

NBA Finals, Summitt, and Howe

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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It is always a surprise to me that so much can happen in SportsWorld in only two weeks. It was just over two weeks ago that I left for Canada and the annual conference of the Sport Literature Association. That was followed by several days on Prince Edward Island. The developments over these last two weeks have left me with much to contemplate.

First on the list was the result of the NBA Finals and the sports resurrection of Cleveland. The drought is over. Cleveland has a championship in a major professional sports league. The Cavaliers defeated the Golden State Warriors in the seventh game in what turned out to be a highly entertaining, although not impeccably played, final. High stakes and seventh games seldom are an artistic success. This does not mean that individual performances of high quality were lacking, nor does it mean the games were a disappointment.

In this case the anticipation of the outcome in Cleveland alone was enough to support a massive fan interest. At the center of this interest was LeBron James, the prodigal son who had "taken his talents to South Beach" in a manner that was unsavory and left an unpleasant aftertaste. However the narrative changed when James, "King James," returned to the city whose river had once burned. Having promised to lead the Cavaliers and the greater Cleveland area, his boyhood home, to the promised land of an NBA Title, James sat in the eye of a potential hurricane.

In the first year of the return the NBA title eluded the King and his Cavs. Golden State defeated an injury hamstrung roster in the finals and King James' crown lost some of its luster. This year however things were different in a number of ways. Golden State was an improved team and set a new NBA record for wins in a season. More significantly LeBron James had a full cast for the finals and one of that cast, Kyrie Irving, played with the cool poise of a veteran player and became that second great player that all NBA champions need. Both teams had a complementary cast of excellent role players.

It was Cleveland's year, James' year, and the title King had been earned yet again in an NBA world where James seemed to be doubted by many. For me there was never any doubt of his greatness as a player. I have seen all the great ones form George Mikan on, and none were better than James. I had only one

reservation about James and that centered on his maturity. Back when the Orlando Magic were near greatness in 2009 I saw James stymied by Stan Van Gundy's defensive scheme and the Cavs defeated in the Conference finals. When the final game ended James ran off the court and never looked back to acknowledge the achievement of his opponent. It was a classless and cowardly moment.

This time around it was different. Throughout the finals, win or lose, he faced the press and their sometimes obtuse "How does it feel" questions. The moment that defined the "King" in James, was the interview he did with Craig Sager.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=be93SANvffs>) For me it erased all my misgivings about James as a person and set him apart from the old James and from many other bad winners and bad losers in the world of Sport.

Pat Summitt, one of the most important figures in modern women's sport, died on June 28. In women's basketball she was the most significant of all, and as a coach she was in a category with the likes of Bee, Allen, and Wooden. It would not be an exaggeration to say that she invented the modern women's collegiate game as we now know it.

It is possible to make this claim because she built the first women's basketball dynasty at the University Tennessee, and by virtue of the fact that she did so with her grit and her genius. She started with nothing at Tennessee at age 22 using bake sales to buy uniforms, driving the van to take her team on the road, doing the team laundry, and tirelessly promoting the game while building a basketball powerhouse.

Pat Summitt became a grad assistant at Tennessee after she graduated from UT Martin in 1974. When the head coach suddenly resigned she was promoted to that position. The first year was a struggle but the 16-8 record was the first step in a career that ended in 2012 when she resigned in the face of early-onset dementia.

Summitt's career can be measured by the ascending numbers of wins, conference championships, national championships, her salary, and the size and prosperity of Tennessee basketball. She is a member of the Hall of Fame, a pioneer in the sport, but most important of all are the many women who played or worked for Summitt and how she shaped their lives.

In Women's Sport there are many great and defining figures including Billie Jean King, Pat Summitt, Wilma Rudolph, Althea Gibson, and the Williams sisters. In the post Title IX world of

collegiate sport none is more important a figure than Pat Summitt.

A few weeks earlier one of the greatest hockey players in the history of the game died. Gordie Howe had a five decade career that helped to transform the game offensively. He posted numbers over those decades that will make him a permanent part of the record books. Only Wayne Gretzky posted more career goals. On the ice he was a fierce competitor. Part of the Production Line with Ted Lindsay and Sid Abel in Detroit his toughness was attested to by the signature Gordie Howe hat trick consisting of a goal, an assist, and a fight. Gretzky who idolized Howe recalled facing him on the ice, stealing the puck from Howe, only to feel Howe's stick on the back of his leg and watching Howe skate away with the puck. Off the ice Howe was revered as a gentleman of great kindness and generosity, a wonderful human being.

Meanwhile the European Cup competition has produced its surprises with Wales and Iceland, yes Iceland, advancing into the knockout round, while England produced the double with an exit and a Brexit. At Wimbledon the fortnight comes to its conclusion this week following an upset of Djokovic opening up the men's draw, and the Williams sisters heading to a possible meeting in the finals.

It has been a fun-filled fortnight.

On Sport and Society his is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don' have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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