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The ultimate non-event: the NFL Draft

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The ultimate non-event: the NFL Draft
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It is the biggest non-event in sport. It saturates the sports talk shows, the sports pages, the sports magazines, the sports web sites. It is the orphan adopted and promoted by ESPN and turned into a monster of the television world. It is the sports version of "Let's Make a Deal" as audience members dress up to catch the camera eye. It is the sports television equivalent of a nuclear explosion leaving behind a wasteland of irradiated viewers.

It is the NFL DRAFT!

Over a week ago I had heard so much about the NFL draft that I thought it was happening last Saturday, April 22. The array of pre-draft specials and the myriad discussions of who was going where in the first round, and whom Houston would select as prime beef in the marketplace, led me to believe that the appointed day was upon us, and none too soon. So I waited last Saturday to hear the first cannon shot from the mouth of Chris Berman that would signal the start of the show. It didn't happen. Alas, another week of polluted airspace lay ahead, another week of speculation on the Bush stock, Reggie not Dubya.

Then I read the most ludicrous warning I have seen in years, something well beyond a Red Alert. A columnist in the Orlando paper told readers to beware of the dreaded Mel Kiper Overload. It was coming soon during the Draft weekend ahead. Had this guy been on Mars? Even for the semi-conscious sports fan Mel Kiper Overload hit about a month ago.

Although I can never get too little of Mel, I must say I admire him as a great American success story. Mel Kiper Jr. is one of those characters that dot the American landscape taking what is a minimal amount of talent in an obscure corner of the universe, parlaying it with some esoteric and faux information, and magically turning it into a life's work accompanied by a notable level of celebrity. Kiper is not unlike Jimmy the Greek in that respect. As a familiar name and a familiar face he rivals Charles Nelson Reilly as well as a flock of ubiquitous game show hosts who have passed across the television screens of America over the last several decades.

So now the appointed day really is upon us. We will soon know the answer to that important question, who Houston will take as number one. This is the major issue troubling America today. Not war. Not gas prices. Not the trade deficit with China.

Mel Kiper Jr. will be adjusting his charts, talking about one player's "upside," another player's slippage, as a wide receiver drops from three to fourteen. Kiper will ask whether or not that running back from Unknown State University who put up big numbers in Division II has the heart to hit the line in the NFL. Others will speak knowingly about some player's ability to succeed on Sunday. We will be privy to what's happening in the war room and who's still sweating it out in the green room. Smiling young men will be introduced to the crowd and interviewed on TV. Grandmothers will hug newly minted millionaires.

And all the while Mel Kiper Jr. will ponder those lists trying to figure out who the Jets will take in the next round. Chris and Tom will debate the merits of going for the best available athlete or meeting the particular needs of the team. Mel will weigh in here as well, because Mel Kiper Jr. has never met a problem for which he didn't have an opinion.

Great American dreams are played out at the draft and certainly that is part of its appeal. New millionaires will be asked, what is the first thing you will buy? Some will mention a sports car, others will speak of gas guzzling SUV's, but mostly they will tell us that they will buy a house for Mom and Dad who stood behind them all these years; Mom and Dad who made those sacrifices that parents make and believed in the new millionaire's dream to play football in the National Football League.

It is such an American Story. Little boys across the land, some already being red-shirted in kindergarten, will watch this display wondering why Mel keeps shouting. In the meantime, their fathers will calculate the right mix of motivation and coaching needed to produce a first round pick. While Mel ponders his charts, the fathers of America will be assessing other charts to determine the football potential of Middle Schools and High Schools across the land. Little millionaires are made, not born.

Older boys already dreaming the American dream will focus more firmly on the task ahead. They will commit themselves to more hours of practice and weight training, contemplate the possibilities of pharmaceutical assistance, and mortgage their

youth and their education for the NFL dream. They, like so many trained in the ESPN universe, will confuse the false dreams of the TV reality show, with the ambition, dedication and talent necessary in both sport and life.

They will believe that in the world of statistical odds they live on the up side. One day they, too, will be highly rated by Mel Kiper Jr. and then be interviewed by Chris Berman; all this coming shortly after they hug their grandmothers, these new millionaires, the latest lottery winners, these possessors of the American dream.

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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