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NBA and NHL Playoffs - Return of Baseball

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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For the fan of professional sport it is a wonderful time of year with a cornucopia of marvelous events on the airwaves. The NHL playoffs are underway, the NBA playoffs are off and running, and the eternal hope of spring has been let loose with the opening month of baseball season. Even the Cubs are pennant contenders. It's all a reminder that for everything else blotting the landscape of sport, the game is still the thing.

The National Hockey League in its best moments still offers a level of play that makes its claim as the greatest sport in the world highly credible. Here in Florida where the closest we can get to the playoffs is our television screen, the recently concluded Dallas-Edmonton Series was a reminder of just how riveting and exciting hockey really is. Three of the six games of this series were televised here and each of them was of the nail-biting high drama variety.

The intensity of play, the skills of skating and passing, the sheer speed on the ice were a reminder of the grace, excitement, and power of hockey. In addition the young Oiler team, having been eliminated from the playoffs over and over again in recent years by Dallas, never quit. After heartbreaking overtime losses, or trailing late in games, or in the final game down to the final second, the heart displayed by this team was inspiring. It is an eloquent answer to those who think that professional athletes don't play with the same enthusiasm as the collegiate semi-pros.

The ability of each team to answer the best efforts of the other offers testimony to the fact that sport at the very highest levels in the professional ranks can still be a thing of sheer beauty.

For those watching the NBA playoffs the Indiana-Philadelphia series has put another kind of beauty on display. Reggie Miller and Alan Iverson have both put on shooting exhibitions that are a joy to watch. For those wondering what has happened to the ability to put the ball in the basket, this series is proof that it is not entirely a lost art.

Time and time again in his career Reggie Miller has shined brightly in the playoff showcase. His shooting ability under pressure and with people hanging all over him is quite remarkable. Reggie Miller must be one of the best ever at getting open for a shot, and he must also be one of the best at getting a shot off in the blink of an eye.

As for Alan Iverson, if you haven't seen him play you are missing the best small guard performance in recent memory. Iverson's skills are such that he can totally disrupt and dismantle the opposition, wreaking havoc on opposing defenses. At times it looks like there is more than one Iverson on the court, that Larry Brown has called timeout to insert a second and third Iverson into his lineup. He is, in short, just great fun to watch.

The true meaning of spring is, of course, only found in baseball. Hope springs eternal in the early season, or as they say, on opening day everyone is in first place. At least until the day is over. This spring has produced an abundance of what will no doubt turnout to be misplaced optimism.

The Minnesota Twins, the assumed doormat of the American League, are off to their best start in several decades. Strong starting pitching and a decent bullpen along with timely hitting—the oldest success formula in baseball—has been their early season mark. They are not likely to sustain the pace, but with their pitching they should be a factor in the months ahead.

The Seattle Mariners and the Boston Red Sox both have opened strong after both lost their star shortstop. Without A-Rod and Nomar these two teams were expected to go slouching towards May. Their success formula is the same as that of the Twins—strong pitching and timely hitting.

Seattle's other wonderful spring story is the play of Ichiro Suzuki, an established star in Japanese baseball who has joined the M's this year. His hitting and fielding have been very impressive in the early going, and Ichiro has ignited the fans in Japan some of whom are shelling out \$1900 to Japanese travel agencies to make the trek to Seattle for two games and three nights in a hotel.

In the National League the Phillies and the Cubs are the spring surprises. With no one of note in their lineup the

Phillies manhandled the Braves during the first few weeks of the season and find themselves leading the East. The Cubs too are surprising everyone, especially Cub fans. But as all Cub fans know this too will pass. Until it does, let's play two, bring back Harry, and spend an afternoon in Wrigley in the snow.

And it should be noted that Ricky Henderson has broken Babe Ruth's Walk Record as he walked last night for the 2,063rd time. That's over four seasons of walks in his career, a mind-numbing notion.

Wouldn't it be nice if it were possible to keep our focus on these great performances and wonderful surprises, but of course we know it is not. The Cubs will eventually be the Cubs, police reports will hit the sports pages again, and greed will rear its ugly head.

So, for now just enjoy.

No doubt Alan Houston could find a quotation on his Palm Pilot Bible for all of this, perhaps, Genesis 1:1:

"In the Big Inning . . ."

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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