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Ex-Athletes as Politicians

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In recent days and weeks there has been considerable discussion in the national press of Bill Bradley's presidential run and its relationship to his professional basketball career. Such questions as: Should he exploit his NBA fame for political purposes? Should he be using this fame to raise money as he did in the big fund-raiser in Madison Square Garden last week? Why after years of disconnecting himself from his basketball career does he now seek to reconnect? Does this negate his claims that he much more than a basketball player?

For those who know much about Bradley's career it is clear that he is more than a basketball player. He postponed his NBA career to go to England as a Rhodes Scholar and broaden himself intellectually. This was as much a part of his preparation for politics as anything else he has done.

In re-reading Pete Axthelm's The City Game I found it interesting that at Princeton his classmates thought of him as presidential timber, or at least they saw him as a future presidential candidate.

After Bradley returned from England he decided to spend some time in the NBA with the New York Knicks. He made it clear to those around him that this was a bit of a diversion, that his primary interest continued to be politics, with his ultimate destination presumably the White House.

When he left the NBA he quickly left this part of his life behind, concentrating his energies on politics and seeking not to reference his basketball career. He wanted to be thought of as a serious politician not an ex-jock. As Senator from New Jersey he was determined to build his political life and reputation on political issues and causes, not on his fame in the NBA or on the hardwoods at Princeton.

Bill Bradley, it would appear, was a politician first and an athlete second, a student first an athlete second, while being very good at all of them. Still he has preferred until now to downplay his athletic career, to leave it behind for fear of not being thought a serious person.

In the last few weeks Bill Bradley has changed his tune. Suddenly he has rediscovered his NBA career and he has not hesitated to use that career to connect to the American voter, especially upscale males in NBA fandom. He has also rediscovered his teammates and his competitors and last week at a fund raising gala they came out to help Bradley raise the profile of his campaign and \$1.5M for the run at the White House.

What should we make of all of this? First, I would argue that Bradley, like Jesse Ventura or Jack Kemp or any other athlete or celebrity, should not be penalized for his background. The fact that Bradley tried to distance himself from his basketball career should probably be seen as commendable. The fact that he now seeks to reconnect to help finance his campaign and lure voters should come as no surprise. Candidates find themselves under immense financial pressures when running for office, and they find themselves in an intense competition for public attention. Ultimately candidates must do what works for them even if they are uncomfortable with it.

Indeed in the end most candidates will do whatever needs to be done. If that means using some aspect of their background for advantage, so be it. Steve Forbes uses his money, Donald Trump his money and celebrity; Ronald Reagan used his fame from the movies to build their political careers. In the end what most candidates discover is that once they have the attention of the public they better have something to say that voters find worth hearing. If not, all the money and fame in the world will do them not a bit of good.

Another interesting and different aspect of the Bill Bradley discussion is the fact that virtually no one, including the candidate himself, is suggesting that his athletic career prepared him in any way for his political career. What has happened to all those who once argued that athletic endeavor builds character? What has happened to the notion that wars were won on the playing fields of Eton? What has happened to the ideal of a sound mind in a sound body? Where are the advocates of "Muscular Christianity" and the "Strenuous Life" in the waning days of the 20th century?

Can we possibly hope that those days have passed? Indeed it could be that in the face of so much evidence that has been

accumulated just on college campuses, no one any longer holds such notions like sport builds character. Each week we are bombarded with stories of the corruption of human character in the athletic world. No wonder it is difficult to find many people out there claiming that sport increases the virtue of the participants.

Should we lament this change? Have we lost something in the course of charting all the corruption in the world of sport? I suspect we have, and I suspect it is not entirely for the better. Perhaps we should try to refocus around the character issue, and instead of claiming that sport builds character, we should insist that sport, like so much that we do, should try to build to character.

The loss of ideals should not be welcomed and we should rededicate ourselves to our better instincts. In doing so we should also reinforce and celebrate the loss of the hypocrisy that was the legacy of the 19th century shadows cast by Tom Brown and the ideals of British Amateurism.

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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