thing can be done to make the contests even *more* commercial—eliminating this, shortening that, a designated hitter here and a 24-second clock there—it will be, but the heart of sports remains pure. An athlete shinnying up the greasy pole will find a recognizably similar game at the top to the one he played as a child—and this will be the guarantor of his innocence up there if anything can be.

What it guarantees for women is a brand-new question for most of us—too fresh to answer though never too fresh to talk about. To wit, if certain sports are in some sense an apprenticeship for, and escape from, the world of politics and business, it stands to reason that great numbers of women will want to play them too, however much the games themselves seem to have been designed exclusively by men for men, for example football, whose weekly injury list seems like a benign version of a war memorial.

**S**o maybe we can expect some new rules shortly, or even a whole new game—but if so along what lines? Women have not succeeded so far in making either business or politics “kinder

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and gentler" because the material itself won't permit it: you can't be kind with shareholders' money or gentle with Saddam Hussein, or even with Margaret Thatcher, if her country needs something.

But will sports prove that much more malleable? How much reform can they stand without losing their original point? The evidence so far suggests that the tide usually runs the other way, and that the sport changes the players long before they can change it. Most games, whether played in boardrooms or stadiums, have a way of dictating not only exactly how they should be played but with what attitude, so that the mildest of citizens may suddenly find his engorged face parked in that of an umpire without being quite sure how it got there. And this goes apparently whether one's name is Andre Agassi or Martina Navratilova.

But these matters of protocol may conceivably be negotiable at that. What isn't is the other thing that sports dictate, which is that you will always play them as hard as possible, since violence is the inevitable and often exhilarating by-product of taking your foot off the brake and seeing just what your body is capable of. And this is an element of sports that can't be compromised without losing the point for sure. You can, if you like, put helmets on the boxers to reduce the damage, and you can bench your star quarterback to keep down the score, but what you can't do is tell either of them to take it easy, or to "have a heart."

And this, not the physical pain, will surely be the hardest aspect of competitive sports for many women to swallow: their sheer implacability and ice-cold legalism, which could break your heart even if you were playing touch football in a suit of armor. Sports are in fact as unfeeling as life itself. The ref still calls pen-

alties against you even when you're down 50-0, and the scoreboard won't be adjusted afterward to make you feel better. Nowhere does self-esteem take a worse pounding than on a sports field—unless maybe it's at a chess board where "checkmate in three" can hurt worse than a blind-side tackle that breaks both legs. What you get in exchange for these ritual humiliations is a thimbleful of self-knowledge, a small but precious sense of how reality works, and all the self-esteem you can earn with your own muscle and sweat—and here, sports relents a little: it rewards duffers who try hard with almost as much self-satisfaction as it gives to champions.

**T**his, for the last 150 years, is how men in the modern world have prepared themselves for life. If women decide to take this route too in significant numbers, and indications are that they are doing so, it will, if nothing else, test the sturdiest of all truisms, that men naturally are just and women merciful. Men are, it seems fair to assume, not really born just, but usually have it thrust upon them the first time they try to cheat someone, or someone tries to cheat them, and they realize that justice is the most kindness you can give to two people at the same time, if their interests differ. Any kindness you have left after you've played games long enough will be solid indeed—and of course, the generosity of athletes to teammates is legendary, and to foes only slightly less so. What one might hope women, or *somebody*, might effect is an opening up of this parochialism to let the rest of the world in.

If this should ever happen, I can only say the blessings of sports would be infinitely easier to argue than they have been in this essay.