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SI Swimsuit Edition - Major NBA Trade - Figure Skating - Brian Hill Fired

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

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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It is mid-February, just past mid-winter in those regions to our north. It is the shortest month, while at the same time the longest month for those caught in winter. On the sports calendar it is the time between, when the Super Bowl is over and we await the NCAA Road to Wherever to be followed by the NBA and NHL playoffs. Nothing much is happening.

To fill the void and end the tedium of winter, Sport's Illustrated created the swimsuit issue. As a marketing device it worked brilliantly and has been emulated by numerous other sports magazines. The sexual revolutions, waves of political correctness, and assorted liberation movements have not changed this mid-winter ritual. It hit the stands this week, and in a bow to the new age, the cover appeared on the internet before it appeared on newsstands.

Unlike years past it did not arrive in a quiet week. Two major national stories and one major local sports story have preoccupied at least some fans who may actually have missed the arrival of the swimsuit issue.

On the national scene the New Jersey Nets and Dallas Mavericks of the NBA pulled off a blockbuster trade involving nine players. It was a roster shift not unlike a shift in the San Andreas fault. Fans heading to games in Dallas and New Jersey will find it necessary to buy a program so they have some idea who is on the court.

Not coincidentally a story appeared in the New York Times on Monday about the Nets and John Calipari, their overpaid and overhyped coach. The story contained the names of several players who had recent run-ins and disagreements with the coach. All of those named are now in Dallas. While in Dallas the three J's, Jimmy Jackson, Jamal Mashburn and Jason Kidd, who were touted as the core of this franchise, have all been traded in bargain basement deals. Now the trade could be voided and that would be an even bigger story.

Also on the national scene the past weekend saw the first major figure skating event leading up to the 1998 Winter Olympic Games, the U.S. Figure Skating championships.

In the men's competition Todd Eldredge won the gold as expected but was overshadowed by Michael Weiss who apparently completed a

quadruple toe loop, a feat never before done in competition. A mere two hours later, after reviewing the video tapes, the geniuses of the U.S. Figure Skating Association decided that the landing was not clean.

In the women's competition, always the glamor event of figure skating, Michelle Kwan was unable to defend her title. National and World champion last year at the age of fifteen, she has now been pushed aside by younger competition. Kwan, feeling the pressure, fell twice, and one supposes that if she fails at the World's she will be considered over-the-hill at age sixteen.

The winner was Tara Lipinski, at fourteen the youngest U.S. champion in history. Listed as being from both Sugar Land, Texas, and Detroit, a mind-bending combination, Lipinski landed seven triple jumps and dazzled the crowd with her energy. Suddenly she emerges as a favorite for the Winter Games in Nagano, Japan, and if Michelle Kwan can piece her ego back together the U.S. could be very strong in this event.

These developments cause some to worry that women's figure skating may be going the route of women's tennis and women's gymnastics with an invasion of the munchkins and the specter of burnout at an early age.

Meanwhile in Orlando we have been obsessing on the sudden exit of Magic head coach Brian Hill. Out of nowhere on Sunday came word that Hill would be fired following the Bulls game. A leak to locker-room sniffer Peter Vecsey of NBC indicated that Hill was finished. John Gabriel, the Magic General Manager, power glutton, and master manipulator, chose to leave Hill twisting slowly in the wind until the team returned to Orlando on Tuesday. Hill even coached the team Monday night in Charlotte, while Gabriel defined the word "disingenuous" for this city by saying that no decision had yet been made on Hill's future.

Gabriel also kept saying that this was an unfortunate situation and had to be dealt with as quickly as possible so the organization could get the team back on track, as if Gabriel himself was not responsible for the leak which created this situation in the first place. Gabriel tried to deflect the blame for Hill's sudden departure onto the players, and it appears that the local media have bought this slight-of-mouth deflection hook, line and sinker.

The next time anyone begins to talk about loyalty in sport think about John Gabriel's rise to power in professional basketball

from Philadelphia Gofer to Magic GM. Then contemplate the fate of Matt Goukas, Pat Williams, and Brian Hill, all of whom befriended Gabriel on his way up.

Pass the swimsuit issue. Winter boredom is killing me.

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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