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## Stanley Cup Playoffs

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In the recently concluded Stanley Cup playoffs the point was made repeatedly that the road to the Cup is a war of attrition. Unlike other sports leagues, the National Hockey League does not require their teams to reveal injuries, and in fact disguising and hiding injuries has become a major art form in the NHL, while trainers and team doctors have come to rival coaches in their significance. Various drugs have become the key elements to victory.

This year three instances of injury were most remarkable, as was the frankness with which Bill Clement, the ESPN color commentator discussed them. In the final game it was clear that Bret Hull was physically unable to compete without considerable assistance from the medical staff. It is clear that his ability to skate at all was due to the fact that he was given injections in the area of his groin to allow him to endure the pain and stay on the ice.

As is usual in these circumstances Hull was described as a gamer and a warrior. Hull's dedication to the team and to the quest for the Stanley Cup were held up for praise.

In another case a player was described as needing ACL surgery at the end of the season, although he was still playing. This bit of business was praised not only for the usual "playing with pain" reasons, but also because this particular player was headed into free agency and therefore had no assurances of a future in the game or with his team. He was willing to risk the possibility of permanent damage and the end of his career in his quest for the Stanley Cup.

The power of the Stanley Cup to elicit superhuman effort and medical risks seems to be infinite.

The third case involved Mike Modano who took a very hard hit in game two of the finals that left him with a broken wrist. Unwilling to admit this injury the Dallas medical crew listed Modano as day-to-day, saying that it appeared that he had a severe sprain. In the end Modano didn't miss a game, although he couldn't shoot with accuracy or authority. He was still able to take the face-off and pass and skate and played an important role in the Dallas victories.

Modano was described in glowing terms for his guts. The TV people recalled that Modano had always been suspect for his reluctance to endure pain, take the hit, and play the physical game. He was thought to be soft and a pretty-boy. But no more. He now proved his courage, his manliness, his toughness. Terms like "gladiator" and "warrior" were attached to him.

What was most remarkable was Bill Clement's candid discussion of Modano "taking the needle" in order to play. Clement, on at least one occasion described in fairly graphic terms the point of entry for the injection, how the drugs would work, and what this, along with a light cast, would do for the Dallas player.

It was a clear triumph for the pharmaceutical industry and an even clearer statement about the willingness of players to use drugs to keep going in the face of tremendous pain and serious injury. It was also a clear statement of the macho madness in the NHL and in other sports where permanent damage to the body is happily risked in the quest for victory. In this case the power of the Stanley Cup to move young men to superhuman and drug assisted effort is awesome indeed.

In a similar vein at the College World Series Blair Varnes of Florida State University limped to the mound to pitch the championship game, on his way to post-season knee surgery. The courage of this player was praised throughout the game, and no one questioned his sanity. There was no discussion of "taking the needle" in this case, but one wonders what he did take to go the five or six innings he lasted on the hill. All of this was seen as a perfectly legitimate activity because there was so much at stake. Not the health of the player, nor his ability to walk at age fifty, nor the possible arm injury that could result, but rather only the College World Series championship.

At least two major issues are brought into focus here. The first is the need to win that drives people to superhuman effort while risking permanent damage to their bodies. Is this really the message we need to be disseminating in our sports mythologies? Should this sort of thing be praised as exemplary behavior?

The second involves drugs. If we live in a world and a sporting environment in which drug use or drug induced and enhanced performance is decried, then how can it be that people "taking the needle" are held up as examples for praise and emulation? What, may I ask, is the difference between a performance enhancement drug and a performance enabling drug?

Clearly the performance by Hull and Modano could not have taken place without the drugs. Is this not then performance enhancement? Without the drugs their performances don't happen at all, or are at such an anemic level that they would make no contribution to the effort of the team.

As I have said before, it seems useless to worry about drugs in sport. Clearly drugs are used both legally and illegally, and as this year's Stanley Cup proves, the distinction between what is legal or not is hardly a distinction worth making.

So when it is said that a victory is achieved in professional sport due to the efforts of the entire organization, clearly this includes the trainers and doctors who work their magic both with and without the needle.

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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