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## The Palace Brawl

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
The Palace Brawl  
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It really is not the end of Civilization as we know it.

The Palace Riot in Detroit was ugly, uncalled for, stupid, silly, frightening, foolish, the action of immature millionaires and immature and alcohol laced fans. It was the result of boorish fan behavior and lax security, the inevitable outcome of excessive hype in every corner of our culture, and the result of too much attention paid to sport. It was fueled by the exhibitionism of players, the resentment by fans of millionaire athletes, and cultural differences over the meaning of sportsmanship.

The list could go on forever.

However it is not the worst moment in the history of American Sport, it is not another sign of the further decline of decorum in American public life, and it does not mean that American sports fans and players are worse than those who belonged to previous generations. These things are not new, they have been going on here and around the world for over a century, and they are not going to end. As the cliché would have it, "You cannot stop it, you can only hope to contain it," something sports authorities have been doing with some success over the years.

Fans, players and referees have been subjected to violence and occasionally death at sports venues and in riots outside such venues for many years, most recently in Boston. In the half-century that I have been aware of such things I can remember a huge laundry list of such episodes. Each year there is at least one story of fans of rival college or high school teams getting into fights before, during and after the games. There have been more than a few high schools around the nation that have found it necessary to cancel games, or to play in empty gyms or stadia because of the threat of violence. I repeat this is not new.

At the professional level players often perform under the pall of death threats from fans. I remember one night in the early years of the NBA when Minneapolis Lakers center George Mikan was just missed by a knife thrown from the stands. I remember one holiday baseball afternoon in Minneapolis when the venerable Gene Mauch and his brother-in-law headed into the stands and

fought with St. Paul Saint fans who had been verbally harassing them all day, first in the morning game in St. Paul and then in the afternoon game in Minneapolis. Both the two city doubleheader and the harassment were holiday traditions.

In baseball two of the original members of the Hall of Fame, Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb, headed into the stands after hecklers. Cobb in 1912 went into the stands after a heckler named Claude Lueker and pounded on him. When informed later that Lueker had lost three fingers on one hand and could not fight back, Cobb said he didn't care if the guy had no feet.

Ruth in 1922 after being called out stealing second, throwing dirt in the umpire's face, and being ejected from the game was greeted with boos as he headed to the dugout. Babe went into the stands after one heckler chasing the man from the park, then went back to the top of the dugout and challenged the entire crowd.

The worst incident that I had the good fortune to witness was the now famous Atlanta-San Diego bean ball war in August of 1984. After a two hour plus rain delay in which fans had plenty of time to consume all the beer in Fulton County, the game opened with Pascual Perez hitting the Padres leadoff man with a pitch. From here a bean ball war ensued when Padre pitchers kept throwing at Perez. Four separate brawls took place on the field over the course of the game, and more than once several highly fueled Brave fans joined the festivities on the field. At one point Padre Kurt Bevacqua was physically restrained from going into the stands by police after he was hit in the head by a beer cup.

That afternoon in Atlanta there was a feeling of madness in the air. The only thing like it that I ever experienced was when I was caught in the middle of a riot in Memphis several years before. You could feel the craziness and there was a sense that you were at the edge of chaos. It could have been worse. The previous night had been "ball night" when a baseball was given to every fan as they entered the stadium.

Many will recall Disco Night in Chicago, Nickel Beer Night in Cleveland, hockey players going at it with fans, Vernon Maxwell of the Houston Rockets going into the stands in Portland in 1995, and several fan/player confrontations this season in baseball. After each such incident there is a wringing of hands and sometimes there are even steps taken to change things like security and beer sales. Basketball is particularly vulnerable

with the fans so close, in some cases sitting courtside, while it is relatively easy to get to the court. It is also easy to verbally harass players from the more expensive seats.

The real question is not why did this happen, but rather why doesn't it happen much more than it does? If you have been to games at any number of levels you know that the verbal abuse can be vicious and at times highly personal. You also know that the fuel-injected fans that fancy themselves tough guys frequently challenge the manhood of the athletes. Rivalries often approach the level of hatred. Craziness fills the air at any number of sporting events.

Clearly something should be done to enhance security and to control the worst of fans as well as those players who cannot control their own emotions. Just as clearly, things are not as bad as they seem in the immediate wake of the Palace Riot.

The levels of security at an English Premiership Football match display a police presence around and in the stadiums that resembles a maximum-security prison. I was amazed the first time I saw this. I can only hope that we will not come to that state of affairs, and I am thankful that so far we have not.

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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