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Money and the NBA - NBC and Winter Olympics - Track and Field Records

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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There are any number of extraordinary stories in sportsworld this week, and most of them have to do with money. First and foremost is the turmoil surrounding the NBA where a very ugly scenario has developed involving an attempt by agents to decertify the Players Association and take total control of the economics of the game. Late Tuesday night came word that a new agreement has been reached by the League and the Players Association, but it remains to be seen if Michael Jordan, Patrick Ewing and their puppet masters will accept it.

The biggest money news came out of New York on Monday when it was announced that NBC had purchased the rights to the 2000 Olympic Summer games in Sydney, and the 2002 Winter games in Salt Lake City with a record breaking payment of \$1.27B. The breakdown is \$715M for Summer games, \$545M for the Winter games. These are mind boggling sums and it is clear that NBC does not really care if they make or lose money on the proposition. It was simply more important to get the rights, than to make money.

Not only is Australian Rupert Murdoch and his Fox network shut out, but ABC and their new owners from the Mouse House did not make a big splash, and the CBS hold on the Winter games has been broken. With the Sydney games coming in September NBC can use the Olympics to promote its new television season and block out the new season on the other networks.

The \$715M for the Sydney games is a 56% jump on the \$456M paid for Atlanta by NBC, and the \$555M for the Winter games is 47% higher than CBS is paying for the 1998 Winter games in Japan. Not only is this a big jump in Olympic rights fees but it is a big jump in the sports television market generally. Essentially NBC is paying \$1.27B for four weeks of sports programming, while Fox has laid out a comparable \$1.58B for its four year NFL contract, and CBS laid out \$1.72B for a seven year extension on its NCAA basketball tournament contract. The NBC fee is also considerably higher than what the organizers in Sydney and Salt Lake City had projected would be the income from the games.

All of these numbers are a reminder that sport is big big business, and that when players struggle with owners over money it is not a trivial matter. What is at stake is where the lion's share of these enormous profits will go: Into the hands of the owners or into the hands of the players. In addition as the sums of money get bigger and bigger, it should not be surprising that the intensity of the struggle increases correspondingly. When

the pie is small there is little greed in evidence as there is so little to be greedy about.

Meanwhile there has been a great deal of action on the fields of play, and I want to mention at least one notable event that has been going on over the past week, the World Championships of Track and Field taking place in Sweden. Clearly a preview of what is to come in Atlanta next summer these games have produced an extraordinary performance by the British triple jump man, Jonathon Edwards. Not only did Edwards break his own month old world record by jumping 59'7", but he then broke that record on his next attempt, becoming the first person to jump beyond the 60 foot barrier by going a quarter inch over 60 feet. Edwards has extended the world record by over a foot this summer, while coming off a bout with Epstein-Barr syndrome last season.

While in Ethiopia last month I had the occasion to see Haile Gebrselassie. He was at a hotel nightclub where traditional Ethiopian dancing was being performed and was introduced to the audience after he participated in some of the dancing himself. In June Haile had set a new world record in the 10,000 meters, and this week he won the gold at the World Championships in Sweden, running away from a field which included a number of powerful Kenyan runners.

In a race filled with tall long-legged runners the 5'3" 119 pound 22 year old Ethiopian looks out of place, but he ran away from the field in the last 200 meters. On the dance floor he looks like a small wiry fellow with excellent moves, and would never be mistaken for a world class runner.

I asked an Ethiopian friend why Ethiopians seemed to do so well on the world track and field scene. He pointed to the advantages of training at altitude, and the fact that running is one sport that is in all the Ethiopian schools. But most important may be the inspiration and tradition established by the great Ethiopian marathon runner Abebe Bekila, who won the Olympic marathon in Rome in 1960 barefoot, and then came back to win a second gold medal in Tokyo four years later wearing shoes. Since then there have been many Ethiopian world class track men and women at both long and medium distances.

With Haile Gebrselassie the legacy of Abebe Bekila lives on, and at 22 years old the legend of Haile Gebrselassie may be just beginning. Look for him in Atlanta in '96.

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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