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Sport: The Original Reality TV - More death on the Overheated Football Fields

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The latest in the "Survivor" series is currently being filmed in Kenya, where locals are amused and confused by the notion that survival in their everyday environment has been turned into a ludicrous game show by Americans. Indeed the reality television craze seems to be hitting new levels of unreality everyday.

If reality television is really what people want in their living rooms then I invite them to the world of sport, where in just the last few weeks the issues of survival, both figurative and literal, have been on display daily.

This weekend at the PGA tournament, especially yesterday, one could watch with excruciating clarity as Phil Mickelson failed in his long quest to win a major championship. Once again he was so near and yet so far. He played about as well as one can play and yet came up short. The real pain on his face as he watched his own putt stop just short of the cup, was followed by his look of resignation as he waited for David Toms to drop in his ten foot par putt for the victory. Mickelson knew with certainty that Toms would not miss.

The month of August is a month of legendary proportions in baseball. It, not April, is the "cruelest month" as one by one the pretenders are separated from the contenders in baseball's divisional races. Through the summer there has been much euphoria in Minnesota as the lowly Twins rode atop the American League Central Division. Over the last four weeks the Twins have been in a free fall losing players to injury and watching trades fail to deliver. Excellent pitching and timely hitting have vanished and this reality has been painful for all. The look on Paul Molitor's face as the Twins blew a three-run ninth-inning lead was reality TV at its best.

The Chicago Cubs have been atop the National League Central and now they too are beginning to crack. In recent days they have fallen behind the Houston Astros and are watching the St. Louis Cardinals close in on them from below. Their pitching is shaky and their ace is now on the Disabled List. Cub fans knew intuitively that this was coming as this is the stuff of reality Cubness.

In the National League West the Los Angeles Dodgers are crumbling and falling from contention, while in the AL East the
Boston Red Sox have shown once again their uncanny ability to self-destruct on the field and in the front office.

 Reality has been at its most vivid during this past month in football where the season is yet to begin.

 One of the features of Reality television seems to be a physical challenge that drives the contestants to levels of extreme exertion. The payoff on Reality TV is watching people toss their lunch or collapse. If you like this sort of thing then you will love fall football practices at all levels of competition.

 In temperatures rivaling the waiting room of hell, young men are put through physical challenges of an excruciating character. The results in the best of circumstances are scenes of players retching, gasping for air, and watching pools of sweat forming small ponds at their feet. Cramping is another entertainment, as large men can be seen suddenly falling to the ground in agonizing pain. If Americans want real cases of survivor then this needs to be captured on camera and shown in prime time.

 At the next level survival itself becomes the reality. In high schools, colleges, and at the professional level there have been more than ten deaths at football practices over the past month. You want Reality TV, try this. Here "survivor" is not the name of a television program, but in fact a reality with dire consequences.

 At Northwestern University in a "voluntary" preseason practice, Rashidi Wheeler collapsed and died during a "conditioning test." The workout, according to the Chicago Tribune started with ten 100-yard sprints with 15 seconds of rest after each, eight 80-yard sprints with 13-second breaks, six 60-yard sprints with nine-second breaks, and four 40s with seven-second breaks.

 Videotape of this event shows Wheeler completing the 100 and the 80-yard sprints, then falling behind teammates in the 60-yard sprints, and finally having difficulty keeping his balance in the first of the 40-yard sprints. His teammates were cheering him on and exhorting him to cross the finish line. He did, but before the start of the second 40-yard sprint he collapsed, managed to stand and walk a few feet only to collapse again. Within a short time he was dead.

 At Minnesota Vikings camp while working in a heat index of 110 on the second day of practice, Kory Stringer collapsed of heat stroke and died during the night in a local hospital. A similar
scenario took place the University of Florida just a week or so before.

Across the nation several high school and college players have died, while no one has even a vague estimate of how many were pushed to the state of vomiting and collapse. This is a reality that won't appear on reality television, because in fact we have a very low tolerance for reality on television.

Even if the extreme is not be seen even on the eXtreme games, you can see more reality in sport than you will ever see on Reality TV. You may see even more than you would ever care to see.

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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