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Sport and National Anthem

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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The major flap over the suspension of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf from the Denver Nuggets by the NBA for failure to stand at attention for the National Anthem has been settled. In the midst of the controversy there was considerable discussion, and a great deal of misinformation was tossed around about the history of this ritual.

First, it is important to note that there was no official National Anthem until 1931 when The Star Spangled Banner was declared so by an Act of Congress. However during World War I President Wilson had declared the S.S.B. the unofficial national anthem, and the intense display of public patriotism during World War I meant that the Star Spangled Banner was played on many public occasions to stir patriotic feelings.

It is generally accepted that the S.S.B. was first played at a baseball game during the first game of the 1918 World Series. It was played under the shadow of an atmosphere that saw considerable public discussion of the patriotism of baseball players who had failed to go off to Europe and Defeat the Dreaded Hun. The charge of "slacker" was heard across the land and the baseball establishment was most sensitive to this charge.

To demonstrate major league patriotism baseball teams had the players march in formation during pre-game military drills while carrying bats on their shoulders. During the seventh inning stretch of Game One of the 1918 World Series when the band spontaneously began to play the S.S.B., the Cubs and Red Sox players stood at attention facing the center field flag pole. The crowd sang along, even without Harry Cary, and when the singing ended there was applause. Given this reaction in Chicago the S.S.B. was played during the seventh-inning stretch for the next two games.

When the Series moved to Boston the great theatrical Red Sox owner Harry Frazee pumped up the show biz, brought in a band, and the S.S.B. was played before the start of each game.

When the war ended the practice did not, and on those occasions when a band was present such as opening day, special holidays, or the World Series, the playing of the S.S.B. became common practice. Opening day in Washington saw it played in the

presence of the President of the United States, and in other cities local politicians participated in the events. The Seventh Regiment Band under the direction of John Philip Sousa played the Star-Spangled Banner as part of the pregame festivities at the opening of Yankee Stadium in 1923 before the largest crowd to ever see a baseball game. But it was not done everyday because the lack of sound systems and the expense of having a band present on a daily basis made it impossible.

Although the Star-Spangled Banner was played on these special days, it did not become a daily practice, even after the song was declared the official National Anthem in 1931, and even though by 1934 some ballparks had public address systems.

The coming of war in the late thirties changed all of that.

During the 1939-40 National Hockey League season the Canadian Anthem was played at games in Canadian cities as Canada was already at war. Then the practice spread to Madison Square Garden and from there it was transferred from hockey to baseball.

In 1940 with the fighting underway in earnest and America becoming more conscious of the possibility of war there was increased talk of a need for the national anthem before baseball games. This was suggested by The Sporting News in June, while at the same time the President of the International League called for the anthem in league cities in the U.S., as was already being done in Canadian cities. By 1941 the practice of playing the anthem before sporting events had achieved nearly universal status. At some games the pledge of allegiance was added on, and by 1941 "I Am an American Day" became a feature at major league parks.

It would be nice to say that all of this was pure patriotic expression, but of course much of it was PR conscious owners making sure that in World War II there would be no questioning of the patriotism of athletes who played games while others went off to serve their country. Four years of war, followed by the Cold War and the emergence of the American Empire solidified the practice and made it into a national ritual.

In recent years the National Anthem has lost its patriotic air in most sports venues. It has become an occasion for entertainers to display their talents or lack thereof, fans to create new cheers, and the networks to run commercials. Its

symbolic significance has been overshadowed by commercial purposes and public indifference.

It might well be time to end this practice which has lost its patriotic purpose.

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