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Politics and Sports

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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It was a quick war and as wars go a relatively easy one for the victors. In an age of mass media, endless cable news coverage, and imbedded reporters there was a kind of faux realism to it all. In fact the two favorite words in the reporting were "surreal" and "robust."

There was a considerable amount of faux patriotism the target of which as usual was the freedom that these wars are fought to protect. Before, during, and after the fact, those who raised the voice of dissent were shouted down and their loyalty questioned from the "patriots" who clutter the electronic airwaves with their tireless jingoism.

The world of sport is not immune from these forces. On both sides of the war issue sports figures let their feelings be known, and from all directions the critics poured forth. Before the war was even underway there were protests registered during the playing of the national anthem by a female college basketball player, while a Cy Young Award Winner offered thanks to the troops before they left for the war zone.

Some argue that politics doesn't belong in sports, while others have criticized athletes over the years for not taking a political stand at a critical time in the nation's history. Beyond the war itself we have seen politics slip its way into sport at the Masters at Augusta National, and questions have been raised concerning the use of a publicly financed stadium in Arizona for an anti-abortion rally.

In the days following the attacks of 9/11 players, teams, and leagues found themselves making decisions about when to play, about the role of sport in such a national crisis, and the proper response when play did resume. In nearly every case some sort of patriotic expression was felt appropriate at sporting venues and a special role was seen for those teams in New York City.

Since 9/11 all sports teams at the college and professional level have adorned their uniforms with American flags. Is this a political statement or a simple statement of patriotism? Should individual players make decisions about wearing the flag or is that a decision for franchise executives or owners? Is this an appropriate gesture? What of those who do not care to make this

gesture? Should this dissent be tolerated, welcomed, or banned? How much dissent should be allowed?

These are neither easy nor simple matters and an atmosphere of hysteria and silliness is not a good one in which to contemplate such issues.

During World War I baseball players were considered "slackers" when they continued to play baseball rather than join the war effort. Baseball management became so sensitive on this issue that they ended the 1917 season early and shortened the 1918 season in anticipation that the war would still be in progress. Baseball teams conducted on-field pre-game military drills for their players to give the illusion of support for the war, and it was during WWI that the national anthem was first played at a baseball game.

With the approach of World War II the anthem came to sports venues, first in Canada at NHL games, from there to hockey in the United States, and finally to other sports. Baseball, always going the extra mile to prove its patriotism, instituted "I Am an American Day" at the old ballpark, while the owners, worried about the security of their investments, were frantically working behind the scenes to secure a draft exemption for their players.

During the Vietnam War some athletes became extremely active in both the anti-war and pro-war movements. Owners protected their investments by getting players draft deferments or placing them in reserve units allowing them to stay stateside and continue to play the games. Campus protest attracted its share of athlete support and opposition, with football players on some campuses encouraged to assault the protesters. The most notable protest of all was made by Muhammad Ali who paid dearly with part of his career and millions of lost revenues for his stand against the war.

The end of the military draft has diminished the anxiety of sports administrators in time of war while offering owners peace of mind over their investments. The players are not going to be dragged away by the government and cause damage to teams and leagues. At the same time expressions of patriotism continue to be of importance at sporting events. The national anthem is played before every such event at every level in the United States. The waving of the flag and the "support for our boys" gestures are done quite conspicuously by a public relations conscious world of sport.

If displays of such support and patriotism are appropriate for the sporting venues, should there not be an equal acceptance of dissent? Isn't putting a flag on a uniform, or a backboard, or some part of field of play, a political statement? Why should other political statements not be allowed at these venues? Why should athletes be criticized for taking public positions on other public issues such as abortion, sexual freedom, ecology, or drugs?

What of all those non-Americans playing college and professional sport in America? What should their response be to such patriotic expression? Why should they be subjected to wearing the American Flag? Would an American consider wearing a German flag if they were playing in NFL Europe? What would you do during the national anthem if your country were being bombed by the United States at the same time you were asked to stand at attention?

By what standards should we make any of these judgements? And who should decide what is appropriate or not appropriate in this area? What are the issues that involve only individuals? Who makes the decisions for franchises or for organizations like the NCAA? Should these decisions be binding on individual athletes? Who makes decisions on facility use and on what basis?

If and when public calm returns in the months ahead it might be wise to have a discussion of these issues away from the heat of battle. Whether this discussion will produce more light than heat is a matter of considerable doubt, but the one thing we should have learned over the last month is that such a discussion needs to be held.

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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