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## NBA and NHL Playoffs

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Now that the Michael Jordan Invitational Tournament has ended it might be a good time to look at some of the highlights of both the NBA and NHL playoffs. Once again Michael set new standards of performance, and once again he proved how important he is to the Bulls' success. Twice during the finals he took games away from the Jazz, once with a buzzer-beater and once with a performance that has extended the Michael legend to another level. The buzzer beaters have happened so often that they are nearly yawners, and in fact the pass to Steve Kerr at the end of the final game may have been more exciting because the shot was more in doubt. The battle with illness in game five was the stuff of legends.

In several games throughout the playoffs Michael totally took over the action, and nearly single-handedly defeated the opposition. All of this is remarkable, all of it adds to the legend, but at some point it becomes counterproductive for the NBA, and it could be we are approaching that point.

Unless winning is accompanied by occasional failure the mystery goes out of the action. Competition is essential to sport, and when one team dominates, the competitive element is taken out of the game. In the case of the NBA no one seems to be competitive with the Bulls. There is no real mystery in how a series between the Bulls and a playoff opponent will end. It will end with a Bulls victory, and at least two of the four Bulls wins in a series will be traced directly to Michael Jordan. The Civic celebration will follow on the streets of Chicago in mid-June.

While the Bulls were doing the usual in the NBA Playoffs, the Detroit Red Wings were doing what no one thought they would, by winning the Stanley Cup. Conventional wisdom had the Colorado Avalanche repeating, more than likely defeating the Philadelphia Flyers in a struggle in the finals. Instead Colorado never got there, as Detroit beat them soundly. The Wings then came back to sweep the Flyers in a shocker.

The Detroit Red Wing victory was a victory of sorts for the more open style of hockey which seems to be dying in the NHL. In part the Wings won because they were able to skate circles around the bigger, tougher and stronger Philadelphia Flyers, who seemed determined to restore the goon hockey of the 70s played by the Broad Street Bullies. For the most part Detroit didn't stand still long enough to get smashed or cross-checked

into oblivion, as the bigger and stronger Flyers had done to everyone else.

It looked like the Flyers would simply overpower the Wings, beat them silly, and take home Lord Stanley's Cup. The Red Wings with their European and Red Army cast saved us, if only temporarily, from this retrogression. When the Russians were on the ice together there were moments of pure nostalgia and beauty as the game opened up with passing and skating and showed a flow that is increasingly difficult to find in the NHL. The morons in the stands in Philadelphia responded to the whipping their Flyers were taking by chanting "USA, USA." But then we have come to expect this sort of thing in the City of Brotherly Love.

Scoring has been on the decline in the past couple of years and the trend continued. The reason is simple. Clutching and grabbing, slugging and mugging, bring this beautiful and violent sport to a grinding halt. The result is hard hits and little flow, more stitches and more dental work, and a steady decline in goals.

The NBA is going through a similar scenario of clutch and grab, push and shove, elbow and punch basketball, which is having nearly the same impact. During the regular season scoring was down, and during the playoffs it was down further with the Bulls and Jazz, two of the leading scoring teams in the NBA, providing us with the second lowest playoff game point total in NBA shot-clock history. Showtime has become slowtime.

During the Detroit Tiger-Seattle Mariners baseball game on Saturday night during the Cup Final someone threw an octopus into centerfield. Ken Griffey did not field it cleanly, in fact did not field it at all. Perhaps he didn't understand the meaning of the gesture. In Detroit the octopus is a symbol of the eight victories it once took to win the Stanley Cup Final. However in the last two years the Octopus may have become the perfect symbol of the clutch and grab hockey that has emerged in the NHL, and the clutch and grab basketball that has surfaced in the NBA.

Finally it should be noted that with these victories Scotty Bowman and Phil Jackson enter the elite of professional sports managers in North America. Bowman has won seven Stanley Cups, only one less than his mentor Toe Blake, and has coached three different teams to championships. This had never been done by anyone in the major professional sports. Phil Jackson has won his fifth NBA championship and is now second only to the

legend, Red Auerbach. To say, yes, but he has Michael, is to miss the point.

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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