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Playoffs Galore: A Great Time of Year

Richard C. Crepeau

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

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE

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For the sport's junkie there is no better time of year. Be it in person or on the tube this is the time for unfettered excitement at the professional sports level. Both the hockey playoffs and the NBA playoffs are underway.

In Orlando Monday night the Orlando Solar Bears were involved in one of those tense and exciting decisive playoff games. It was the fifth game of a five game set. These are one of kind playoff games in which one team moves on and the other one goes home. The incentive is the same for each, and, to use the old cliché, "there is no tomorrow."

The Solar Bears started the series at home losing two games, one in double overtime. Facing elimination they had to go on the road and win two in Grand Rapids, which they did. Monday night back in Orlando the decisive game produced sixty minutes of high tension as both teams played cautious and defensive hockey. Grand Rapids scored two fluke goals on shots that most anyone in the stands could have stopped. The Bears tied the game about half way through the third period and then took the lead for good with about four minutes left. The final was 3-2 in a game filled with spectacular goal-tending.

Tuesday night on television the NHL offered three seventh games. Only one, the late game from the coast between the Mighty Ducks and Phoenix lacked nail-biting excitement. The other two went to overtime. Buffalo used the home ice advantage to finally put away the underdog Ottawa Senators, a team that didn't exist five years ago, 3-2.

In Dallas the transplanted Stars with the second best record in the West were beaten by the young and quickly maturing Edmonton Oilers 4-3 in overtime. This was a game dominated by the Stars and by the superb goal-tending of Curtis Joseph for the Oilers. The deciding goal came in a four-on-four situation which woke up the ghosts of the past in the faraway Northlands Coliseum. It could have been Gretzky, Messier or Tikkanen, but it was Todd Marchant who went flying past the Dallas defense on the right wing and beat goalie Andy Moog, topshelf.

The third period was scoreless and the game went about half-way into the overtime before the goal was scored. The tension was thick and the goal tending was outstanding especially on the Edmonton end. CuJo looked like the CuJo that many of us saw last

year as he led the Utah Stars in IHL finals against the Orlando Solar Bears.

If all of that wasn't enough the Orlando Magic returned home on Tuesday night facing elimination in the first round of the NBA playoffs. In Miami last Thursday and Sunday the Heat turned the Magic into the Tragic with two humiliating defeats. On Thursday the Magic were down twenty-five points by the end of the first quarter, and Sunday they were down by the same margin by the middle of the second quarter.

At that point in both games this team gave up. They looked like deer caught in the headlights, like candidates for a group heart transplant. It was a pathetic performance that no volume of injuries could justify. The Heat pushed them all over the floor without resistance, and shut them down with smothering defense.

The local media and the talk shows produced an avalanche of ridicule, outrage, and disgust. Many went to the game Monday night to observe the interment of the corpse. Others did not go at all, as empty seats were scattered across the O-rena.

Those who were there watched in anger as Miami came out and pushed the Magic all over the floor again, and about half-way into the second period built a twenty-point lead at 39-19. Just over a minute later that pushing sent Ronny Seikley flying across the floor. and as he went he incurred a badly sprained ankle. He was carried out on a stretcher with the look of excruciating pain on his face. Miami scored only 36 points the rest of the way.

By the end of the period the score was tied at 42 and the O-rena was near bedlam. Two things happened. Darrell Armstrong came off the bench and picked up the defensive intensity, while Penny Hardaway took the game on his shoulders and transformed the score. He had 36 points by the half, finishing with 42. Armstrong had 21 points, four steals and eight assists. Most importantly the Magic played defense and matched the physical aggressiveness of the Heat.

Armstrong was clearly a key to the victory, but in the final five minutes of the second quarter Penny Hardaway took the game over, dominated it, and turned a twenty-point deficit into a tie. He transformed a defeated and lackluster group of players into an aggressive team that took the game to the Heat.

This could be the game in Magic History that people will look back on and say, this was the night that Penny Hardaway became a true team leader and franchise player.

This is what the playoffs can do.

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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