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College football violence

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
College football violence
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It was an ugly scene last Saturday. Players from both teams were pushing, shoving, and punching one another. Some players were thrown to the ground and kicked by others. Coaches and stadium security, as well as local police, got onto the field to try to gain control of the situation, but as soon as they stopped one fight, another broke out.

The Dartmouth/Holy Cross game ended in disgrace.

Several brawls broke out in the stands at a very bloody Army v. Navy game with President Cleveland in attendance. That was in 1893.

In the early days of college football, fighting on the field was no stranger. Opponents choked players, eyes were gouged, fists flew, and kicking was common. It was a violent game, and a deadly one, and it was played with a win at all cost mentality.

After Washington beat Washington State in an overtime game a few years ago, angry Washington State fans rained down glass bottles onto the field. The rioting and arson following Ohio State v. Michigan games in Columbus is the stuff of legend. In Morgantown, West Virginia, mayhem along fraternity row follows all significant victories.

A 2002 Harvard Study of drinking and binge drinking clearly linked the growth of violence at college sporting events to the blood alcohol levels of the fans in the stands. The link between beer and sport in America is so intertwined as to make them nearly indistinguishable.

This past weekend, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and the University of Nevada, Reno, renewed a football rivalry that was cancelled after pre- and post-game fights at the 1995 game. Two weeks ago, an on-field pushing and shoving incident took place following Illinois' upset of Michigan State. It seems that in some sort of rite of territoriality the Michigan State players were trying to prevent Illinois players from planting the Illinois flag at mid-field. In point of fact the Michigan State coach seems to have an obsession over this little ritual with the posting of players at mid-field after any home loss. One wonders why a coach would prepare his players for defeat in such

a fashion, but that was part of his Notre Dame game plan as well. "Not in Our House" has become a national sporting slogan.

Major high school football rivalries were frequently followed by major street fights among fans for as long as I can remember, and that memory goes back to the 1950s. Sometimes the fans didn't wait until after the game and the fights broke out in the stands.

The list is endless, as is the list of incidents involving the University of Miami over the past few decades. The Hurricanes have earned a reputation for braggadocio and violence, including the wearing of army fatigues by the team in the days leading up to the 1987 Fiesta Bowl. In 1988 it was Notre Dame battling Miami (the Catholics v. the Convicts) at South Bend, in the tunnel, prior to the game. And in three of Miami's last seven games the Hurricanes have been involved in on-field incidents, culminating in the brawl with FIU at the Orange Bowl.

Following the incident at Louisville, in September, Gregg Doyle of CBS Sportsline wrote that the problem was that Miami coach Larry Coker "hasn't learned the difference between a good hoodlum and a bad hoodlum." After the brawl with LSU following last year's Peach Bowl, there were apologies all around from Miami athletic officials, but clearly nothing meaningful was done to change the football culture under Larry Coker and U of M President Donna Shalala.

So Miami once again proves the worthiness of its reputation, and Donna Shalala, who has taken "the football express" for her career advancement, first at Wisconsin and now at Miami, has shown she knows where the real money is. Responsibility starts at the top, and Donna Shalala's values were made clear when she approved the admission of Willie Williams to the University of Miami in the summer of 2004 despite his criminal record and the charges against him during his recruiting process. Her past makes her just announced policy of "zero tolerance" as empty a gesture as one could concoct.

It is in fact incredibly easy to pound on the Hurricanes, and I suspect that is why so much has been written over the past few days on this topic, and why the condemnations have been so loud. Miami however is but a poster child for much deeper problems in the American sports culture in which winning remains the only thing.

It is in the name of winning that any and all behaviors have been tolerated in sports. Woody Hayes was allowed to destroy locker rooms and assault players, as long as he was winning at Ohio State. Bobby Knight was given a pass on the most boorish behavior imaginable by a coach, as long as he was winning. Great players have been given passes over and over again for bad behavior and poor grades, beginning in primary school, because they were winners. Sexual assault, simple assault, battery, burglary, public disorder and indecency, harassment, drunkenness, drug use, and fraud all have been tolerated at any and all levels in the service of winning.

Very little of this corruption is new to our contemporary sports culture. As long as winning is everything, and as long as success is measured in revenue flow, nothing much will change. Miami, Larry Coker, and Donna Shalala are not really all that important. They are only symptoms, and this week's headliners, in a sports culture that has long been out of kilter.

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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