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Loving March Madness in spite of it all

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Loving March Madness in spite of it all
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Have you caught March Madness? The television ratings thus far indicate that there is a greater chance this year than last that you have not.

I have. I always do. I can't help myself.

No matter how much I loathe the hyping of March Madness, no matter how mentally disturbed I find many basketball coaches, no matter how hypocritical I find the NCAA, and no matter that I have come think of elite intercollegiate athletics as one of the most corrupt institutions of our time, I can't help myself.

I love March Madness. I love the competition. I love the pure illusion that Cinderella might actually win the Big Dance, even though Cinderella needs to buy a ticket to get into the Final Four. I love all those screaming college students who actually seem normal when they wander into my classroom. I love the all-out effort by the athletes, who enjoy the beauty of competing with such intensity, even as I wonder if they ever give half that level of intensity to their educational responsibilities.

All this being said the commercialism that now totally dominates intercollegiate athletics is beyond the pale. The corporate sponsors seem to be omnipresent. General Motors is hyping its "March Madness" sale, hoping that hoop fans will catch this form of March Madness for which this staggering corporate giant has paid a pretty penny. The length of the so-called "TV Timeout" is now approaching infinity (actually three minutes). I watched nearly an entire hockey game during these timeouts.

CBS advertising sales are estimated at \$545M on an investment by the network of an estimated \$529M. Advertising rates for the championship game will be \$1.256M, second only to the Super Bowl. General Motors, AT&T and Coca-Cola are the three biggest advertisers for March Madness and pay additional fees into the NCAA's "Corporate Champions Program," the NCAA's top sponsorship level. This gives these champs additional opportunities to build marketing programs around March Madness and other NCAA sports and the right to use the NCAA logo. One report put the cost of this status at \$500M.

Again this year CBS and the NCAA will provide on-line video streaming and this time it is free to users. Sponsors such as Courtyard by Marriott and Dell will pay the freight, and commercials will appear during the games just like real television. Facebook purchased the exclusive rights for the CBS Sports Official Brackets contest. Indeed everything that moves or does not move seems to have a sponsor.

Not to worry however because the athletes themselves will not be able to exploit their commercial value while advertising the virtues of Enormous State University and pushing ESU's merchandise on an adoring public. They will also find little time to pursue their education during a basketball season that sends them around the country to compete at all hours of the day and night so that ESPN, FOX, and CBS will have sufficient programming to fill their schedule.

One of my favorite discussions these days is the one about the David Stern Student Athlete (DSSA). That's the freshman superstar who has been forced to go to college for a year, rather than to head into the NBA after high school. The television analysts have termed them "the one and done" players. I prefer to think of them as victims of a drive-by education.

One of the more revealing discussions during one of the game telecasts this past week was speculation on whether or not these "one and done" players actually bother to go to class during the spring semester. If they plan on leaving for the NBA after the end of their David Stern enforced exile, why would they bother? It doesn't matter if they flunk out of school because they're not coming back to school anyway.

I love this sort of candor.

I doubt that NCAA President Miles Brand enjoyed that discussion on national television. The NCAA, of course, is all about education and student athletes, even if it is only for one year or even one semester. I am sure someone somewhere is saying, yes, but these players are getting exposed to college (the raincoat theory of education). This is true and in the end much less dangerous than being exposed to high levels of toxic waste or even all that NBA money.

Always equally edifying is the report that comes out of Richard Lapchick's Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, at the University of Central Florida, showing graduation rates for those universities involved in March Madness. Just how strong

the commitment to education in NCAA athletics is evident from these studies; although they show some overall improvement in graduation rates over the past few years, unfortunately once again this year the gulf between graduation rates for African American athletes and others remains quite significant.

When all is said and done then March Madness really is about the money, and it has either a detrimental effect on higher education or at best no effect. Its purpose, as is the purpose of intercollegiate athletics generally, has been stated quite well by former University of Michigan President James Duderstadt who said that they exist "for the entertainment of the American public, the financial benefit of coaches, athletic directors, conference commissioners, and NCAA Executives, and the profit of television networks, sponsors and sports apparel manufacturers."

And finally, did you know that there is an Official Ladder of the NCAA Championships? When the winners cut down the nets next Monday night, look for this new star of the latest NCAA revenue stream.

No word yet on the scissors.

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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