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The Silly Season for Cubs and Congress

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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It could be the full moon again. Or perhaps silliness is now the norm. Whichever the case, two items caught my eye this week. First, the Chicago Cubs are talking about trading Sammy Sosa, and second the U.S. Congress is considering legislation to ban legal betting on college sports. Which is the sillier of the two? Medieval theologians could debate that for decades.

For the past two baseball seasons Sammy Sosa has established himself as one of the two best home run hitters of our, and perhaps any other, time. In the past two seasons Sammy Sosa has been about as good an ambassador for the business and game of baseball than any player in several decades. Two seasons ago Sammy Sosa helped to both relax and humanize Mark McGwire as the two of them became one of the great stories of this baseball generation.

In the past two seasons, and indeed in prior times, Chicago Cub fans have been coming to Wrigley Field to watch the great Sosa in action even when the Cubs are out of contention. For the past two seasons, and indeed for many seasons before, Sammy Sosa has been one of most important figures in Latin America.

And so with an eye to writing another chapter in the chronicle of ineptitude that is Chicago Cub History, the Cubs are contemplating what no other franchise would dare to contemplate. This is not a case of a small market franchise unable to meet the demands of a modern sports payroll. This is not the case of some clever scheming plan to balance the books at the Tribune Company and save the media giant from bankruptcy. It is simple classic Cubness.

And the beauty is that such an idiotic move would not have a lasting impact on Cub fan loyalty. Cub fans secretly love failure. Cub fans love watching their favorite baseball team self-destruct. Cub fans expect this sort of thing.

In short the trading of Sammy Sosa would confirm that this franchise, despite the money and power of the Tribune Company and the front-office genius of Andy MacPhail, is still the same old Cubs, the loveable losers. Like the ritual killing of a vestal virgin this sort of thing is

required by history and tradition. The purity of it all is awe-inspiring.

Meanwhile back in Washington, D.C., the home of the U.S. Congress, sometimes called the greatest deliberative body in the world by those who have not seen it action, several representatives began pushing a bill to outlaw legal gambling on college sport. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Maxine Waters of California, two of the comic figures from the Clinton impeachment hearings, are ready to take on the evil forces in Las Vegas that seek to destroy college athletics.

It is clear to these wise and prudent leaders of Congress and to the NCAA officials that point-spreads and legal betting must be banished from this earth or intercollegiate athletics will die. Ignorant of history they push forward on their quest to save Western Civilization as we know it.

Perhaps if they reflected briefly on the history of college basketball and its rise to popularity in New York City they might have second thoughts. But then that presumes first thoughts.

College basketball came into the limelight via the college basketball doubleheader games at Madison Square Garden in the 1930s. Driving the popularity of the Garden games were the attraction of two games at one price, the quality of the basketball on parade, and the opportunity to bet on the games. The crowds were there to cheer for the teams, but they were also there to cheer for the point spread. Students and alumni were not the mainstay of the Garden crowds, gamblers were.

In the history of sport there is one constant. Gambling is at the heart of the popularity of sport, and in most cases gambling initiated sporting matches. Without gambling the appeal of sport would be greatly reduced.

It is true that gambling scandals have impacted intercollegiate athletics over the years. But eliminating legal gambling would do nothing to change that reality.

What is more interesting is to see the NCAA and people like Lou Holtz testifying before Congress about this sort of corruption of college sport. The major corrupters of college sport are not to be found among the gamblers, but

rather within the world of the NCAA surrounding the recruiting process and among the coaches with their endorsement contracts.

Holtz worries that point spreads might become more important than winning. Perhaps that would be an improvement. It would mean that Holtz would not have to corrupt an institution of higher learning to produce a winning program as he did at the University of Minnesota. It would mean that Holtz would not find it necessary to whine that academic standards are too high, as he did at Notre Dame when winning become too difficult.

To hear those who make millions off of intercollegiate athletics from television and corporate sponsorship decrying corruption from gamblers in the halls of Congress, while they seek to get another non-student into a university and look the other way when boosters dispense the goodies, is simply silly, full-moon or not.

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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