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## Freedom of the Press and Sports: Not Always

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
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In two cases in the last few weeks the power of sport to move politicians has been on display. In the process the notion that sport is a promoter of democracy and a teacher of civic involvement and responsibility has been dealt a severe blow.

The first case was one of those moments that cause politicians to salivate. To be seen doing the popular thing in the presence of a revered person is the political equivalent of riding in on the white horse to save the maiden in distress; Or perhaps the political equivalent of shooting fish in a barrel. The maiden in distress was Teresa Earnhardt and the offending party was "the press," this time in the guise of The Orlando Sentinel. The issue was access to the autopsy photos of Dale Earnhardt.

When the newspaper tried to get access to the autopsy photos racing fans, responding to the objections of Teresa Earnhardt, deluged the newspaper with mail, e-mail, phone calls and letters. The public outcry moved Florida's governor and legislators to seek restrictions on a free press. Freedom of the press and freedom of speech mean little to elected officials looking for votes. Indeed it is true that bandwagons are most often driven by political vote-seekers.

So the governor, the legislature and the public applauded the curbs on freedom of the press because the image of a fallen hero seemed threatened. It should also be noted that a multi-million dollar sports industry with great power felt threatened by the pursuit of truth about safety in the racing industry. NASCAR, Daytona, and Bill France Jr. have an economic stake in this issue and all are major players in Florida politics.

Autopsy records will now be closed to the public unless specifically released by a judge. Freedom of the press is not an issue when sport heroes are to be protected from who knows exactly what. Apparently this was never a consideration in the political process. A widow objected and a power industry objected. For most politicians, and I suspect not just in Florida, that was enough. Governors and legislators are now heroes and protectors of a damsel in distress. Freedom of the press be damned.

Not surprisingly these are the same people who were so willing to prevent the counting of all the Florida votes for fear the outcome would not be to their liking.

Meanwhile in Lubbock, Texas, we were being treated to another sports mob trampling on freedom of the press and the constitution. This time the venue was an institution of higher learning. The staged press conference to introduce Bobby Knight looked all too much like a Hitler Youth Rally. Each time a difficult or probing question was asked by the press the student audience of some two or three thousand booed or hooted the question down. Knight disingenuously responded with a shrug as if willing to answer but unable to do so.

Oddly the press did not respond to decry these attacks on freedom, at least at Texas Tech. If this had happened on a college campus to someone from the Bush administration or the governor's office there would have been much weeping and gnashing of teeth over political correctness and disregard for the constitution. But of course this was only sport, where freedom or the constitution doesn't apply despite the claims that sport teaches democratic principles and citizenship.

It might be easy to excuse politicians for trampling on freedom and the constitution, but it is not so easy to excuse those charged with educating young Americans who will be the future leaders of the society. For institutions of higher learning and Presidents of those institutions civil society should be a priority especially in a nation trying to instruct the world in these virtues. Clearly at Texas Tech this is not the case.

Could it be that freedom of speech and democracy are not compatible with sport? Could it be that the need to win and the psychology of coaching preclude democratic ideals and depend on totalitarian methods of leadership? Is there room for the dissenter in sport? Is success in sport more the product of the subsuming of the self to the greater good of the team, akin to subsuming the self to the good of the state? Does sport teach us rather to follow the leader, sacrificing all for victory and team? Dare we ask if sport is more fascistic than democratic?

It could be that this mentality does no more than place sport, sports figures, and heroes above the law and the norms of society, beyond the obligations of civic responsibility, beyond the rule of law and the constitution. If so, isn't that enough?

Unfortunately these tensions in sport culture are real as these two cases illustrate all too clearly. These are disturbing and distressing episodes, especially for those who believe that there is something transcending, uplifting and even glorious in sport.

In Florida and Texas these two cases should give us pause as in the name of sport and in serving the business of sport, both sport and the constitution have been tarnished.

Even worse, most people hardly noticed.

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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