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Tonya Harding Story

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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If you have been waiting for the other shoe to drop, the sounds being heard over the last week are starting to resemble an avalanche at the Tom MacCann factory. I'm talking, of course, about the Tonya Harding Story, or is it the Nancy Kerrigan Story, or perhaps the Three Stooges meet Tonya.

It has produced some incredible rhetoric, massive amounts of hypocrisy, and no small load of lies. One gets the feeling that if the truth were suddenly to be revealed, no one within the sound of an American television set, would be able to recognize it.

Although Nancy Kerrigan was clearly the early star of the show, that role has diminished. The wounded skater appeared on the cover of news and schlock magazines, uttering the now famous words, "Why me?" The answer is obvious.

Then there are all those wonderful people out there who insist that what is at stake is the American system of justice. "She is innocent until proven guilty." "She can not be denied due process," "She has constitutional rights." Since when has this become an issue for the public?

On a daily basis we are ready to hang people on the simple basis of their arrest. Supreme Court judges have been denounced from the pulpit, the pundit's corner, and the street corner for suggesting that those charged with a crime have any rights at all. Earl Warren became the object of impeachment for his role in the Miranda decision. This point of view was best summarized by an assistant District Attorney in Portland who a week ago said, hey, everyone is presumed innocent, until we make an arrest. Wow, where did he learn his constitutional law?

But it is the U.S.O.C. officials who have distinguished themselves above all others. The President of the U.S.O.C. worried aloud recently about whether Tonya Harding was the sort of person who should be representing America? Did she really stand for what America stands for? He said he wanted to be sure that America sends it finest young men and women to the Olympics, that the American team must give the proper image. What is this guy talking about? What team? The Olympics isn't a team sport? It's about individual athletic excellence, not national excellence. It's about athletic achievement, not proper image. It's about money.

Then there was the anonymous U.S.O.C. official who said of the Harding group, "But, they're all so, so, you know, common." Ah yes. That really is Tonya Harding's problem isn't it. She comes out of the great unwashed mass. She doesn't have the designer clothes, nor the designer image. She smokes, drinks, shoots pool and swears like a sailor. She is white trash, and should not even be near a sport whose image is so highly polished as is figure skating.

It is one of those Olympic Sports that reeks of class consciousness, smugness, and nouveau-riche pretension. Harding has too much grease and not enough ruffles to suit the figure skating establishment. She is not a little princess, or an elegant lady, but just a tough kid who was foolish enough to think that achievement was more important than social class in America. It is not, and that is one of the primary lessons to be learned from this dirty little story.

And what of image? Doesn't the U.S.O.C. have a convicted felon as a key member, and hasn't he made significant contributions to the development of figure skaters? This may explain why he has not had much time to fire Yankee managers recently.

Then there is Tonya Harding herself. Her credibility was never too high and she did it further damage last week when she admitted that she had after-the-fact knowledge of the conspiracy. Then in one of most disingenuous scenes since Richard Nixon claimed he was not a crook, she said that all she ever wanted was to win a gold medal for her country. She was much more honest a week earlier when she said all she wanted to do was to kick Kerrigan's butt at Lilihammer, and when she speculated that Meg Ryan should play her in the TV movie. And there will be one.

Now a deal has been cut with Jeff Gillooly, he'll be played by Eric Roberts. He pleaded guilty to racketeering including perjury. And we are told that he is a reliable witness, who will prove Harding's guilt. The prosecutors better have something more than the testimony of a perjurer and abusive spouse.

And finally comes this odd twist to the story. Nike CEO Philip Knight has donated \$25,000 to create a Tonya Harding Defense Fund. It is purely an altruistic move. It has nothing to do with the fact that Reebok has Kerrigan under contract, and that Reebok beat out Nike as the Official Olympic Sponsor at

Barcelona. To suggest such a sordid set of motives in such a pristine setting as this, is obviously just too cynical.

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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