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New Year's Nonsense

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
New Year's Nonsense
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As the calendar turns over from 2004 to 2005 we are back where we were a year ago with the BCS. Once again the "C" has been removed. At the end of the regular season there were five undefeated college football teams. In the meticulously constructed world of the BCS only two of those five teams played each other in bowl games negating the claim of a national championship although there certainly is a BCS champion.

The BCS championship game was played in what is called the Fed Ex Orange Bowl. This offers perfect symmetry as the Orange Bowl game is not being played in the Orange Bowl, making it as phony as the attempt by the BCS, ABC, and ESPN to pass this off as a national championship. The Orange Bowl is no longer played in the Orange Bowl but in Pro Player Stadium, once known as Joe Robbie Stadium, located some thirty or so miles north of the Orange Bowl.

So at the end of all the bowl games we know several things. Oklahoma may not have been the best choice to play Southern Cal, there are still three undefeated teams, and no matter how heavy a beating USC put on the Sooners no one can say for certain that USC is the best team in America. We can say they are the BCS champions and we can say they pummeled Oklahoma but Auburn and Utah remain undefeated.

We also know from the last few weeks that you can claim anything on TV, and if you say it often enough and solemnly enough, many people will believe it. Over and over again ABC announced that the national championship game would be played on January 4. Some people have come to believe it. If it truly was the national championship it would not be necessary to constantly announce the fact as people would simply know it. So let me end this segment by saying that you are reading the best sports commentary in America. Now repeat that five times every day for the next four weeks. Thank you.

Meanwhile over in the National Football League, another one of those institutions that continually illustrates the triumph of public relations over reality, another bit of sports fraud is being perpetrated. In the last two weeks of the regular season teams that have clinched playoff berths have benched their stars

to keep them from being injured. This is not a serious issue unless a team fails to put their best team in play for games that have playoff implications. Two weeks ago Philadelphia gave the Rams a free pass and the Rams finished 8-8 making the playoffs, when in point of fact they could easily have been 7-9 and on the outside looking in. Denver too was given a similar gift this past week by the Indianapolis Colts who bench the best quarterback in the game after a few plays.

If this sort of situation arises in baseball the unwritten rules are clear. When playing teams that are fighting for pennants or playoffs you play your best players and you use your regular pitching rotation. If this is not done, the howling is fierce, and indeed it seldom happens. Some may say that football is different because of the greater risk of injury. That is an illusion or simply a lame excuse. A baseball player can be injured at any moment in any game, and a pitcher can suffer an arm injury without prior warning.

Baseball concerns itself with the integrity of the competition, while the NFL does not. In the NBA rules were adopted to prevent teams from "tanking" games at the end of the season to improve their draft position. Also in the NBA games with playoff implications are played for keeps with everyone in the lineup.

If the National Football League is as concerned about the integrity of the game as it claims to be something must be done. The rule should be simple. In games with playoff implications everyone plays and plays to win. If they do not the Commissioner makes a judgment and imposes a severe penalty. Taking away a first or second round draft pick from an offending team might be one solution.

In college football the ethical landscape continues to develop sinkholes. At Ohio State the once proud Buckeye Program is reeling under the weight of boosters on the loose. Andy Geiger, once considered the penultimate in athletic directors, appeared before the press clearing stunned and dismayed, while many called for his resignation under the cloud of corruption. It has been a steep slide.

At Louisville Coach Bobby Petrino signed a million-dollar contract with his institution nearly doubling his salary, and when asked if the signing of the new contract meant that he had no interest in the LSU job, he said that is what it meant. Within a week Petrino was involved in discussions with LSU about the head-coaching job there. The Louisville faithful were

furious over Petrino's conduct and there is still no guarantee that he will remain at the Kentucky school even though LSU has gone elsewhere. Across the nation salaries continue to escalate faster than the national debt, while university presidents watch helplessly unable to control their own institutions.

At Oklahoma Bob Stoops is given a \$100,000 a year raise every year no matter what. If he gets a call from Jeremy Foley, the Florida AD, it is said, only partially in jest, that Stoops gets an automatic million dollar raise. Eight Division I-A coaches make over \$2M annually and it is predicted that the \$3M threshold is soon to be crossed. Should we blame it on the market forces or the booster forces? Or are these the same things?

Not content to allow football to monopolize the nonsense front, baseball has made its move. The Anaheim Angels are no more. When the franchise began as an expansion team in 1961 they were the Los Angeles Angels. In 1965 they became the California Angels and then in 1997 the Anaheim Angels. It was under that last name that they won their only World Championship. Now the Angels have announced yet another identity. They are from this day forward to be the Los Angeles Angels at Anaheim or LAAA.

Where is Bud Selig now that we need him? Where is the invocation of the "best interests of baseball clause" now? My guess is that Bud is off somewhere practicing the new Angels' fight song: LAAA, LAAA, LAAA, LAAA, LAAA.

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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