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New Year's roundup

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
New Year's roundup
JANUARY 2, 2007

It is difficult to know where to begin after being away from this column for the past few weeks as there are so many bizarre and interesting things that have happened that seem worthy of comment.

First, can anything be said in favor of the bowl system? It appears that there are thirty-two bowl games, or approximately thirty-two more than needed. Most of them belong to the category of "Friends and Family Bowls." Many Bowl names offer little or no clue as to where they are located or why they exist. Such names as Brut Sun, Emerald, or Meineke Car Care Bowl seem to exist in a timeless, spaceless universe. The Papajohns.com Bowl offers the prospect of a game at a pizza establishment in cyberspace. Then there is the University of Phoenix Stadium, site of two Chip Bowls. If you didn't know any better, you might think that this is the home field of an on-line university whose team exists only in cyberspace. On-line football presented by those offering an on-line degree in a virtual world. There is no longer a need for reality based football.

One good thing might be said about the bowls, or at least one bowl, the Fiesta Chip Bowl. Boise State's amazing win over Oklahoma was welcomed by those of us who still don't quite understand how it is that BCS schools are better in football by fiat than non-BCS schools. If Florida should beat Ohio State it will be more than amusing to listen to the experts and BCS apologists explaining why the undefeated Boise State team isn't the number one team in the nation. It will give added meaning to the term "mythical national champion."

All of this, of course, is overshadowed by the obscenity brewing in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where it is now said \$40M has been put on the table for a football coach. It might be cheaper to bring back Bear Bryant. The notion that winning football games anywhere, even in a place with no other distinction, is a sad statement about the priorities that surround college athletics. The only thing more disquieting is how little comment this elicits from the academic and cultural leadership in this country.

Education has been taken to another level by David Stern's insistence that high school basketball players, no matter how

good they might be, must spend a year somewhere after high school, before being drafted by a NBA team. For most players this means a year will be spent at an institution of higher education learning the intricacies of history, math, and the motion offense. These players have already been dubbed "the one and dones." They will spend the year on a campus playing basketball, and maybe even attending a class, before moving on to the NBA. The era of Drive-by Education has arrived.

Most college coaches see this year of exposure to college as a benefit, or at least as Jim Boeheim of Syracuse said, "I don't know anyone that's been hurt by a year of college." And no one has been harmed by eating vegetables, Jim. No harm, no foul! More to the point, as many coaches and administrators point out, "the rule change allows colleges to build stronger teams and sell more tickets while giving the N.B.A. a better chance to evaluate young players." A win-win situation if there ever was one. What more important reason could there be to support the college of your choice?

Also in college hoops, it's time to celebrate Robert Montgomery Knight's elevation to the top of the pantheon of coaches. Knight now has won more games in men's college basketball than anyone in history, passing Dean Smith this New Year's Day. For all the negatives I have written about Knight over the years, it must be said he is a very good coach of basketball skills and schemes, and he is a man committed in his own strange way to the fundamental concepts of education, even though his behavior is despicable. He is not a great man, or a great hero, but a complex and fascinating human being, who has reached a significant milestone in his career.

The news from the world of baseball is also quite revealing. First is the spending spree that has been unleashed in the free agent market. Once again owners are unable to restrain themselves and the price of mediocrity, unknowns, and super-stars have all taken a jump. This is another illustration of why the owners tried for years to get the players to stop them from their profligate spending habits.

More interesting has been the decision by a three-judge panel in the Ninth District Court of Appeals, by a vote of 2-1, that will allow federal authorities to use the drug test results seized in the BALCO case for courtroom evidence. Even though the tests were administrated under a collective bargaining agreement that guaranteed complete confidentiality to the players, the courts

have voided the agreement. The ruling is a reversal of lower court decisions, and indeed is a dubious application of the law.

For those who think that mandatory or even voluntary drug testing is a good idea and do not fear how the information gathered in this testing might be used, regardless of guarantees of confidentiality, it is time to think again. We are in a climate in which the Fourth Amendment and other constitutional rights are under siege. Trust no one, especially your government, to uphold the constitution, and remember that an appeal to the current Supreme Court is a crapshoot.

Finally, for those who think that football is King, there is good news. It is, but it is not American football. According to a group called Initiative Sports Futures, the world's largest television audience came together to watch the World Cup. 260 Million people watched the World Cup final and over 600 Million watched some part of the World Cup. Compare that to the Super Bowl audience of 98 Million and you get a look at the relative significance of these two kinds of football globally.

So football is king, but alas it is played with a round ball.

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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