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Harding and Kerrigan Followup

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Winning isn't everything, its the only thing. The words of course of that great American philosopher Vince Lombardi. I was reminded of them once again this week as the bizarre story of the attack on Nancy Kerrigan unfolded. And as it unfolded the nature of this commentary changed dramatically.

Earlier in the week I wrote a commentary about the senseless attack by some bizarre zany, some certifiably, who broke through the flimsy security at Cobo Hall in Detroit to put Nancy Kerrigan out of commission in the U.S. Figure Skating Championship. It was clear to me then that this was one more proof of the madness in sport in which athletes are idolized, and envied, and finally brought down by the jealous or obsessive fans out there in TV land.

But it turns out that the Kerrigan case may be much less complex than that, as it appears now that the attacker of Nancy Kerrigan may have been hired by the husband, body guard, or some combination thereof, of Tonya Harding. The motive was to insure that Harding would be the top finisher in the U.S. Championships and would lead the U.S. team to the Olympic games in Lilihammer in February.

So the motive was simple, and not some complex set of factors such as psychological terror, distorted hero worship, and obsessive behavior born out the overemphasis on the heroic and public relations aspect of sport.

It appears now that Tonya Harding, who herself has been subjected to a number of threats on her life, had no knowledge of, nor participation in this goofy plot. Apparently her husband and/or body guard acted on their own, demonstrating that they had lost confidence in Harding's ability to defeat Kerrigan in head to head competition.

But winning is the only thing, and as such all actions are justified in achieving that goal. We still must wait to see how this bizarre case plays itself out. Was Tonya Harding involved in the plot? Was her husband? Was her body guard? If any of these were involved what does this do to Tonya Harding's participation in the Olympic games? Should she be excluded from the games regardless of her involvement, or should she only be excluded if it can be proven that she was an active or even passive participant in any plot to injure or even kill Nancy Kerrigan?

The notion that winning an event could become so important to the husband and friends of Tonya Harding is frightening, and one measure of how far out of kilter sport in America has become. In a world in which massive amounts of money and incredible volumes of adulation are heaped upon athletes, many of whom are still children, it should not be a great surprise when things like this happen. Our values have been distorted, and sport reflects this distortion as accurately as any facet of the culture.

Our sport heroes and celebrities have become walking targets for all sorts of crackpots. The need to win has become so important, the need to be number one has become so important, that some people will stop at nothing to achieve this golden fleece of the late 20th century. Unfortunately Vince Lombardi was right.

In another mind bending turn of events the National Basketball Association has notified the newly awarded franchise in Toronto that unless the Ontario government removes NBA basketball from the provincial lottery game, the franchise award will be withdrawn.

There are several issues raised by this action. First, it is an incredible and arrogant abuse of power by an athletic league which seeks to tell a provincial government how it must run its revenue-raising operations. Second, for the NBA to object to this lottery system on the grounds of the evils of gambling is simply ludicrous. Millions of dollars are bet on a daily basis all across the nation illegally on NBA basketball. This is why there are point spreads. And yet I have not heard David Stern or the NBA announce that NBA franchises will be withdrawn anywhere in the United States where there is gambling. Why does Mr. Stern think people are interested in nightly NBA games in November or December, or games between non-contenders in March and April? It is simply because people bet on these games, not because they have any immediate compelling significance.

The Ontario lottery makes use of NHL games without any great threat to the integrity of hockey. So come on Mr. Stern lighten up. Gambling and sport are now and always have been fundamentally connected, and even more so, professional sport. Without gambling professional sport would not survive.

It isn't whether you win or lose, its if you beat the spread. Maybe winning isn't the only thing.

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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