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The Strike Impact in the NHL and MLB

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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As the hockey playoffs roll on and the baseball season begins to take root, it might be a good time to try to make an initial assessment of the impact of the two strikes which affected both of these sports.

As you may remember the hockey season started late, a shortened season was played, and still it is likely that the Stanley Cup playoffs may not end until July 1. As to the fan interest and the impact of the strike it is becoming clear from the low percentage of sellouts in the playoffs that the fans are drifting away from the game.

I was with a good friend from Calgary last weekend and he talked about his own feelings and those of his friends. He is a devoted Flames fan and longtime season ticket holder, and for the first time this year he chose not to buy playoff tickets.

There were several reasons for his decision. First when he did attend the games they were poorly played, often without intensity. Second, he found it difficult to have much sympathy for the players who were making salaries several times higher than his, while he was out working two jobs. He had a lot of trouble with their argument that they were underpaid at a half-million a year. One of the striking players lived down the street from him, and during the strike the player was out shooting hoops everyday, his house was already paid for, and he seemed to be having few financial difficulties. My friend had a tough time relating to this player as oppressed or underpaid.

He also told me that something very interesting happened to many of his friends during the strike. They discovered how little they needed hockey, how little they missed it, and what a great range of other activities were available to them, including skiing in the mountains and the joys many other family activities.

So Calgary's playoff ticket sales were low and there is likely to be some softness in the season ticket package next season. There is even considerable discussion among season ticket holders of changing their loyalties to the new Junior-A team which will play in Calgary next season.

In several other playoff cities teams have been playing to less than sellout crowds, and the TV ratings for the playoffs have been abysmally low. The great new golden age of hockey that

seemed on the horizon last spring at the end of the Stanley Cup Playoffs seems now a distant memory. With Quebec already on their way to Denver, Winnipeg in a holding pattern over Manitoba, and the New Jersey Devils threatening to become Stanley Cup Champion on their way to Nashville, the future of several franchises seems in doubt.

In short hockey is in trouble and although all its woes are not due to the strike, many of them are, while others were seriously aggravated by the strike.

In the meantime baseball seems to be suffering a severe case of fan disinterest. Attendance figures around both leagues are down, in some cases to record lows, and in most cases to five and ten year lows. Even where there are new ballparks, the crowds have been disappointing. Where teams are losing, the crowds are nearly non-existent.

In the past three years it has been nearly impossible to get tickets to an Atlanta Braves game. Now, even on weekends, there are plenty of seats available. Weekday and weeknight games around the major leagues are overpopulated with empty seats. Sellouts have become the exception rather than the rule.

There are any number of explanations for this other than the strike. It can be argued baseball's current problem is that the NBA and NHL playoffs are distracting the public, and trying to start a season at this time is especially difficult. Second, the long layoff, it is said, will require a bit of time to draw the public back into the stadia, but they will come in June, July, and August. This might be, but if they do not come soon, there will be major difficulties for several franchises.

Television ratings remain soft and the ability of major league baseball to sell its product to the major networks come August and September is in doubt. These problems are further compounded by three-divisional play, in which pennant races have become a bit more difficult to follow, and high interest more difficult to sustain. And it could well be that after eight months people have found other activities that seem just as interesting, or more so, than the national pastime.

All in all it is not a pretty sight, and come July and August we will know if we are dealing with a short-term problem or a major crisis for baseball.

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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