

Ereck Plancher and tragedy

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Ereck Plancher and tragedy
MARCH 30, 2008

It has been about two weeks now since the news came that Ereck Plancher, a University of Central Florida football player, had collapsed and died following a grueling conditioning workout leading up to spring football practice. He was nineteen years old and an honor student in high school. He was just starting his second year at UCF. Having graduated from high school one semester ahead of schedule, he enrolled at UCF early hoping to establish himself academically with a 4.0 GPA before starting football.

Well-liked by his classmates both at UCF and at his high school in Naples, Ereck was a hero to his nine year-old brother. His parents, his brother, and his sister were devastated by the news. His teammates were stunned. George O'Leary, the UCF head football coach, said calling Ereck's parents was the most difficult thing he had ever had to do as a coach. Ereck's high school coach talked about what a great kid he was and how much he was loved by everyone who knew him. He had great promise both academically and athletically.

These are always shocking moments and it is difficult both to find words that can encompass the grief and the tragedy and to offer explanation and comfort to the living. In this case it was no different.

When a tragedy like this occurs on the athletic field it makes headlines. The local media devoted significant airtime and print space to the story. Coaches were interviewed, friends were contacted, students at the university appeared on the local news in reaction sound bites. The coach held a news conference, the university issued a statement, the grief of the family was speculated upon. Again and again the refrain came, "he was only nineteen." He was cut down in his youth. There was so much promise and now it is gone. Yesterday's memorial service in Naples saw a reiteration of the stories, the tributes, and the anguish.

After a few days passed and I had a chance to reread A. E. Housman's "To An Athlete Dying Young," I started thinking more and more about this young man of nineteen and how his death was such a prominent event in the community. I then thought about other nineteen-year-olds in this and in other communities across

the country who, over the past five years, have become one of those, among the four thousand, to die in Iraq.

It seems to me that over the past five years none of these nineteen year-olds killed in Iraq as part of the American invasion and occupation had ever caused a public reaction as did the death of Ereck Plancher, at least not here in Orlando or at the University of Central Florida. This is not to question the tragic nature of Ereck's death, only to wonder why the many deaths of nineteen-year-old soldiers did not draw similar attention.

Is it more tragic to die on a football field than in a war? Is it more newsworthy when a nineteen year-old dies preparing for football than when someone of the same age dies in a war? How do we make these comparisons? Who makes these determinations?

Does this mean that death serving one's country in a misguided cause is less tragic than death while serving the gods of football? Do we make less of the death in the current war because we don't want to contemplate the tragic consequences of political hubris? Or do we make more of death on the athletic field because somehow we value sport more than most any other action a nineteen-year-old might do? I don't pretend to know the answers to these questions.

I do know that sport is highly valued in our society and that pursuing football has long been a measure of manhood for the young men of America. I also know that serving one's country and being willing to face death in combat has also been an important marker of manhood.

As I watch these scenarios surrounding death I am struck by how differently each has been treated. I also find it troubling that I see little in the media about the tragic deaths of young men serving in this war, the promise that has been cut short in their lives, the grief of the living who will never see these young men again. Where are the sound bites from their friends, their classmates, their coaches, and their parents? Where is the sense of tragedy and loss?

And I wonder which of these deaths is more senseless and which is more tragic.

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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