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Spring Break, Spring Training, and March Madness in Many Forms

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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It is March Madness in America.

Consider the many signs.

First, here in Florida the college students have arrived for spring break. They have begun drinking enough to venture diving off the balconies of motels in search of the swimming pool. The T-shirts proclaim this the "2002 NCAA Outdoor Balcony Diving Championships." The students will have to go some to top the nine deaths during Bike Week but they may make it. MTV no doubt has the exclusive television rights.

Second, at spring training sites across the Sunbelt optimistic fans of even the weakest of teams are claiming that a trip to the World Series is all but wrapped up. Simultaneously the baseball owners and executives are trashing their sport in what is now a yearly ritual as they prepare to avoid collective bargaining while collectively bemoaning their sport.

Third, the NCAA will soon be suing someone for using the name "March Madness" without authorization. I saw an ad for a "March Madness Furniture Sale" and expect the owners of that firm to be served with a cease and desist order within the hour.

Has March Madness ever been madder or is it just me? Each year at this time I am amazed at the amount of media attention given to this multi-million dollar entertainment extravaganza produced by the NCAA. Each year at this time I am increasingly perplexed by how any of this might relate to the educational mission of an American university.

I am equally amazed by the willingness of people to give credence to the thousands of games over the previous ten days that come under the category of "Conference Tournaments." After playing anywhere from eighteen to twenty-two games to see who is the best team in a conference, all is rendered irrelevant by the staging of these tournaments. This means that the only thing really at stake in the regular season is the seeding order for the tournament. Twenty games to determine seeding followed by a one loss and out tournament. Tournament champions not

conference champions get an automatic invitation to the NCAA field of sixty-five.

What all this means is that teams already highly ranked and thus insured of being in the field of sixty-five have little or no incentive to win the conference tournament. As a result many of the top teams in a conference lose early in the conference tournament.

Why then a conference tournament? Money, Money, and Money.

The conferences are amply rewarded for providing the much-needed television programming, and of course this keeps the conference offices running and pays the bloated salaries of conference bureaucrats whose main responsibility seems to be running the conference tournaments.

In the meantime the student part of the student-athlete recedes deeper into the mist. With conference tournaments and the three rounds of the NCAA tournament the students who play hoops for the most successful teams will miss at least half their classes in the month of March. In addition they will be distracted from academic life by their preoccupation with March Madness and left exhausted by practices, games, press demands and transcontinental travel schedules. All of this is justified by the same people who insist that a Division I football playoff would lead to the loss of too much class time by the student athlete.

It is time to shut down the universities of America for the month of March so that students and student athletes can concentrate on what is truly important. If the television people and the NCAA can dictate starting times of games and order teams to travel across the continent, certainly they have the power to shut down the universities. They can do this in the name of education, claiming to be protectors of the student athletes, preventing them from losing too much class time and thus disrupting their education. Putting everyone on a one-month spring break would also appreciably enhance the economies of the Sun Belt states or at least the ones with beaches. It would also add considerably to participation in the NCAA Balcony Diving Championships.

I am pleased to see that Winthrop made the field this year. A university named for the leader of the Puritans in Colonial America taking part in this carnival of consumption and decadence is a nice touch.

It will also be inspiring to hear young men and women thanking Jesus, God, or Allah for his or her intervention on the Road to the Alamo, which of course is too often confused with the Road to Damascus.

Finally there is the NIT Tournament whose only reason to exist is to generate even more money by including another forty teams in post-season play. Surely no one is actually interested in knowing who is number sixty-six in the nation. But that is what will be demonstrated by the outcome of this event for those who did not make it to the NCAA group of sixty-five.

So more student athletes will miss more class time and be further distracted by this totally meaningless exercise in what can no longer be described as sport.

This may be the ultimate madness of March.

Or worse, it may 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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