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Patriotism and the Super Bowl - Drugs and Sport

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Watching the Super Bowl on Sunday one could not avoid being moved by some aspect or another of the patriotism on display. 9/11 remains strong in the memory of us all and as I noted last September sport does provide us with opportunities for collective mourning, remembrance, and expressions of patriotism. I also noted that it is a characteristic of Americans to move toward excess in almost everything we do in public ritual.

Certainly all of these things proved true on Super Bowl Sunday. There were moments when in the pre-game, halftime, or commercial time authentic emotions were expressed and appropriate displays of patriotism were presented. There were also moments that evoked a cringe or a groan, a feeling that the bounds of good taste had been badly overreached.

The one question that keeps intruding into all of this and the one question that is almost never broached is, what exactly is the connection between patriotism and football, between national pride and the National Football League? Does the National Football League exploit the patriotic feelings of its fans to build its fan base, impress the television audience, or protect itself from public criticism? Or is the National Football League genuinely interested in providing a vehicle for patriotic expression apart from any crass commercial considerations?

When a beer company or soft drink company express their loyalty to America or pay tribute to those who have paid the ultimate price for their country, are they doing this to sell their products, to establish a connection between patriotism and their company in the minds of the public, or are they in fact expressing simple genuine feelings? Moreover how can we sort these questions and issues out?

In a world where everything is for sale, and everything is a means to sell, is it cynical to suggest less than pure motives among the sellers? Do we now live in a world in which commercialism has so muddied the waters that sport can no longer be simply sport, or patriotism be simply patriotism?

Another issue that haunts modern sport that will be much discussed as we move into the Winter Olympics is the role of drugs in athletic performance. In an interesting way the question came center stage at the Super Bowl.

During the course of the game the subject of Tom Brady's injured ankle was raised. Brady was still suffering from the injury that took him out of the Oakland Raider game. Brady of course did play and he turned out to be the Most Valuable Player of the game. He was portrayed as having great courage playing with the injury, and it was pointed out that he wisely "took the needle" in that ankle to minimize the discomfort.

In point of fact Curt Warner needed the needle for his sore ribs, Jerome Bettis took the needle the previous week for his groin injury, and when the needle hit a nerve he was temporarily paralyzed and unable to play. It is clear that many players take the needle at some point in their career. Many of the greats of the past took injected or oral painkillers with some frequency. Dexter McCleon of the Rams says that without medication half the teams in the NFL would have difficulty fielding a team on Sundays.

The dangers in this of course are many, both short term and long term. Chronic arthritis is common, early death is a statistical reality. Those players who have suffered long-range affects are nearly unanimous in saying that it was worth it. The culture of sport is to play with pain and this is seen as an important value. How you play with pain is another issue and one that needs further public discussion.

When Tom Brady is held up as a model for taking the needle on Super Bowl Sunday, it seems ludicrous to pick up the paper in the days following and read about athletes being barred from competition for taking performance enhancing drugs. If you need a painkiller to compete, surely that painkiller becomes a performance-enhancing drug. Yet what we will see and hear throughout the Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City over the next fortnight is a denunciation of performance enhancing drugs and the banning of athletes who are detected using them.

In his State of the Olympics address in Salt Lake City on Sunday the President of the International Olympic Committee, Jacques Rogge, identified "doping" as the single

greatest threat to the games. He said that doping was an attack on "ethics and fair play," and a "direct attack on the health of the athletes." He also described it as a "mortal danger to the credibility of sports world."

One can argue with Mr. Rogge's assessment of these matters, and I certainly have in the past, but if he is correct on any of these points, where does that leave the state the National Football League? Some substances are banned by the NFL; some are not, while some have become essential to the competition. Oddly NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue did not address any of these drug-related issues in his State of the NFL address.

In the aftermath of Super Bowl XXXVI and with the games in Salt Lake approaching, these are some of the questions and issues that seem to me to be worthy of discussion.

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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