Sport in Time of National Crisis or Disaster

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One week ago at about this time sitting in the mountains of North Carolina doing some writing and listening to classical music on the radio, I was distracted by a special news bulletin. The announcer said there had been what appeared to be an attack on the World Trade Center in New York. I quickly moved to turn on the television and was struck by a sense of total disbelief at what I saw.

Since then, like most of you, I have watched more television, listened to radio, and read newspapers trying to absorb the enormity of what has happened. I still have not been able to grasp all of this, and still do not have a very good sense of what this will mean for the United States and the world over the long haul.

I have also tried to come to some conclusions about where Sport resides in this complexity of issues and events. Over the past week as people in the sports industry have tried to make decisions on the appropriate response, I must say I do not envy them that responsibility as my own thoughts on the matter have gone back and forth. To make these decisions while still numb from the events is even more difficult, and to make them when considerations other than appropriateness come into play adds to the difficulty.

There has been a great deal of discussion about historical precedence and I must say I have not found this to be particularly helpful. The Kennedy assassination led to a cancellation of all sports events other than the National Football League. Having been out of the country at the time I never have had a full appreciation of the intensity of feeling that swept the country and the role television played in the process. I always was amazed that someone as smart as NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle could have made a decision to play on that Sunday. Now, having lived through something similar I am simply astounded that anyone would have even hesitated before canceling the games two days after the assassination of the president.

The other precedent that is sighted is the situation of baseball after Pearl Harbor. Again this is not particularly helpful because several months passed between the attack and the first baseball game.
The letter that President Roosevelt sent major league baseball asking that baseball continue has been sighted over and over again. In fact it was much more complicated than it appears. Before and after Pearl Harbor, baseball owners operating through Clark Griffith in Washington were lobbying the President and his cabinet to exempt baseball players from the draft as they worried about their investment. The owners feared that baseball might not be allowed to continue and were desperate to get some reassuring sign from Washington. The White House itself saw baseball people as a nuisance and was irritated by the lobbying. The impression that FDR on his own initiative requested a continuation of baseball, and that baseball owners were patriots in keeping their entertainment business open simply stretches all credulity.

So what to do in this case?

It is clear that the NFL played the key role in this decision, and it is clear that their initial reaction up through Wednesday was to play on the weekend as baseball was inclined to do. This decision could have been justified, especially on the grounds that the President had asked people to try to get back to their normal routines.

It would appear that two factors changed that decision. The first was the logistics of air travel. It would have been difficult to get everyone involved in a game to the venue, let alone provide enough security. Second, and perhaps most important, a number of players let it be known that they were not playing; some out of a sense of what they felt was appropriate, some because they feared getting on an airplane at this point, and some because they felt it more important to be with family.

To try to force people to play under these circumstances would have been too much. One-sixteenth of your regular season revenue is a big piece of change, even more than they would have to pay refs if they agreed to their terms, but compared to the losses elsewhere in the nation NFL officials did not want to mention economic considerations.

When the NFL cancelled Major League Baseball could not play on Sunday, even though they were ready to play on Friday night. So the World Series will be another week later and they can hope for a late winter.
As for college football, they will find a way to get these games in sometime, somehow, no matter how much class time is lost. I must say I couldn't see teams traveling coast to coast under these circumstances and considering that the airports and airlines would not be back to normal.

My own view is that the pros could have played, and perhaps should have played, on the weekend. College games requiring only limited travel, i.e. non-air, should have gone forward as well. Small colleges and high schools did play and these became occasions for community mourning and communal expressions of patriotism. The emotional draining of the nation certainly would have benefited from some relief from the replays and round the clock discussion of Tuesday's tragedy.

When baseball resumed its schedule last night the ceremonies in the ballparks, which will continue tonight, were moving, appropriate, and necessary. These could have been equally effective on Friday night or Sunday, but certainly nothing was lost by waiting.

What remains to be seen is the longer-term affects on sport, especially if the economy should go into a tailspin and if the atmosphere of war takes up permanent residence.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don’t need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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