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Richard Nixon and Sports

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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In one of the most interesting and bizarre pieces of American literature featuring a president of the United States, Robert Coover in "Whatever Happened to Gloomy Gus of the Chicago Bears?" draws a picture of the late 37th President of the United States that has become a classic of presidential portraiture.

Gloomy Gus was a former football player at Whittier College in California, and for the Chicago Bears, who met his demise at the Republic Steel Strike in Chicago on Memorial Day of 1937. He was gunned down by police when he came off the picket line and tackled a policeman. His last words were reported to be "I am a baseball fan."

Gloomy Gus is an inept character, wooden really, who found it necessary rehearse his every move, his every line. He completely lacked in spontaneity. While playing football in Chicago he was known as the Fighting Quaker, Iron Butt, and Gloomy Gus. He is shown in situation after situation, social, political, or on the field of play, and in every case he is capable of responding in only one set pattern at a time. What dialogue is spoken by Gus, seems a combination of sports cliché and classic Nixon speak.

With the death of former President Nixon thoughts of Richard Milhous Nixon and sport came running back to the memory. And whenever that happens, Gloomy Gus is one of the first images that comes to mind. Somehow Coover's character captured the essence of the wooden personality and the over-rehearsed spontaneity, which characterized the man who came to Disney World to proclaim, "I am not a crook."

Nixon and sport, Nixon the baseball fan, Nixon the-would-be sportswriter, Nixon the developer of plays for George Allen and the Washington Redskins for use in the Super Bowl.

Richard Nixon could talk endlessly about baseball, the players, the statistics, the great moments. Often he was seen at ballpark, in Washington while vice-president, in Baltimore while president, and in retirement with Gene Autry at the Big A. He loved being around athletes, and seemed to the nation's number one sports fan.

He would pepper his political speeches with sports clichés, especially fond of the notion of never quitting. He could

describe diplomatic and military situations in sports metaphors, "hitting the line hard," "the best defense is a good offense," and always the references to the significance and importance of comebacks.

In one of the darkest hours of his presidency during the anti-war protests in Washington he went out onto the mall and down near the Lincoln Memorial where he engaged the student protestors in conversation, conversation that inevitably headed back to college football, baseball, sport.

His former coach at Whittier College described this third string lineman as tenacious. He would take a severe beating in practice, but never give up, always get back on his feet ready for more. "Dick liked the battle," said his coach, "and the smell of sweat."

Roone Arledge recounts a time when he was at a reception with President Nixon. Arledge wanted to talk about politics, world affairs, matters of import. All Nixon could talk about was sports, rattling off all sorts of stories and statistics. Arledge finally realized that the President of the United States was not trying to put him at ease, but was in fact trying to impress him with his knowledge of sport. He couldn't believe it. On another occasion Nixon told Arledge that he knew Frank Gifford. He attended the Gifford's parties, "I know Frank Gifford," Nixon boasted "Frank Gifford remembers me." Arledge found something pathetic in this scene.

It was Nixon who started that irritating practice of telephoning the winner's locker room after the Super Bowl and the World Series, a practice that eventually led to dialing up almost any championship athlete or team at any and all levels. Championship teams to this day are paraded across the television screens on the White House lawn, where political types can share the spotlight with these jocks.

Was Richard Nixon the nation's number one sports fan or simply a politician trying to exploit sport? I think Roone Arledge's story answers that question more than adequately. He loved sports, athletes, and the competition. Unfortunately he seemed unable to put sport into its proper perspective, thinking too often of world and human affairs in terms of a twisted sports ethic. What he failed to grasp was the essence of fair play and sportsmanship. In sport you defeat your opponent within the framework of the rules of the game. For Richard Nixon in the

sport of politics the object was to destroy all opponents by whatever means necessary.

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