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Sport and Society 3-4-98

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
March 4, 1998

This week I want to talk about the man who taught me a love of sport, and especially a love of baseball, and who taught me much about life.

Charles, Charlie, Chuck, Crepeau was approaching his eighty-first birthday, when he died of a heart attack a week ago Wednesday during a Twins-Yankee game at the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome in Minneapolis, the city of his birth and most of his life. He was at his familiar stand in the press box where he supervised the radio and television section. He had performed similar duties in the press box at Tinker Field during spring training until the Minnesota Twins moved on to a more lucrative location. These were the center of his activities since his retirement from Wilson Sporting Goods.

My earliest recollections of him are associated with sport. From before my birth he umpired baseball and softball, played softball on his company team, and refereed basketball. I remember going with him when he umpired baseball games on Sunday afternoons at North Commons Park in Minneapolis in the late 40s. Large crowds gathered there from the surrounding neighborhoods. Even then "Chuck" was a local fixture, as well known as most of the players, if not always admired for his decisions behind the plate. But whatever the controversies of the game, the anger did not last, because those who knew him knew that he was an honest man, knew that he was there out of a love of the game and for the young men who played.

He umpired grade school baseball and refereed grade school basketball in the CYO leagues throughout Minneapolis, and was known and loved around the city. Especially in basketball he was a wonder to many, as he carried 180 to 200 pounds on his 5 foot, 5 inch frame. He could get up and down the court quickly, was amazingly light on his feet, and was never caught out of position.

Whether it was baseball or basketball he was always in control of the game, and worked by the rule that a good official at any sport should not be noticed. Other than his size and shape he seldom violated that maxim, and always did his best to keep the game centered on the players.

During the late 1950s with the emergence of Little League baseball he was pulled in that direction. He started umpiring

games, then started supplying umpires for first one league and then several others in suburban Minneapolis. In the late 70s and early 80s he became district commissioner of Little League baseball in the Twin City area.

His approach to Little League was like his approach to all baseball. It was there for the young boys who played it, not for the coaches, not the parents. He believed it should be fun, and a learning experience for those who played. He demanded that league officials control parents, and remove those who did not understand the purpose of the game. He demanded respect for his umpires, and support from league officials. He got total effort from his umpires.

When he umpired he was always the teacher. He would give advice to the catcher, might tell a hitter to move his back foot closer to the plate, might correct a hitch in the pitcher's motion. He wanted everyone to play well, play hard, and above all enjoy the game.

In the five years that I umpired with him I learned a lot about the game and even more about him. We had a great time umpiring together, always enjoying the games, and always knowing we had given our best.

If there was trouble in some league he and I would go there the next night. At times there was tension in those parks, which almost always broke with his presence or with his well placed words before the game.

When I worked a game with him, I always left knowing that I had worked with the best umpire there could be at any level. Most of the crowd thought the same thing. The players loved him, and when the players and crowd saw him approaching the field they were delighted to see that Chuck would be doing their game that night. Over the years he was honored in numerous ways by the leagues he supervised.

Since his retirement from Wilson he has spent his winters here in Florida, and he took up the game of golf. And in the last six or seven years I have taken up golf with him, a game I left behind twenty-five years ago. On the course he and I played poorly, but we enjoyed the game, the competition, the exercise, and the chance to spend a few hours together. And always we talked baseball.

Last fall he was at his third World Series, and saw our beloved Twins win their second championship, in what has to be the greatest Series of all time. The morning after the final game he called. I picked up the phone and heard his familiar voice say, "Did you see it? What a game, what a Series." We chattered on for several minutes and then he closed the conversation saying, "I just had to call you, it was such a great Series."

In the last few years as his friends were dying off he said to me on more than one occasion, "I want to go quick, and if I have my choice of where, I want it to be at the ballpark." He did, and he was. It could not have been better.

In recent years he would introduce me as his son the college professor, and then say that he taught me everything I know. I don't know if he knew how right he was.

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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