

Catching Up

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
May 31, 2015

As I mentioned previously it seems as if there are always some bizarre or hilarious developments in the world of sport while I am out of touch. A few days ago I reported on my experiences watching hockey in Russia. Now I want to revisit what many of you will consider old news.

The first story to break as I winged my way to Moscow was the release of the Wells Report on what has been called "Deflategate." First it is clear that Americans are in dire need of some way to discuss scandal without using the suffix "gate." Second, the report itself offered much that was predictable. The Patriots were guilty of something and the guilty parties were in the equipment room, probably prodded into action by Tom Brady. The Patriot's quarterback denied any knowledge of tampering with the footballs offering an expected pose of indignation from one of the golden boys of the NFL. No one outside of New England was buying his story. Coach Belichick of course had no comment and was quickly ready to move on. The hapless Commissioner made his usual pledges to find the truth and shuffled into action.

Goodell decided that a four game suspension was appropriate for Tom Brady and he issued a one million dollar fine and took away two draft picks from the Patriots. Robert Kraft said he would not appeal the fine even though he disagreed with the report. Brady is appealing his suspension and the NFLPA is joining the appeal and also objecting to the fact that the Commissioner will hear the appeal of his own actions at a hearing where he will be a witness. What's the problem with that?

Brady's fans were outraged, while Brady haters were delighted. An educated guess is that Brady will get a reduced suspension and if he is found to abstain from all "air releasing activities" during the off-season he might even have the entire suspension lifted. Whatever happens in the appeal process it is a near certainty that the Commissioner will come off poorly.

Of more interest than this trivial tempest were revelations that those tributes to our servicemen carried out at NFL games and many other sporting events may have been less

expressions of the patriotism than paid advertising from the Department of Defense.

The "Hometown Hero" salutes cost the Defense Department some \$5.4M over the past four years. The NFL and other leagues and teams have been amply rewarded for their less than genuine patriotism. Public relations can be a dirty business, and when it is used to tug at the heart strings to manipulate fans it approaches the level of scandal and gross hypocrisy. The Army National Guard and the Air Force were the biggest advertisers, while the Atlanta Falcons were compensated at the highest rate for their tainted patriotism. Beyond the NFL, money has flowed to Major League baseball teams, NHL teams, NASCAR, and college football teams.

Watching these tributes to the troops I have often wondered how much was being spent on the flyovers, the family reunions, and other PR acts of patriotism. I always assumed that some of the cost was being borne by the Defense Department, but even in my most cynical moods I never thought that it was simply an advertising purchase. I thought it was simply a PR exercise to make sports franchises look patriotic.

On May 11 Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona sent a letter to the Defense Department asking for an accounting of the spending on patriotic tributes at sports events. Senator Flake said that "giving taxpayer funds to professional sports teams for activities that are portrayed to the public as paying homage to U.S. military personnel would seem inappropriate."

It turns out that flyovers are fairly costly. The Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps participate in some 850 flyovers annually, according to a report by Josh Robbins of *The Orlando Sentinel*. The cost for fighter jets is about \$36,000 a show and no doubt it is considerably more for Stealth Bombers. Perhaps the worst example of this practice is exemplified by an estimated \$450,000 paid for a flyover at the Super Bowl in Dallas in 2011. Remarkably the stadium was closed and no one inside the facility saw the display of American air power. A Navy spokesman claimed that it was not a waste because everyone inside the Jerry Dome could see it on the big screen televisions inside the stadium. Given that sort of logic I am looking for a flyover at my house the next time I watch the Super Bowl.

Walt Disney is often quoted as saying that the goal of the Disney Parks is to offer an experience to visitors in which they will not be able to distinguish the real from the artificial or fanciful. Is this what it has come to in our public relations riddled culture? When this sort of fraud is perpetrated in the arena of sport, the ultimate reality event, and done so to manipulate the public emotions in support of the military, how can the result be anything but disgust and a sharp increase in cynicism?

Finally on a lighter note it has been announced that the long awaited "Bud Selig Experience" has opened at Miller Park in Milwaukee. I cannot wait to visit this latest tribute to the ex-Commissioner of Baseball. I look forward to being able to try to break the players union, reward my friends with baseball franchises, fleece the taxpayers, and best of all to feel the power when canceling the playoffs and the World Series.

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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