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Football in the Air

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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September is here and that means football is back, both the NFL and the collegiate pros. The student-athletes of the NCAA opened play over this extended holiday weekend with more games than any human being could possibly ingest. There seemed to be excitement in the air on and off campuses across the country and across the Atlantic.

Here in Florida where the temperatures hit the mid-90s it was anything but football weather. It is difficult to get in the football spirit when it is sweltering and the leaves are not showing even the slightest sign of turning. There is no hint of fall in the air, only the mustiness of the dead hand of late summer. In this climate it's difficult to think in terms of football. If you left a pigskin outside more than a few days it would begin to turn green.

In ancient times football season began in mid-September. Now the first games are in late August. The college football season has been expanded from nine to thirteen or fourteen games. This was done to generate revenue, while at the same time college presidents argued against a college football playoff saying it would extend the season and interfere with the scholarly pursuits of the student athlete.

One rationale for extending the season was that it would make it possible to have more intersectional games and more "games of the century" between the great teams of America. The result has been noteworthy and is exemplified in the scores from this weekend's games. A sampling follows: 84-0, 62-10, 62-0, 56-9, 52-0, 51-9, 56-10, 69-3, 50-10.

The extended schedule has produced college football's version of trickle down economics. Many of these lopsided scores represent games in which top teams get to warm up against doormats before they have to play real games. Doormats are willing to play their role in order to bring home a big paycheck in the form of a guarantee. This allows the doormats to continue to pay for the escalating costs of putting a college football team on the field. Then if they are competitive against teams at their level they might be invited to an irrelevant bowl game at the end of the season. They will lose money going to these bowls but they will get "exposure." To put it another way, get hammered in

Columbus in September, and be rewarded with a trip to Shreveport in late December. This is the stuff that dreams are made of.

This is the first football season in the memory of most of us without Joe Paterno at Penn State. In the aftermath of last fall's scandal and Paterno's death has anything changed? Without missing a beat the national media has pushed their hyping of college coaches into overdrive. Urban Meyer is presented as a messianic figure at Ohio State, Nick Saban is a figure of awe and perfection at Alabama, and the general deification of football coaches on campuses across the country remains an ongoing media pathology.

Despite all the discussion of the flawed and distorted culture of college football since the revelations out of Penn State, those flaws and distortions have shown no signs of abating. At a Division One football school the university president concluded an athletic policy statement to the campus community describing himself as "the biggest fan of our athletics program" and thanked the university community for its support "as we strengthen our commitment to compliance and continue our journey to greatness." Apparently there are some out there that fail to understand that being a fan rather than a campus leader is what led the administrators at Penn State down the road to a criminal cover-up.

With the opening football game yesterday in "less than Happy Valley" two things stood out. The Penn State fans are defiant and seem to blame everyone but themselves for what went wrong. Second, the media described this game as the beginning of the post-Paterno post-Sandusky era, but if one thing is clear it is that the Paterno-Sandusky era at Penn State is far from over. There are many court cases and accusations of blame ahead, and that should keep this scandal fresh in the minds of those at Penn State and across the country for months and even years ahead.

The post-Paterno post-Sandusky era will not come with the opening of new football season. It will come only with a major cultural change at Penn State and numerous campuses across the country where the flawed and distorted culture of college football remains fully in tact.

The NFL opens this week under a shadow of its own. The league and their referees are in a dispute over pay and other matters. At this point it looks as though the games will begin with scabs coming on board to referee the games as the NFL referees have been locked out by ownership.

This is problematic on multiple grounds. First, the Executive Director of the NFL Players Association, DeMaurice Smith, has been quite vocal in opposition to the use of scab officials, claiming that this is, first and foremost, a safety issue. If it is truly a safety issue, the NFLPA has an obligation to its members to instruct them not to play. It would also be a good gesture, if not an obligation, for one group of workers to support another group that is being locked out by the owners.

Second, Roger Goodell has been trying desperately to show that the NFL is concerned about the safety of its players and get in front of the curve on the safety issue. Using scab officials is not reassuring on this point.

Goodell, as did all of his predecessors, insist that the integrity of the game is one of their primary concerns. The use of scabs that admittedly do not possess sufficient skills to referee NFL games, demonstrates a total disregard for the integrity of the game, the league, the shield, and the brand.

The Commissioner says that he has full confidence in his inexperienced recruits. In one of the most remarkable statements on this issue Goodell said that using scabs would be "worthwhile to ensure long-term improvements to officiating." What this means is anyone's guess, including Goodell's.

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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