Kobe Bryant Case - The British Open Fabulous Finale

7-21-2003

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The avalanche has begun. Over the next several months we will be buried in media coverage of the Kobe Bryant Case. We will get double coverage with misinformation flowing from the news outlets and the sports outlets. By the end of this weekend numbness was already beginning to set in every time I heard the word "Kobe."

When I turned on my computer Saturday morning and connected to the MSN homepage I got my first dose of the trivializing of a serious case of sexual assault: "Vote: Is Kobe Guilty?" Less than twenty-four hours after the indictment in Colorado, before anything substantive is known about this case, the Internet public is asked to make a judgement. On what basis? To what purpose?

You can be sure this is only the beginning. In a society in which sex is used to sell anything and everything, there is nothing that captures the attention of the public more than a juicy sex scandal. In a society that holds the presumption of innocence as a central tenant of its judicial system, there is nearly always a mad rush to public judgement in these celebrity cases.

What we have seen so far is only the beginning. The Bryant press conference of Friday had less sincerity than a 4 a.m. Infomercial. The attacks on Kobe and on the young woman in question have just begun. The defense of Kobe on the grounds that he is a great player or that he has so much too lose, and the mounting attacks on the character of the woman in the case are all irrelevant, inappropriate, and disgusting.

What we know is that a sports icon, Nike role model, and seemingly very nice quiet young man has admitted that he cheated on his wife. His image has been forever shattered whatever the outcome of the criminal prosecution. What we do not know is the truth, and despite what claims may be made for the American legal system, we are never likely to know the truth. We will know if this is a strong case, we will know if the prosecutor is good at his job, and we will know how good the highly paid legal defense team is. But lawyers, commentators, and spin-doctors will bury the truth.
In the meantime the case will be discussed ad nauseam in the media and the public will form their opinions without having access to all the evidence, not that such access really matters. The lives of Kobe Bryant, his wife, and the young woman in Eagle, Colorado with whom he had sexual relations will never be same.

Another sports hero has tumbled from the heights. As if following some sort of law of compensation the sports machine has produced a new hero within forty-eight hours of the indictment.

The Open, better known in the U.S. as the British Open, produced one of the most amazing Sundays in its long and storied history and tossed up for our consideration a young hero, who by the end of the day seemed almost a legend. Ben Curtis has a background that seems right out of a 19th century novel of pluck, luck, and middle class myth. Only the fact that he is a recent graduate of the Hooter's Tour reminds us that this world is not entirely perfect.

Ben Curtis grew up in Ohio, learned the game of golf from his grandfather, on a course built by his grandfather. One television commentator even mentioned that Curtis was a product of solid mid-western values, whatever that is supposed to mean. This is Curtis' first year on the PGA tour and his sixteenth event on the tour. He has never finished in the top ten in any of these events, he is ranked 396th on the tour, was a qualifier for The Open, and this was his first major. No one has won their first event at a major in ninety years.

It was the manner in which Curtis won that was most amazing. As he bogeyed four of the final seven holes after holding the lead through much of the day, it appeared that the pressure of The Open had overcome the rookie. However just before he made a very nice putt to save par on the final hole, Thomas Bjorn, who had a two-stroke lead over Curtis, was taking an improbable double bogey on the sixteenth hole. Had Curtis known that his final putt was to maintain a tie for the lead, one wonders if the pressure that had weighed so heavily on him down the stretch would have affected that putt. But he did not know, and he seemed relaxed as he rolled in his par on the eighteenth giving him the winning margin. Bjorn would go on to bogey the seventeenth and Curtis was the winner by one shot.
Ben Curtis was seventeenth after the first round, tied for fourth after the second round, and tied for third going into play on Sunday. The victory is one of the most improbable in the history of The Open, and indeed one of the most amazing results in the history of modern sport.

We will now be treated to the stories of this remarkable 26-year-old from Ohio, his fiancée, his Midwestern values, his solid family, his special relationship with his grandfather, and then some. There will be the temptation to see Ben Curtis as a hero and a role model, something above the ordinary human being.

As long as this is confined to his achievement at The Open such praise is justified. The danger is that it will spill over to become a lauding of his character, a subject about which little is known. We must remember that Ben Curtis' achievement was on the golf course and tells us nothing about his character as a human being.

To be able to strike a golf ball or shoot a basketball with extraordinary skill has nothing to do with the quality of the character of a person. If nothing else the stories of Bryant and Curtis on this amazing weekend should remind us all of this simple truth.

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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