

A Special Week

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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It was one of those very special weeks in SportsWorld. At least three things stood out: two in baseball and one in the bizarre world of the NCAA.

It is probably best to start with the NCAA, as this organization seems to be incapable of doing anything sensible even when it tries. This in part can be explained by the fact that the NCAA operates in such a Byzantine universe that concepts like "rational" and "sensible" have no chance of ever drawing a breath.

This week the illustrious protectors of the athlete-student ruled that universities can offer unlimited meals and snacks to athletes, above and beyond the meal plans provided as part of the athlete's subsidy.

What might be the consequences of such a ruling? It seems likely that what has been called the "arms race" in intercollegiate athletics will now become a "food fight" on a nuclear scale. Fast Food Halls where all known franchises will be built on campuses across America and the hunt for celebrity chefs to service the athlete-students will be intense and competitive.

Recruits will be shown the massive Fast Food Hall, open 24/7/365 where they will be free to satisfy their every snacking need. Parents will be dazzled by the fact that the celebrity chefs that they have only seen on the Food Channel will now be feeding their children. All of this of course will work to the immediate advantage of the larger institutions that have the most money to waste.

The *New York Times* reported that before this ruling was made the University of Mississippi hired a sports nutritionist and certified chef and increased the annual food budget in their new dining hall to \$1.3M. Prime rib, made to order pastas, and an omelet station for athletes are available. This sounds like the appetizer in the New Food Order, and but a preview of things to come in the new Age of Intercollegiate Gluttony.

In baseball the geniuses who are responsible for the creation and maintenance of the instant replay system have made their first major course correction. Somehow when the

system was created they were unable to come up with a definition for a catch, even though baseballs have been caught at every level of the game for over 150 years. So they came up with a definition that few could believe and that left players, managers and coaches in an emotional state ranging from irritation to outrage.

After some deliberation the replay committee did the sensible thing and returned to the definition of a catch that had been followed for as long as anyone alive could remember. All of this proves that in baseball the powers that be are sometimes capable of correcting their own blunders. There may be a lesson there for the NCAA, university presidents, and the NBA.

On Wednesday while much of the world was noting the 450th anniversary of the birth of William Shakespeare, the Cub faithful in Chicago and across baseball were celebrating the 100th anniversary of the opening of Wrigley Field. This charming little ball park on the North Side of Chicago has seen many notable events, a wide variety of sports, and many a Cub disaster over the past century. What it has never seen is a Cub World Series triumph.

Wrigley Field was the site of Babe Ruth's called shot in the 1932 World Series. It was the place where Gale Sayers ran for six touchdowns in one game for the Chicago Bears, who won seven professional football championships during their 50 years at Wrigley. Wrigley has hosted a wide variety of sporting events including ski jumping and hockey.

The Lovable Losers of Chicago have etched pain and suffering into the brick structure which is obscured by the Ivy that blooms on the outfield walls every spring. It is the strange and bizarre that seems to be the hallmark of Cubness. In recent times the "Steve Bartman" incident is remembered as the cause of (excuse for) the collapse of the Cubs in its 2003 playoff series against the Florida Marlins.

In 1969 the nose dive of the Cubs was triggered, not at Wrigley but at Shea Stadium in New York, when a black cat ran onto the field and made an ominous pass toward the Cub dugout. Although the incident took place in New York, the collapse itself was played out in front of the Cub faithful at beautiful Wrigley Field.

The Curse of the Billy Goat is often cited as the root cause of Cub futility, although it remains somewhat murky in its details. The claim is that a tavern owner wanted to bring his goat to a game in the 1945 World Series and was not allowed to do so. He then put a curse on the Cubs. I like to think this is but a mythic curse and the incident never really happened, because it would be just like the Cubs to be cursed by a non-existent goat incident.

The Cubs have not won the World Series since 1908 and not participated in one since 1945. Wrigley Field stands and waits while the Cub Faithful watch and wait as the years turn into decades. Some believe it just wasn't the Cubs Century, and others believe it could be another century before things change. Collapse could be the Cubs' middle name as that has become the Cub trademark in playoff appearances and pennant races in recent decades.

The anniversary celebration on Wednesday underlined that view. The Cubs led 5-2 going to the ninth inning and lost the game when the closer couldn't close, an error aided the Diamondback rally, and in the key play a ground ball hit the bag at second and took sharp turn away from a waiting fielder. Arizona scored five runs and won the game 7-5. It was so Cubby that it could lead a fan to wonder about the efficacy of curses.

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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