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Charles K. McNeil and the Point Spread

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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Charles K. McNeil is not a name instantly recognized by most sports fans across the nation. But Charles K. McNeil is as significant a person as there is in Sport in America in the 20th Century.

His name came to mind last week when the Long Island Blackbirds basketball team was in town to play Joe Dean's UCF Running Knights on the occasion of the dedication of the new Arena on the UCF Campus. It was a grand evening and UCF officially inaugurated its new facility in style with a victory.

What went unnoticed that evening by all except a few, was that fact that 1991 marks a significant anniversary for LIU's basketball program and for college basketball in general. It was forty years ago, in 1951, that basketball's greatest scandal broke on to the front pages sending shock waves across the nation.

Since 1932 Long Island University's basketball program had been under the direction of the legendary Clair Bee. Bee was known among other things as the creator of the fictional character Chip Hilton, the clean-cut, All-American student athlete who was a WASP winner to the core, and an ideal young man of character. But unlike his fictional character, for Clair Bee it wasn't how you played the game, but rather if you won or lost, that counted. For Clair Bee winning was the only thing, and he would stop at nothing. LIU rapidly developed into a national basketball power, and basketball became a major source of revenue for the school.

Also in the early Thirties with the nation in the midst of a depression a New York newspaper reporter named Ned Irish convinced Mayor Jimmy Walker that college basketball could be used to raise money for the unemployed of the city. Walker took the advice and on December 31, 1931 the first college basketball triple-header was held at Madison Square Garden. It was a grand success and several other such events involving six colleges from the City were held over the next few years.

Ned Irish recognized a good thing when he saw one, and in 1934 he began to rent Madison Square Garden to promote college basketball games. As Charles Rosen has noted "The Garden became synonymous with quality, big-time, big-pressure college

basketball. Every schoolboy in the country dreamed about playing there."

By the mid-Thirties the LIU Blackbirds were one of the premier teams in New York City and Madison Square Garden was the LIU home floor, replacing the small gym at the Brooklyn College of Pharmacy, and upping the revenues. Other city teams joined the parade. CCNY, Manhattan, St. John's, Brooklyn, and Columbia all followed the road to the Garden, and big-time college basketball.

While basketball was developing under the leadership of Bee and others and the Garden was emerging as the Mecca of the college game, Charles K. McNeil was about to make his mark on Sport in America. Early in the Forties McNeil, a former math teacher in Connecticut opened a bookmaking operation in Chicago. McNeil invented a new form of wagering called "wholesaling odds." McNeil rated each team and then estimated how many points the favorite team would win by, and gamblers bet the point spread. What a magnificent and ingenious device. The Point Spread. One bookie called it the greatest invention since the zipper.

But the spread also brought problems. Games could now be fixed without losing. A team could win and lose at the same time. And basketball clearly was the easiest game in which to shave points. Big-time college basketball had become a big-time business for the colleges, and now it could become a business proposition for the athletes as well. Everyone could be a winner and make some money.

During the Forties rumors of the fixing of games became rampant. Then in mid-February of 1951 the first players were arrested at CCNY, where Nat Holman had developed a winning basketball tradition, and a program riddled with corruption. Unqualified students were admitted to school, high school records were altered, grades were fixed. Now games were being fixed. The 1950 CCNY team was one of the best ever, winning the NIT and NCAA tournaments, and doing so while shaving.

Arrests followed at LIU and Manhattan. Dishonest gamblers, black and Jewish players, and the general atmosphere of New York City were blamed. Midwesterners claimed that such a thing could not happen there, and Adolph Rupp at Kentucky boasted that gamblers couldn't touch his boys with a ten foot pole. But by mid-1951 the scandals had reached Toledo and Bradley, and in the fall the point shaving scandal had engulfed Kentucky, along with revelations of illegal payments to players by Adolph Rupp.

It was an ugly scene and the nation officially was shocked. There were those who wondered aloud if college athletics was worth it. But in the end the furor passed, and college athletics was not substantially reformed. Point shaving was but one problem in a corrupt system. Transcript fixing, illegal payments, unethical and immoral recruiting practices, special treatment for athletes, all continued. The commercialization of intercollegiate athletics continued unabated, and the revenues continued to escalate. As for the point shaving scandals they resurfaced every decade or so, to be greeted by shock and surprise, but never to be treated, except as symptom.

And so bye-bye Blackbirds and thanks for jogging the memory to recall the significance of the great Charles K. McNeil.

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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