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Outing Athletes - Death at Spring Training and Dangerous Supplements

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Baseball is back in the news this week with two stories attracting considerable attention. One involves drugs and one involves sexuality, one involving a marginal young pitcher and one involving a Hall of Fame pitcher. Both stories have gotten considerable attention, and the focus in both cases seems to be off the mark.

This week Sandy Koufax announced that he was severing his career long ties with the Los Angeles Dodgers. Two months ago the New York Post ran a gossip item indicating that the Hall of Fame pitcher is gay. Rupert Murdoch who is also the owner of the Dodgers owns the Post. Koufax, a man who has long been vigilant in guarding his privacy, took offense at this story which the Post now says was not true.

What is not clear, as Koufax in his personal style has said nothing publicly, is if the Hall of Fame pitcher was angry about the violation of his privacy or about being charged with being gay. One would hope that it was the former and not the latter. Being called gay, whether one is a member of the Hall of Fame or an ordinary mortal, is not something that one should find offensive.

The focus of the story should in fact not be on Koufax but on the New York Post. This is now the second prominent athlete that the paper has sought to "out" over the past year. Last summer the Post had all of New York abuzz about the sexual orientation of Mets' star Mike Pizza, who finally in total frustration called a press conference to declare his heterosexuality.

One must wonder what the problem is at the Rupert Murdoch owned New York Post and why it is that in New York City the sexual orientation of an athlete is such a major issue of prurient interest. Is the Post reading public so unsophisticated as this? Are the people of New York lacking the cosmopolitan sophistication which we in the rest of the country are accused of not having by the custodians of culture in Manhattan? Do New Yorkers still find homosexuality shocking? Those of us who work with gays and lesbians on a daily basis are amazed by this silliness in America's cultural capital.

It's time that the people at the New York Post, the powers that be at Murdoch's news empire, and the readership of the Post, get over it and join us in the twenty-first century. The real story here is not Koufax and Murdoch, the real story is that homosexuality is still a story.

The second big baseball story of the week came from Baltimore Oriole spring training where Steve Bechler, a twenty-three year old pitcher, collapsed and died during a workout apparently the victim of heat stroke and other factors.

One of the other factors is reported to be the drug ephedra which was in a dietary supplement being taken by Bechler to help him with weight loss in the early days of spring training. Ephedra is one of the key ingredients in a number of weight loss formulas available at your local market. Thousands of people across America, not just baseball players or other professional athletes, take it on a daily basis to lose weight.

Predictably in the aftermath of Bechler's death there have been any number of calls for the banning of ephedra from use in baseball. Congressmen, the Commissioner, and other pharmacological experts, have called for the banning of ephedra, and have taken the opportunity to call for more drug testing. Ephedra, we are told, is banned in the NFL, in the Olympics, and by the NCAA, although not in the NBA or NHL. It has been the position of the Major League Baseball Players Association that players should be allowed to take over-the-counter supplements like everyone else across the United States.

Once again the focus of the discussion is in the wrong place. If there are drugs out there that are dangerous to the health of people who exercise, who are dieting, or who are building their strength in some way, then the issue is not if baseball players or other athletes should be taking them. The issue is if anyone should be taking them. Three billion dollars worth of ephedra products are sold in this country each year and if it is a danger to people it should not be so easily available.

If the Secretary of HEW says that he would not take this dangerous drug, why then has he not done enough to stop it from being available to anyone and everyone who walks in off the street to purchase it? Why are ephedra based

supplements sold without restriction to anyone of any age? Where is the Federal Drug Administration? Does the FDA even have jurisdiction over herbal derivative drugs? Are we to assume that the functioning of the free market is more important than the health or lives of the population?

There are many ordinary people in the population who exercise strenuously, who are trying to lose weight, and who are using various kinds of drugs to do so. Some are doing it under strict medical supervision, others are doing it on their own and relying on over-the-counter drugs. It is clear that people believe that a drug is safe if it is available over the counter. Very often this is true if the user follows the cautions and directions on the label. Clearly at times it is not.

If ephedra is safe then there is no need to ban it. If Bechler did not follow the directions for the product he was using, then a ban is not needed. But if ephedra is not safe, there is no need for baseball or any other athletic body to ban it. Rather it should not be for sale as an uncontrolled substance anywhere in this country.

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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