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Nationalize Sport

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This should be the first weekend of the first ever baseball playoffs involving three division winners and one wildcard team from each league. It also should be the end of the first week of the new hockey season.

The National Hockey League which has been growing in popularity once again seemed to be on the verge of a breakthrough with new teams in the Sunbelt doing very well, a new TV contract with the FOX network bringing money and exposure, and with merchandise sales reaching a new high.

Instead hockey has followed the lead of baseball, and the owners led by Commissioner Gary Bettman seem ready to try to impose a salary cap on the players. Bettman says that a lockout is necessary because the players were likely to strike later in the season when they had all the leverage. After the players gave a no strike pledge Bettman no longer had that rationale available to him, but it didn't matter.

Meanwhile the NBA is getting ready to open its training camps amidst rumblings of a possible lockout. The NBA contract with its players has expired and they await the decision of the courts on the legality of the current NBA cap and NBA draft.

What is going on here? Are we looking at some sort of conspiracy? Has some sort of madness struck everyone involved in professional sport?

Well, not exactly. It turns out that the contracts between leagues and players all expired coincidentally, and about the same time the NFL successfully negotiated a salary cap with its notoriously inept union..

What is it that has produced all of this hard lining from ownership and the dream of a cap for all these sports? Clearly it has to do with the same forces in society and the economy which have been pushing retrenchment, down-sizing, streamlining, cost-containment, and reduction of overhead.

It is also associated with the afterglow of Reaganomics, the high holy days of post-industrial capitalism, in which greed is once again not unfashionable, and being rich is back in vogue. In the history of economic cycles this has always produced a climate of opinion that is hostile to labor and sympathetic to profits. It is precisely the climate in which ownership now

seems ready to put-the-wood to the workers in the name of a rational marketplace, and reestablish their primacy in the economic pecking order.

In professional sport, which is both a business and an entertainment, all of this is taking place in full public view, and with a labor force that is not exactly proletarian in its wage levels or lifestyles. There can be little sympathy for these downtrodden workers, and there seldom is anyway. This is further complicated by the fact that the public are also the fans, and players are both labor and product. This creates an odd mix of emotions and feelings that end in disgust, as fans feel no sympathy and have only a sense of being cheated out of their entertainments by greed on all sides.

So what is the solution? Consider this modest proposal:

It is time to Nationalize Sport and create a Minister of Sport as a Cabinet level position in the federal government, something quite common around the world. Sports should be made into public utilities. As quasi-monopolies they certainly resemble public utilities, and then their profits and wages could be controlled by a national regulatory board, while their competitive character would be retained on the field of play.

Society already invests heavily in sport through tax subsidies and writeoffs, stadium building, and the training of athletes in amateur and college sports programs, to mention only a few. It is time to move from subsidy to control, turn sports into public utilities, and sell stock in these utilities. Management would still be hired and fired on performance, as would players, while profit sharing could take place among investors, the public, and the players.

There would be no need for a salary cap, because all would be governed by a combination of market forces and regulatory agencies. The biggest cause of skyrocketing salaries would be eliminated, as owners with big egos willing to pay any price for star athletes would no longer be a part of the equation.

Someone once said that war is too important to be left to the generals. Perhaps sport has become too important to be left to the owners or the players. This could be an idea whose time has come.

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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