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Texas Cheerleader Murder Case - Robert Smith and the Student Athlete

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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"Extremism in the Defense of Liberty is no Vice."

The words of Republican Nominee Barry Goldwater at the 1964 Republican National Convention in San Francisco. His audience loved it, others went into cardiac arrest.

If the phrase were re-worded to: "Extremism in the defense of football is no Vice," or "Extremism in the defense of cheerleading is no Vice," would there be an equal outcry today?

I think not, in fact there wasn't.

In recent weeks two stories, one from football and one from cheerleading, grabbed the headlines across the nation.

First cheerleading, which I suppose one might say has a fiduciary, or is it proprietary, relationship to football. It certainly has a relationship to sport, and has had such a relationship since medieval times when the Medieval Joy Maidens cheered on the jousts and swordsmen at the big Tournament.

In Texas, the national capital of cheerleading, and home of the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders, a melodrama of major proportions played itself out over the past several weeks.

Wanda Holloway, age 37, of Channelview, Texas was found guilty on several charges involving her attempt to hire a hit man to kill Verna Heath, mother of high school cheerleader, Amber Heath. Wanda Holloway is also the mother of a high school girl, Shanna, who is not a cheerleader, but a wanna-be cheerleader. Wanda loves her little girl and like all good mothers had high aspirations for Shanna. She wanted Shanna to reach that coveted pinnacle of teenage Texas social life. But Amber was in the way. And so to remove the threat of Amber, Wanda hired her ex-brother-in-law, which in and of itself showed poor judgement, to kill Verna. This would make Amber so distraught that she would not be able to run for election to cheerleader, and Shanna would be in. Are you following this? If not wait for the ABSleaze mini-series.

Wanda was found guilty. But of what? She loved her child too much? She understood the true significance of sport in America; the value of cheerleading as an adolescent career move? Wouldn't we all have done the same for our children?

Now on to football. Robert Smith, star running-back at Ohio State University and Football Factory, announced to the world that he was quitting football to concentrate on his studies. Why? Because at Ohio State the coaches seemed to think that football was more important than the higher learning. Robert Smith, an excellent student with aspirations to be a doctor, thought that being a student-athlete involved being a student first. Sorry Robert. There's no money for the university in that, and studying inorganic chemistry doesn't win football games.

The interesting aspect of this story is how few people came forward to defend Robert Smith's actions. Here was a young man who decided that studying at an institution of higher learning was more important than football, that the term student-athlete is not a modern oxymoron but an ideal worth achieving.

And what has been the reaction? It has varied but it has been largely negative. Is there something wrong with this kid? He could have been an NFL first round draft choice. He blew off millions. Anybody can be doctor, but only the few, the elect, can be first-rounders.

If this kid thinks things are difficult at Ohio State now he should have been here during the reign of Woody Hayes. No wimps played for Woody.

Meanwhile on the Ohio State campus the coaching staff spread the word about Smith, suggesting that he really wasn't all that good, that he wasn't a team player, that he was an odd ball all along, that his teammates didn't like him, that he was lazy, that he had been hanging out at bars with the wrong crowd, and on and on. This was a disinformation campaign worthy of the CIA.

Well, certainly the University President came to his defense. Not exactly. The University President, the bow tie and suspended Dr. Gee, looking oh so much the part of the modern academic leader, defended his coaches, not his student athlete. And Dr. Gee we are told is a "leader" in the college athletics reform movement. Let's hope not.

The topper came when Lee Corso, sitting on his throne in the ESPN studio one Saturday night gleefully reported that Ohio State won without Smith, that the Buckeyes had running-backs stacked in a holding pattern over Columbus. Coach Corso then went on to defend the Ohio State coaching staff, and especially the assistant coach who was at the center of the controversy.

The guy's a winner, said Corso, of the coach who thought Robert Smith studied too much. And just what does that make Robert Smith, Coach?

Heady stuff, this. But remember the words of Bear Bryant, when you contemplate the relationship of football to higher education. The Bear said two things and I paraphrase: if the TV boys want us to play at midnight, then we'll play at midnight; and, we have to get away from this student-athlete business, these boys are here to play football. The Bear was a winner too.

These really are two great American sports stories, and they speak to a distortion of values in American society. I know this will surprise some folks but, Sport is not a matter of life and death. Those who think it is, or are forced to behave as if it is, need to be contained, before we lose another mom or another doctor.

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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