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WBC, NBA, and NHL

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE - WBC, NBA, AND NHL
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Now that the World Baseball Classic has ended and the United States has finally notched a WBC championship, it is time to reflect on the event. For me, it was a great success not because the U.S. won, although that was important, but rather for a number of other reasons.

To see baseball played by professionals with such emotion was a treat. To see fans so invested in their teams and so enthusiastic about the games added to the luster of the tournament. Television ratings were the highest they have been and attendance was the highest it has been during the short history of the Classic.

It might be time to consider making this a biennial event rather than once every four years. With the interest generated this year it seems that four years may be too long to wait. Interest might wane over that extended period of time and memories could fade. Having the next Classic in two years would help to build upon the current interest.

Another point of considerable interest particularly important for Americans was to see the variations in the game as played elsewhere. Different cultures found expression through their style of play, the demeanor of fans, and the value placed on the event. Americans take pride of ownership in baseball and think, as a result, that they are entitled to define the norms for the way baseball should be played.

For all of the traditional claims that baseball is the National Pastime, it is not a game that contemporary American fans use to define their cultural heritage. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the American approach to baseball is more

emotionally muted than it is in other cultures or for other American sports such as football and basketball.

Some of the American players seemed to have trouble accepting the fact that others approach the game in a very different way. The enthusiasm and flamboyance of the Latin players seemed to offend some on the U.S. team.

For the Puerto Ricans, Venezuelans, and Dominicans, national pride was at stake in this tournament. This was not just another round of games but an expression of the nation. Baseball does not usually carry this sort of meaning for Americans who do not feel a need to use this tournament as a statement of their assumed superiority in baseball.

Style in baseball is not something Americans have traditionally valued. This is also true in many other American sports where style, until recently, has been shunned as "hot-dogging." American sport developed in a segregated white world where substance of play counted most. Words such as "discipline" and the assumption that there was a "right way" to play, helped drain feeling and stifle creativity. Indeed one of the major obligations of the American coach was to instill these traits that are contained under the general category of "character."

This may be changing in American sport but the traditionalists in baseball do not like it. When African American players were finally allowed to enter the field of competition with whites in sport, one of the great conflicts was over the issue of "style" v. "discipline." White coaches and fans reacted negatively to expressions of style, and even now in the early 21st century the authority figures in the NFL feel they must continue to fight this fight over the issue of end zone celebrations.

For the Japanese the style of the game is also different. The regimen of practice is much more rigorous than in the United

States. The idea is to perfect the fundamental elements of all aspects of the game. Discipline and uniformity are major concerns, even more so than for the Americans. The term, "robotic" is often attached to the Japanese style of play.

For the Japanese fan baseball is a communal exercise with rules and customs. There are team chants and cheers, players have individualized songs written about them, and the fans are expected to know the words to all of these. The fan experience seems more akin to that of a soccer crowd than a baseball crowd in the United States or Latin America. National pride is also central to the Japanese. Baseball can be fun, raucous, and a vivid expression of variations in culture, and as such each nation can claim it as their national pastime, expressing, as it does, the uniqueness of each culture.

The other issue that has come forward this week in the NBA is that of "resting" star players. This was addressed by the Commissioner, Adam Silver, in his memo to owners. Silver referenced the impact this practice might have on fans and business partners, and on the "perception of our game."

Greatest concern seems to be over the impact on nationally televised games. Networks pay for a product and advertisers spend their dollars to reach a maximized audience. One might assume that sitting several stars for a particular game might have an impact on audience size and therefore advertising value.

Silver might also take a look at one of the root causes of the move to rest players. There are too many games and too many back-to-back games, and sometimes as many as three games in four nights in three different cities. For any team certain to make the playoffs, what is the value of exhausting their players in games of minimal value?

The NBA also needs to consider the fan who goes to a game or chooses to watch it on television has a stake in all of this. It is now the practice in professional and college sports to use "premium pricing" for tickets. That means if I am going to see the Cleveland Cavaliers I will be paying more than I would for a game against Sacramento. If LeBron James does not play in that game, I should be refunded the price differential I had to pay to see the Cavaliers. This is classic "bait and switch" and the NBA is now a frequent practitioner of that marketplace fraud, whether intended or not.

So the NBA has a problem of scheduling, but also a problem of economic ethics. Adam Silver now faces a problem that will not be solved as easily as moving an all-star game or removing an owner.

Finally it is the time of March Madness. We know this because Gary Bettman, Commissioner of the National Hockey League announced that the NHL may not compete in the 2018 Winter Olympics because it is inconvenient. So Bettman is ready to toss off the most important showcase for hockey in both the U.S. and the world. It is clear that March Madness has hit him. It is also clear that the NHL needs the marketing offered by the Olympics more than it needs Gary Bettman.

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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