

Ethical values in sport

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Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Ethical values in sport
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At times, the world of sport offers its fans moral and ethical questions of a formidable nature rivaling the questions pondered by medieval theologians. For example, who is morally more reprehensible: a baseball player who assaults a television cameraman or one who takes steroids after denying under oath that he had never taken steroids. Whose transgression is worse: a football player who fails a drug test or a hockey player who in a premeditated action assaults a fellow player with a sucker punch from behind, drives his head into the ice, and breaks his neck?

This first case was put to baseball fans last week and the answer is unclear. When Kenny Rodgers returned from his suspension, which was truncated by an arbitrator, he was roundly booed by fans in Boston, but then Boston fans would do that. When Rafael Palmeiro returned from his suspension for failing his drug test, the fans in Baltimore gave him a mixed reception. Some booed; others cheered. More fans than congressmen, columnists or pundits cheered. In Oakland last night, the A's fans were less welcoming.

The second case is more perplexing. Clearly, NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman, in reinstating Todd Bertuzzi, thought that premeditated criminal assault was not serious enough to ban a player from the league, even if this was not a first offense. Many of the players and even The Great One, Wayne Gretzky, have welcomed Bertuzzi back to hockey, saying essentially that Bertuzzi has suffered enough. Steve Moore, who was the victim of Bertuzzi's assault, has still not recovered over a year after the incident. Apparently, he too has not suffered enough.

This may be the vilest performance in recent years in all of sport. The Cult of Violence in hockey is well known, the codes of violence are well understood, but simple premeditated assault should have resulted in a ban of both Bertuzzi and his coach, Marc Crawford, who set the bounty on Steve Moore's head. The ban for both should be for life. Bertuzzi's assault was not just criminal; it was cowardly. Any attempt to place a sucker punch from behind into the category of being within the macho code of hockey is absurd. Todd Bertuzzi should be in jail and not on the ice.

This reinstatement is a pathetic decision by a failed commissioner who has just led his sport through an attempted suicide. If there were any decency in the National Hockey League Gary Bettman would no longer be associated with that organization. He has now taken a very bad situation and made it considerably worse. It would be nice to think that the fans will prove wiser than the clowns who run the NHL when they react to Bertuzzi's return to the ice, but I won't be holding my breath.

As for those football players in the National Football League who are suspended for taking drugs, no one seems to care. I don't recall any case of a player being booed heavily after returning from a drug suspension.

The simple truth is that the bottom line is winning. If you are winning or are an excellent player, all is forgiven. If you are not, well then, a lot is still forgiven but maybe not everything.

The current sports scene offers another case to consider. Two weeks ago, The Orlando Sentinel ran a feature story in which they pointed out that many convicted felons just out of the slammer will be playing college football when the season opens in a few weeks. One is a player convicted of mugging a fellow student who returns to the field of play after serving 258 days in jail. Another was convicted of armed robbery. A third stole \$16,000 in computer equipment. Two others were involved in a fight in which a young man was killed. One of these players was convicted of manslaughter, while the other was convicted of felony assault. All will be part of the great spectacle that is college football.

According to Paul Haagen of the Center for Sports Law and Policy at Duke University Law School, most of the convicted felons on campus are football players. Most convicted felons would not be admitted or readmitted to the same universities unless they were athletes. The Sentinel offered another half-dozen cases to illustrate the point.

Coaches who embrace these players invariably argue that they are in the "second chance" and "lifesaving" business. Former Nebraska football coach Tom Osborne could wax eloquent about his Father Flanagan role in saving the troubled souls of the young men on his team. Other coaches like Urban Meyer, now at the University of Florida, and Bobby Petrino, at the University of Louisville, make the same point when discussing these cases.

Other coaches simply won't talk about it. As for the NCAA, they would prefer to ignore the issue.

And how do the fans of college football feel about all this? I would guess that few football felons have ever been booed by their own fans, even though they are often the subject of harassment from fans of the opposing teams.

It seems as if the moral and ethical lines in sport are clear. You can do nearly anything on or off the field as long as you are a winner, except in some select cases involving professional baseball players.

I think this is what Heywood Hale Broun had in mind when he said that sports builds characters.

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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