

Sport: Right or Privilege?

Sport is flawed. Period. Fans of what used to be America's game – baseball – can no longer flip open the sports page and see accomplishment. Instead, failure is put on full frontal display. Roger Clemens is now the face of a game so beautiful, so historic, so reflective of the American spirit. Thanks to the onslaught of greedy media markets, the average consumer can no longer attend a baseball game, or visit these historic shrines known as ballparks. Such flaws aren't found only in baseball. Division I athletic programs invest in the one-and-done athlete to boost revenue for their program while forgetting any sense of the word education. So is the ESPN ticker that reports nothing but negativity – and is able to do so because athletes are behaving in such outlandish ways.

Performance-enhancing drugs, violence on and off the field and gender and racial issues have led to a downward spiral in the world of sport. Athletes seem entitled to behave any way they wish, because of our inflated view of what being an athlete is. This is the primary issue; somewhere in the history of sport, a transformation occurred that changed the face of what being an athlete meant. To return order to our games, to return a sense of pride to our games, to return "fun" to our games, sport must be considered a privilege once again.

College campuses demonstrate athletes' entitlement particularly well. We'd like to think that sport builds character, that these fellows that are being paid to be on television, block someone, and take bogus coursework, understand responsibility. We'd like to think that these athletes feel lucky or realize the privilege it is to have been given the type of body that provides them the opportunity to perform. This isn't the case, however. In the last five years, professors have created courses for athletes (Auburn

University), athletes have rented strippers (Duke University), classes have been canceled for football games (University of Georgia), and several other violations have occurred at a multitude of schools (Soltan, 2006). If professors, and leading academics, have clearly prioritized athletics ahead of academics, how are big-time collegiate athletes supposed to respond? There is nothing wrong with being supportive – in essence, that’s what much of sport is about – but this sort of entitlement, these favors and treatment for athletes as deities rather than normal students is killing the integrity of sport. It is also losing the people that made sport fun in the first place: the average fan whose television used to be turned on for gameday each and every autumn Saturday. “There are the truly oblivious,” Soltan says. “A lot of professors are eerily good at ignoring everything in the world.” They’ve become really good at ignoring the big picture: Sport just isn’t what it just to be. Athletes are people first, students second and athletes third. As a professor, you’re a person first, professor second and supporter to your institution third. Unfortunately, these rankings continue to find themselves out of order.

The downward spiral of sport and growing sense of entitlement can also be seen in relation to sportsmanship. Although outdated about 10 years, a 1998 article in NCAA News indicates that sportsmanship issues had been on the steady rise. It’d be fair to conclude that such sportsmanship issues have been on the climb since as well.

“The Institute for International Sport recently released a survey of college basketball players that indicated that 43.8 of male players were willing to accept rash talking as a way of life in college basketball. Only 24.8 percent of female players agreed” (Hawes, 1998).

Furthermore, 78.8 percent of media members said sportsmanship in professional sports is at an all-time low, while 72.9 percent at the collegiate level is at an all-time low (1998).

Clearly, sportsmanship is an issue. This past college basketball season, a focus of the NCAA was on fan behavior and sportsmanship in the stands. *“If you guys win, we’ll come to your house and kill your family,”* screamed one of thirty voice mails on UCLA’s Kevin Love’s voice mail. Or another: *“We’ll find your hotel room and blow your f----- head off with a shotgun”* (Wahl, 2008). Clearly, there is no excuse for such extreme vulgarity and obnoxiousness. But, might be there two sides to the same story? These athletes are entitled to everything and anything. They are celebrities at age 20 and on television before they can drink a beer legally. It is easy to write off these players as people who are emotionless individuals who were born on the court, eat on the court and sleep on the court. Based on this set up, it appears as though collegiate athletics are a right for a very select few.

If college sports were indeed a privilege, then CBS and mega media markets would suffer because athletes would realize their great fortune, their insane athletic ability, their height, and, in turn, be gracious. They’d go to class, be human beings, and “give half (the) level of intensity to their educational responsibilities” (Crepeau, 2008). They wouldn’t take an essential month hiatus of school in order to participate in the Big Dance to satisfy corporate giants. CBS advertising sales were estimated at \$545 million on an investment by the network of \$529 million. Advertising rates for the National Championship game were \$1.256 million (2008). Furthermore, fans of March Madness were able to catch any game streamed on-demand at cbssportsline.com for free. Because the media giants – ESPN, FOX, CBS – rely on these athletes to fill their programming schedule in all hours of the day in all parts of the country, the student in these athletes is forgotten. And the exposure that these athletes receive, in the limelight, only reinforces

that they aren't students but professional athletes without the title. And with this title – “professional” – comes a certain degree of candor in which the general public regards a person on television with a different respect. Unfortunately, money-hungry media markets have corrupted not only big-time collegiate athletics, but also sport from a grassroots perspective.

We can turn to the hundreds of athletic fields across the United States to realize that sport in this country is not solely what we see on television – yet this is just another example of how the media has corrupted us to think so. If “pure” is what we are going for, and it might be a long shot, youth sport might be our best bet. Nevertheless, youth only feed off what they see on television and on their Internet browser. The trash talking and off-the-field behavior of athletes in the limelight trickle down to our nation's youth, who then justify behavior based upon status as an athlete. These things scream “right,” and this is why sport has become corrupt.

“Hitters erase the back line of the batter's box; catchers “frame” pitches to induce called strikes; infielders occupy a different congressional district from second base when turning a double play; sluggers juice up on steroids till their forearm veins resemble bridge cables; and outfielders pretend that one-hopper was in fact caught on the fly, holding up the baseball to the umpire like a prized tomato in a produce aisle” (Rushin, 2003).

If sports do indeed “build character,” catchers would be taught to keep their mitt still. If sports do indeed “build character,” sluggers would be needle-free. If sports do indeed “build character,” young outfielders would be taught to look to the nearest umpire, and say, “You know what, Blue, the ball actually hit the turf.” They don't because they see a different game on television. Major League players cheat because they feel entitled and thus begins the trickle-down effect.

Barry Bonds had the heart to knowingly take steroids and lie about knowingly taking them. “I believe it was just a crazy coincidence that Bonds went from never hitting more than 49 homers in a season to belting 73 about the same time he befriended BALCO weasel Victor Conte Jr,” Rick Reilly mockingly said in his column in *Sports Illustrated*. This is only one visible example of an athlete in the spotlight taking performance-enhancing drugs, and as a result, caught in a circle of allegations. Recently, Bonds was charged with 14 counts of lying to a grand jury and one count of obstruction of justice related to the BALCO doping investigation. Again, the issue of entitlement arises; Bonds, in his prime, made a decision to use performance-enhancing drugs, a decision that probably earned him the home-run crown. Bonds and his biceps were plastered across billboards and continually highlighted on ESPN. Unfortunately, our youth consumes this type of exposure.

The majority of problems we have in sport – from youth through the professional ranks – are a result of athletes feeling entitled and losing – or never having – a sense of privilege that is necessary when taking the field. Minority athletes’ relentlessness in order to make their way into their respective leagues and organizations paved the way for others, and this type of fiery competitiveness only demonstrates that the most meaningful athletes are those that attempt to make a difference. Jackie Robinson, for instance, opened the door for Willie Mays, Henry Aaron and Ernie Banks and broke the baseball color barrier at a great cost to himself as an individual (Zirin, 2005). In March 2004, Colorado University was revealed to have been home to Katie Hnida, the female placekicker who had reported to have been sexually abused and raped on numerous occasions, even during practice. Hnida was able to pursue her dream to be a placekicker because of Title IX, and

Head Coach Gary Barnett did nothing to curb the abuse. Hnida chose not to press sexual assault charges against the University (2005). Although both the Hnida and Robinson cases are drastically different by nature, sport does provide a platform for resistance. In Hnida's case, it was a display to women nationwide that Title XI legislation was a plan for gender equality, not a plan to destruct male-dominated sports. Although Hnida faced severe discrimination and the University of Colorado football team escaped with several counts of criminal sexual assault, sport provided a platform for Hnida to pursue her dream. Because she was unable to kick and be a member of that team like any other male athlete, sport was really only available to a select few – males. The male athletes felt entitled, righted to their masculine game. However, once again, sport is, and should be, a privilege.

Sport is a privilege because we are supposed to enjoy the games that entertain, and the people that enjoy them, it seems, are those that don't take their participation for granted.

“There are, in suitable proportion, vulgar, sotted, and distasteful men in sports. There are minimal perceptions, manipulations, deals, and compromises. There are hucksters, profiteers, and egomaniacs. It is not required by sports, whether in fan, in athlete, or in journalist, that one be virtuous; if that were so, so many millions could not love the game” (Novak, 1994).

If the concept of sport were built upon being perfect, then sport wouldn't be sport. Sport is built upon getting ahead, and winning at all costs. Of course, there will be cheaters, liars, and everyone in between. The first edition of Novak's work, *The Joy of Sports*, was published in 1967, long before the information technological boom of the late 20th century. Today, on the plate of millions of sports fans across the country are issues of performance-enhancing drugs, off-the-field violence, racial disputes and other ethical

concerns (e.g., Spygate). However, the technology of today brings these issues to light at times more often than the games themselves. If we accept Novak's perspective we lose sight of why sports were sports in the first place: to be fun. Sport is a diversion for most and a business for a minute few. We don't love the game based on "deals and compromises." We love it when the players – even the "hucksters, profiteers, egomaniacs" – play for the greater good. We love it when privilege is realized, when right and entitlement are eliminated and the games roll on.

The number of fans, sport supporters, parents and children who may concern themselves with the behavior of collegiate and professional athletes far outweigh the players and personnel directly involved. A utilitarian perspective suggests that players' and coaches' actions, for example, are judged right and wrong based upon the amount of happiness or unhappiness caused (Rachels, 1999). Because the number of onlookers and supporters far outweigh players and management, we can conclude that the general public is concerned with the behavior of athletes. Thus, a utilitarian perspective supports sport as privilege.

Unfortunately for pure sport supporters, for those that have been there all along, for those that love the game; for those that don't just love Game 7, but Opening Day and the day before the All-Star Break, hope is grim. The media is painting our athletes in an increasingly negative light, but the athletes themselves are responsible for those headlines in the first place. For many, being an athlete in America equates to entitlement, but multi-million dollar television contracts, off the chart salaries and events where *fans* can no longer afford an upper deck seat screams entitlement – entitlement to a very select few.

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