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## Nancy Kerrigan, Tonya Harding, and Dangers of Celebrity - NBA and Gambling

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The sportsworld has been full of wild and crazy doings over the last few weeks and days, and it is difficult to know where to start in discussing the current scene.

Certainly the events in Detroit which began last Thursday when one of society's certifiabes attacked Nancy Kerrigan as she prepared for the U.S. Figure Skating Championships, ranks near the top of the current sports stories. Given the pathetic security at Cobo Hall we may never know the motives of this white male attacker, but it is at least possible that he wanted to prevent Kerrigan from competing in the Olympics next month at Lillhammer.

Whatever the case the USOC did the right thing and guaranteed Kerrigan a spot on the figure skating team, if she is physically able to go. One would have hoped that this would not have been necessary, and the head of the IOC would have stepped forward immediately and guaranteed Kerrigan a spot, allowing the U.S. to send two skaters from the competition. This would have sent an immediate message to the lunies out there that they can not disrupt the selection process and prevent a skater from competing. Such leadership of course did not appear.

One of the ironies in this story is the fact that Tonya Harding in a marvelous comeback finished first in the competition, despite the fact that Ms. Harding has been the repeated target of death threats. Harding is a wonderful story of rebellion from the norms of both society and the stuffy world of figure skating, as well as an athlete who has overcome severe asthma attacks, made more severe by the fact that she can't use drugs to control the problem during competition, because such drugs contain a steroid, a banned substance for Olympic competitors.

It is tempting to conclude from the attack on Nancy Kerrigan that we are living in a sick society and sick world. This might in fact be a valid conclusion. Any society that places enormous stress on athletic achievement, and turns teenage girls into sterile sex symbols and overhyped celebrities, invites overblown adulation. In the world of the marginally balanced, adulation can easily become distorted worship or obsession, leading to possessive or violent stalking, and ultimately tragedy.

It is sobering to know that the modern celebrity, including the overexposed and overhyped athlete, is subject to constant

danger. Threats on life and limb are a nearly constant reality, some of course being more obviously serious than others. Like the President of the United States who faces multiple threats daily, the modern celebrity is the object of envy, jealousy, obsession, hatred, or some other distorted emotion of the human heart, and therefore becomes a walking target for crackpots. The massive money and attention showered on these people, many of whom are still children, simply exacerbates the problem.

This reality no doubt contributed to Michael Jordan's decision to leave the NBA, and also contributes to what often looks like unjustified paranoia or hostility by athletes and celebrities, who refuse to mingle with the masses and make themselves accessible to their fans. It could be that we are headed to the sportsworld of Rollerball, where the fans will be caged off from the players. Or is it just the world of international soccer where the moat is standard equipment in any arena of play?

In another mind bending turn of events the National Basketball Association has notified the newly awarded franchise in Toronto that unless the Ontario government removes NBA basketball from the provincial lottery game, the franchise award will be withdrawn.

There are several issues raised by this action. First, it is an incredible and arrogant abuse of power by an athletic league which seeks to tell a provincial government how it must run its revenue-raising operations. Second, for the NBA to object to this lottery system on the grounds of the evils of gambling is simply ludicrous. Millions of dollars are bet on a daily basis all across the nation illegally on NBA basketball. This is why there are point spreads. And yet I have not heard David Stern or the NBA announce that NBA franchises will be withdrawn anywhere in the United States where there is gambling. Why does Mr. Stern think people are interested in nightly NBA games in November or December, or games between non-contenders in March and April? It is simply because people bet on these games, not because they have any immediate compelling significance.

The Ontario lottery makes use of NHL games without any great threat to the integrity of hockey. So come on Mr. Stern lighten up. Gambling and sport are now and always have been fundamentally connected, and even more so, professional sport. Without gambling professional sport would not survive. Long live the point the spread.

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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