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Yankees, Jeffer Maier, George and Reggie - Braves and Cards

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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While sitting around waiting for Gene Budig's resignation as American League president, or even for someone in the press to suggest that it might be appropriate, I have been trying to see as much of the American and National League Championship Series as possible--or the LCS as it is called, which sounds more like a religious cult than a sporting event. There has been some interesting baseball and even more interesting American melodrama.

First the baseball, wherein the New York Yankees have now advanced to the World Series. In doing so they convincingly pounded the stuffing out of the Baltimore Orioles pitching staff that was emblematic of the year of the hitter. The Yankees left no doubt that they are the best team in the American League at this time in the season, although there will always be that small doubt about their ability to handle Cleveland, which was eliminated in the ill-conceived short-series by the O's.

This series offered two major side-shows and one minor bit of nostalgia. For those who think there is an ultimate justice in the universe, the final game offered Roberto Alomar making a Bill Buckner-like move on a double-play ball that should have ended what turned out to be the Yankees big inning on Sunday. The feeling that the Great Expectator got his on that play could not be resisted. Alomar bashers everywhere had to be delighted.

The second major side-show involved Jeffery Maier, the 12 year-old centerfielder who reached out of the stands to turn an out into a home run. My immediate reaction was to see it as one of those refreshing and spontaneous moments of 12-year-old joy that adults almost immediately turn into something ludicrous if not unsavory. It also illustrates Daniel Boorstin's definition of a celebrity: "someone known for their well-knownness." Jeffery certainly became that.

To see the New York media make so much of this kid who possibly altered the outcome of the game and violated stadium rules is so New York. But it is also very much an American story with an American outcome. If it had been a ball hit by Roberto Alomar the kid's life would not have been worth a plug nickel, but that's showbiz. Of course this sort of fan interference happens all the time, but timing is everything, and this one had the timing. The only unanswered question is, will Jeffery get a ring

and a full Series share. There will be millionaires who will argue against it.

The nostalgia featured the verbal hostilities that almost turned physical between George Steinbrenner and Reggie Jackson. The convicted felon and the convicted egomaniac remain little boys even though both are now over fifty. It was just like the old days. Too bad Billy wasn't there to sucker-punch someone. Someone once said that in baseball momentum is tomorrow's starting pitcher. With the Braves down and nearly out three games to one in the NLCS, John Smoltz and Todd Stottlemyre redirected momentum in the first inning of game five. After game four which the Cardinals won in dramatic fashion as Bobby Cox seemed mesmerized by Greg McMichael's total lack of anything on the mound, one could easily have expected the Cardinals to finish off the Braves in game five. But again we were reminded that baseball is not football.

A few weeks ago you may recall I commented that strategy is overrated as a managerial quality, and that how one handles people is much more significant. When you make a statement of this kind you can always count on being proven wrong with a matter of days. LaRussa has out dueled Bobby Cox at every turn getting just the matchups he wants in almost every situation. But then those of us who follow the Atlanta Braves see this happen to Bobby all too often.

Tony LaRussa lives and dies by the analytical charts and computer print-outs, in short he makes a studied use of statistical data. This is why it is surprising that LaRussa went with Stottlemyre in game five on three days rest, as all the data shows that Stottlemyre pitches poorly on three days rest. Then in game six he admits his error and pitches Alan Benes so that Donovan Osborne has normal rest in game seven. LaRussa may have outmanuvered himself by not pitching Alan Benes in Game Five.

In Game Six Greg Maddux came back with a near perfect game as one would expect. The Cardinals were not likely to beat him twice in a row and they didn't. As for the Braves' bats they don't look all that much better despite the fourteen run outburst. So we go to game seven, which will be over by the time you hear this commentary, with the Braves and Cardinals both pitching left-handers.

Irregardless of what has happened in Game Five and Game Six there still is no momentum other than Game Seven's starting

pitchers. After last year's World Series Bobby Cox certainly will be comfortable with Tom Glavine on the mound, and LaRussa must feel good about Donovan Osborne as his starter. Whatever happens it was a great series.

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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