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## The Beauty of the Athleticism in the NBA and the NHL

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Two or three decades ago there was a joke that circulated about a kindergarten teacher who asked the children if they knew the four seasons of the year. An eager young boy waved his hand, and shouted the answer: Baseball, Football, Basketball and Hockey. That cute little joke has lost all of its meaning in this, the last decade of the 20th century.

Here it is mid-June and already the National Hockey League and the National Basketball Association have concluded their playoffs. And all of this has been accomplished several weeks in advance of baseball's all-star break. Note however that the NFL training camps open in less than a month.

Seasons now run into one another with the baseball playoffs marking the beginning of hockey season, the World Series marking the opening of the NBA, and the opening of the NBA and NHL playoffs marking the beginning of the baseball season. As for football it now seems omnipresent, running non-stop with the NFL, the World League, Arena Football, College Football, and Spring practice. All order has escaped the universe, and time has been derailed. The rhythms of nature were destroyed by the electric light and central heating, and now the endless greed of sports owners has destroyed the rhythms of the sport seasons.

While watching these endless playoffs I have learned something new. I once agreed with Ted Williams that the most difficult thing in sport was the act of hitting a baseball. No more. It is now clear that the most difficult thing in sport is to define a foul in the NBA. As I watched bodies flying in all directions, pushing and shoving worthy of a rugby scrum, and forearms to the head, with no foul called, and then seconds later saw a touch foul called, I was reminded of how difficult it is to define a foul in the NBA. How NBA referees must be the new medieval theologians.

Despite all of this the NBA playoffs remain the showcase of incredible athleticism. The movement and body control of Michael Jordan is spectacular. To see him fly through the air, cut to the basket, contort his body in impossible fashion is truly one of the wonders of sport. And like all the truly great athletes he sees all the floor, reads all the spatial relations, and has extra-sensory anticipation delivering the ball well in advance of the move by either offensive or defensive players. His quick

hands and feet as well as anticipation on defense make him the total player.

Someone mentioned to me recently that they were irritated by Michael's tendency to refer to "himself and his supporting cast" when discussing the Bulls. It is clear to me now that such language is a near perfect description of the Chicago Bulls. If that is seen as an ego trip by Michael, so be it.

And one other thing about the Bulls. They have become one more of those repeat teams in the NBA. Is this a dynasty? Maybe. But let's wait and see if a three-peat is possible. On the surface it would look as though it should be. But, key injuries, runaway egos, and the loss of the necessary hunger, all can tear a team apart. Whether the Bulls have the luck and character, and whether Phil Jackson has the coaching ability to pull this off, remains to be seen.

Dynasty is word also floating around the repeat Stanley Cup champion Pittsburgh Penguins these days. Again it would appear that this is a hockey club with a sufficient number of young players, a franchise player in Mario Lemieux, and a rising star in Jaramir Jaeger. But in addition to the perils of success the Penguins have serious question marks in goal, and behind the bench, where Scotty Bowman's future is up in the air. Bowman is regarded as one of the best minds in hockey, but the feeling is that the difficulty of following Bob Johnson and Bowman's general style of leadership may have been too much. He may not be back behind the Penguin's bench. Given the way in which the Penguins handled the Blackhawks it is easy to forget that Pittsburgh was nearly eliminated by the Rangers and the Caps. Despite all of this clearly the Penguins are a team with dynasty potential.

Finally this week I want to say something about the overkill in Orlando on Shaquille O'Neill. Is the fact that Orlando will have the first round draft pick really front page news? Is every move of this young man worthy of front page coverage? Do these pseudo stories rank in significance with the devastation of Yugoslavia or the ineptitude of the Florida legislature? Is this story more significant than the drouth and starvation in East Africa?

Given the overkill of coverage for this college drop out, is it any wonder that he comes into town with a bloated head expecting five million a year to shoot and rebound a ball. Is it any wonder that young men in his circumstances lose sight of reality, succumb to the temptations of drugs, or feel an

incredible amount of pressure when they finally do sign on the dotted line. If you were twenty years old and were treated like the second coming would you be able to keep your head? Would you be able to carry the hopes of a city on your shoulders? Could you cope with this attention? Might you turn to drugs or alcohol? Might you become an insufferable ass?

My sympathies to the Shaq and to all the young gladiators who carry the dreams of a troubled world on their shoulders. But if I hear another word about the Shaq, I just might hurl.

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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