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Madness in March: steroids & point-shaving

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Madness in March: steroids & point-shaving
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Welcome to March Madness, or rather the Madness that is March. I will not use "March Madness" because CBS Inc. and the NCAA Inc. own the phrase "March Madness" and I wouldn't want to face a lawsuit for using this copyrighted phrase. So in deference to CBS, the NCAA, and their all-star team of corporate lawyers, I will not risk their wrath and will speak only of the "Madness that is March" rather than "March Madness."

As you head down the Road to the Final Four looking for Cinderella and an upset special to guide your exercise in bracketology, remember that all the "Madness that is March" will not be seen on CBS Sports, and that neither CBS nor the NCAA has a monopoly on madness in America in March or any other month.

The levels of madness unleashed in the Barry Bonds Saga reached "Red Alert" levels over the past few days. The latest round of Barry Bashing was triggered by the publication of an excerpt from Game of Shadows by Mark Fainaru-Wada (nice symbolism) and Lance Williams in the March 13 issue of Sports Illustrated.

With two hours of uninterrupted time on my hands flying from Dallas to Orlando, I read this scathing indictment of the most hated baseball player in America. What surprised me most about the SI piece was how little it revealed that was new. What it did do was sharpen the focus by providing considerable detail of Bonds' drug life. The shock and outrage over the SI publication seems ludicrous unless most media types have been in a cave over the past several years.

What is worth noting about the details in this book are the sources which were most heavily relied upon by the two San Francisco reporters. First, and foremost, is the information provided by Kimberly Bell, the jilted lover whom Bonds summarily dumped. Second, there is a raft of information from the BALCO investigation, some of it in code. This includes testimony from Victor Conte, owner of BALCO, and Bonds' trainer Greg Anderson, who was on the BALCO payroll. In addition there is considerable circumstantial evidence from Bonds' personal appearance and behavior. These materials are a combination of public information, evidence gathered by federal investigators and leaked to the media, and sealed grand jury testimony. Much of it was already in the public domain.

Nearly everyone quoted and cited in the SI piece had a vested interest in laying blame somewhere other than on themselves, or in taking revenge on Bonds. It may be that the charges are accurate; it may be that they are fabricated; it may be that Barry Bonds violated the law, and it may be that Bonds is a despicable human being. What has not been demonstrated is that Barry Bonds violated the policies of major league baseball.

As a result, the calls for Commissioner Bud Selig to "do something" about Barry Bonds are misplaced. What the commissioner needs to do has been done. Baseball has strengthened its drug policies, testing procedures, and penalties. What the Commissioner must not do is jeopardize the legal proceedings in the BALCO investigation and all of its related matters. Barry Bonds may have violated the law regarding controlled substances and taxes, and he may have perjured himself before the grand jury. What Bud Selig must not do is short-circuit any of the legal proceedings that could be initiated against Bonds.

As to the concerns over baseball records and Bonds, these are beside the point. Let justice proceed to its conclusion, and if at some point Bonds is found guilty of something and is still in major league baseball, then, and only then, should the Commissioner take some action.

Another item in the Madness that is March is a study that has been done by Justin Wolfers, a forensic economist of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. By crunching vast amounts of data involving college basketball results and point spreads, Wolfers has found what he considers evidence that "point shaving" is alive and well. It is most likely to be found in games where the spreads are large, more than twelve points, and where it is easy "to shave" and still win the game. Wolfers has looked at some 40,000 college basketball games played over the past sixteen years and has found that five percent of the games with large point spreads were fixed.

For those who doubt the data, and I am very skeptical of this sort of data, there is enough corroborating evidence in player surveys and previous scandals to ease my skepticism. For those who doubt the methodology, I can only say that similar techniques were used to show that Wall Street traders were backdating their purchases of mutual funds, and this information was successfully used by Eliot Spitzer, New York's attorney general.

One other area of college basketball worth an NCAA examination is the conference tournaments that have just concluded. These non-events are used to determine conference champions who are given automatic bids into the NCAA tournament. If the top-rated teams in the conference fail to win the conference tournament, and a lesser-rated team does win, the result can be an additional team from a given conference making the NCAA tournament.

This is seen as a wonderfully exciting aspect of the conference tournaments. I would suggest one other possible interpretation of such results. In a time when the finances of intercollegiate athletics continue to soar, the pressures for more and larger revenue streams continue to mount. What easier way to maximize conference income than to increase the number of conference teams qualifying for the tournament? And what better device is there to achieve that increase than the proper outcome of the conference tournament? Consult your local bracketologist.

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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