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American Sporting Attitudes to Drugs, AIDS, and the tie.

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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Over the past few weeks there have been several incidents and developments in the world of sport that offer some insight into the culture of sport as well as broader American attitudes toward sport.

On the Olympic front two recent cases raise questions about attitudes toward drugs. The Olympic sports scene has seen the development a veritable smorgasbord of drug usage and an amazing array of drug masking techniques. In the Olympic movement drug usage, although admittedly widespread, is equally condemned by the establishment. Drug tests have been developed to detect illegal usage, urine samples are taken with the same frequency as temperatures of a feverish baby, and athletes have been banned for life -- defined as a period from a few weeks to several years.

Into this atmosphere came the Chinese women's swimming team breaking records with frequency and by wide margins. No one in the United States swimming establishment was willing to accept the Chinese claim that it was training technique that made the difference. So stringent new rules were adopted at American insistence requiring frequent drug testing.

Naturally the first one to be caught in the new anti-drug campaign was an American. Jessica Foschi was found with steroids in her system, and was banned from competition for two years even though the authorities admitted that Jessica had steroids introduced to her system inadvertently. A few days ago that ruling was changed and Jessica was put on two years probation.

This week another case surfaced in which olympic sailor Kevin Hall was placed in jeopardy by the fact that he is getting testosterone shots as a treatment for testicular cancer. Testosterone is a banned substance because it enhances performance. Hall has been in training for ten years and has been through three operations for cancer in the last five years, but the U.S. Olympic Committee ruled that a waiver could not be granted.

What both cases demonstrate is the rigid and hypocritical character of Olympic sport. On the one hand common sense cannot be employed in extenuating circumstances without great difficulty. On the other hand the appearance of a strict enforcement of the drug rules must be given, because drug use is

so widespread. The combination of suspicion, mistrust and hypocrisy is daunting. And in the case of swimming the American unwillingness to accept the notion that they could lose to anyone legally, is a form of hubris that is as questionable as it is disgusting.

The second major story of the past few weeks reveals the still strange and mixed responses to the AIDS virus. When Tommy Morrison tested HIV positive the cry that he must quit boxing came as rapidly as it did for Magic Johnson. There is so much blood in boxing, he could not be allowed to compete. As it was with Johnson, the reaction to Morrison is more emotional than rational. The chances of transmission of AIDS by boxing is just as remote as it is from basketball, but fear dominates over medical science.

Morrison himself admitted to a promiscuous life-style as the likely explanation of how he contracted the virus, and there were suggestions of too many women in too many towns. Again as with Johnson the medical evidence is ignored, because it shows that transmission from females to males through intercourse is a very long shot, and the more likely scenario involves male to male transmission. But somehow if our sport heroes contracted the virus from womanizing, it is preferable to what the statistics and medical evidence tell us is more likely. The implications that this carries in terms of attitudes are both disturbing and instructive about a culture that still hasn't sorted out its reactions to AIDS, nor its attitudes toward women.

Finally in a much less serious vein, although I would argue not a totally unrelated one, comes the news that the NCAA has adopted tiebreaker procedures for college football. For those who believe that "winning is the only thing," and "we're number one," are the dominant ethic of American sport, here is more evidence.

Isn't it odd that we cannot conceive of the sporting event in which two teams or individuals compete at equal levels and therefore the only sensible outcome is a tie? How often have you heard someone say near the end of a close game, "Gee it's a shame someone has to lose this one?" These words are one of the great lies of American sport. We want winners and losers, both short-term and ultimate, and this is why the tie-breaker has arrived in college football. Indeed, Roller Bowl is something more than a fictional sports concept.

The fate worse than death in American sport is "kissing your sister."

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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