

A Bizarre Week - Hoosiers in Indiana and Minnesota - Death of Jimmy the Greek

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Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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It has been the strangest and wackiest several weeks in memory in the world of sport. Lawrence Taylor is busted for cocaine, Marge Schott shoots from the mouth like an AK 47 in heat, Brett Butler is diagnosed with cancer, David Cone has surgery for an aneurysm in his shoulder, Magic Johnson retires again, and it just goes on and on and on.

Somewhere in the midst of this blizzard of the bizarre two milestones were reached in American sport and culture. Both tell us something about our past and our present, and perhaps even something of our future.

Last week came the announcement that the State High School athletic authorities of Indiana, the Vatican of basketball, had done the unthinkable. The open state high school basketball tournament has been ended, and now Indiana will have its tournaments by classification based on school size. No longer will it be possible for a team like Milan to come from the backwaters to claim the state title. "Hoosiers" is dead.

In 1954 Milan, a town of 1,700 people with a high school of 161 students defeated a school of 2,200 students from Muncie for the title. It was a story that became the basis for the 1986 film. Now only three states remain where the spectacle of David whacking Goliath is still possible in high school basketball: Delaware, Hawaii, and Kentucky.

I remember in the early 60s when Edgerton, a small town in southwestern Minnesota, sent its basketball team to the state tournament. Edgerton High had something less than 20 boys in its school and nearly all of them played basketball. I sat in total disbelief at Williams Arena watching them easily handle one of the major suburban Lake Conference schools on their way to the State title. It was a magical run and captured the imagination of the entire state.

There were other years and other Edgertons, just as there have been other Milans in Indiana. This in fact was part of the great charm of the state high school tournament, a playdown of all the public high schools in the state with the final eight coming to the big city in late March. This is the American story of the underdog; the little guy reaching out and dropping the giant. It is the American story of the rural hayseeds come to the city and thumping the city-slickers at their own game. It is the story of

slow white farm boys teaching the virtues of team discipline to smooth black kids from the ghettos who play the city game.

Now that story is vanishing in a world where boxing has ten thousand divisions and weight classes, sports programs in college are classified by wealth, and high schools find it necessary to set up classifications by size so that more high school students can feel better about themselves and more students can be champions, while our dreams and fantasies are diminished. The possibilities have been increased and decreased at the same time.

Another American story ended two weeks earlier with the death of Jimmy the Greek Synder. I have always liked the Greek because to me he was one of the best living examples of someone who was able to take almost nothing, and parlay it into a career. He was proof positive that you could become rich and famous in America for no apparent reason, a version of the American Dream.

The Greek died in Las Vegas, as he should have, and was buried in Stubenville, Ohio, where he began his career dealing craps. He was a connoisseur of the track and the gaming tables, a gambler and oddsmaker, who somehow arrived with professional football in broadcast journalism on CBS.

Synder first established his fame as a gambler when he defied the experts in 1948 and picked Truman over Dewey and made a few dollars in the process. The Greek heard too many people, especially women, saying that they would never vote for a man with a mustache as president. This first established him as a prognosticator of some prowess, but later as the audience for professional football grew, especially on television, the Greek and CBS recognized that someone who could pick the games should have a role on the broadcasts.

Having started there, his role expanded as rumor monger and insider who had that vital information that every good weekend gambler needed. He was just past the top of his popularity when he tried to become an expert on racial theory and sport, and did so in front of a microphone. His knowledge of both physiology and history were appalling, and his career came to a screeching halt in 1988 as CBS fired him in a less than courageous act of damage control.

His career was emblematic of two truths about American life: You don't have to have any particular talent to get rich; and sport and gambling are eternally and inextricably linked. Now he too

is gone, but his career will continue to inspire as long as someone is willing to take or give the points.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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