

2-2-2003

## LeBron: High School Professional and Phenom

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, [richard.crepeau@ucf.edu](mailto:richard.crepeau@ucf.edu)

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), [Other History Commons](#), [Sports Management Commons](#), and the [Sports Studies Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Public History at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in On Sport and Society by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "LeBron: High School Professional and Phenom" (2003). *On Sport and Society*. 558. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/558>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
February 2, 2003

The name LeBron James was one that I saw occasionally on the ESPN.com site during my time in London last fall. I paid little attention to it having lived through the Amare Stoudemire buzz in Orlando last winter. I had no idea what a major story James had become in Dickvitaleland and how big a celebrity he is across America. He is so popular he may be the only high school student in America today who is known by his first name only.

This past few weeks there has been more than a little trouble for LeBron as he has learned some harsh lessons about the price of celebrity. Presumably he already knew some of its advantages as well as a bit of its cost. The arrival of his new \$50,000 SUV caused some consternation in a few of the more unsophisticated corners of the land, but after a review by the Ohio High School Athletic Association LeBron was found to be an amateur.

Now I don't want to be seen as too picky, but how could LeBron James, his high school, his teammates, or most anyone involved in big time high school athletics be classified as anything but a professional? Money and attention is swirling all around them. The school is playing a national basketball schedule in major arenas before national and pay-per-view television audiences. The team is getting all sorts of equipment and related goodies from the major athletic suppliers. The school, which is private, is getting a bonanza of free national advertising. His coach is no doubt finding a few things rolling his way. LeBron himself has become an economic asset of major proportions, valuable enough to serve as collateral for a loan on his now legendary means of transportation, and no doubt there is more.

The definition of a professional as someone who gets pay for play is silly at best and leads to the strange distinctions seen in his case. LeBron James can benefit his school, his coach, his mother, his friends, and certainly himself as long as it doesn't involve certain taboo items. In the case that led to his suspension from Ohio high school athletics, the taboo items are signed collectable football jerseys. The owner of a store in the Akron area gave these to James.

Suddenly LeBron James is a professional.

The fact that James spends much of his day practicing and playing basketball, appearing on television, travelling thousands of miles to play basketball games which are television events; the fact that he has already been squired around the country to basketball camps and tournaments, while staying in nice hotels with plenty of amenities; the fact that basketball has been the sole focus of his life for years; all made him a professional years ago.

It is clear that there are many other high school professionals all across the country playing basketball, football, tennis, hockey, baseball, golf, and figure skating. One is a professional not by the fact of monetary technicalities, one is a professional when what one does is either your major means of support or the major occupation of your waking hours. If you are pursuing that activity with the idea of gain, monetary or otherwise, you are a professional.

If young Mr. James has a skewed sense of values, who could be surprised? If young Mr. James has an exaggerated sense of his own worth, who could be surprised? If Mr. James sometimes wonders why everyone near him is making good cash money and he is not, who could be surprised? If Mr. James turns out to be a wonderful young man with a strong sense of moral and ethical values and an unassuming personality, who could not be surprised?

The only thing we really know is that LeBron James is a very good basketball player, that he has thousands of people taking a piece of his action, and that he has been a professional for several years.

The issue is not his professionalism, but the opportunism of those around him. It is not his professionalism but the value system of a society that reacts in this obscene manner to the fact that a young man is very good at basketball.

Our games have long since ceased to be games. The concept of play has nearly vanished from the land. Commercialism is omnipresent and it corrupts nearly all those touched by it. What is new in the equation is the creation of a national communications network with an insatiable appetite for

devouring sports celebrities. Network television, cable television, sports journalism at all levels, the shoe companies, the equipment companies, and the agents have all raised the bar of lunacy and commercialism in sport.

Those caught in the middle of it seem unable to recognize their role. ESPN does stories about how this young man is being corrupted and then turns around and glorifies his every move. Dick Vitale, the creator of 17-year-old Adonis figures, expresses dismay and astonishment over what has happened to LeBron James in the past week. Vitale calls on everyone to just let the young man play and enjoy his youth. Dickvitaleland is the center of the corrupted universe and its skill is blinded by the landscape.

Of course it is not new. Forty some years ago I watched a friend who was a very good athlete destroy his life because he came to believe that the sun rose and set around his person and nothing but his athletic skills would ever be required of him in life. We probably all know people whose lives have been sidetracked by the glitter. The miracle is that anyone survives this mad world of American commercial athletics and hypocrisy.

Whether the saga of LeBron James becomes a cautionary tale, a story that fuels the madness to yet another level, or somehow produces a decent human being with a strong sense of ethics and values remains to be seen.

Meanwhile let's get ready for next year's prep school sensation who is, we will be told, "just awesome baby!"

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.

Copyright 2003 by Richard C. Crepeau