

7-2-2008

The death of Jules Tygiel

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "The death of Jules Tygiel" (2008). *On Sport and Society*. 778.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/778>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The death of Jules Tygiel
JULY 2, 2008

Yesterday the long and courageous struggle of Jules Tygiel ended. For the last several years Jules has been battling cancer with considerable success against high odds. In the past several weeks the options for treatment began to close down, and from his last health update two weeks ago it was clear that the battle was coming to its tragic conclusion.

Still it came as a shock when I got a message from Lee Lowenfish last night telling me the news none of us wanted to hear. The first reaction was one of loss and sadness, but as is often the case sadness was tempered by reflection on this wonderful person whose life as husband, father, son, friend, historian, and human being was inspiring to all who knew him.

I have known Jules for over thirty years, having met him at meetings of the North American Society for Sport History, and having heard a paper by him, read in his absence, on Jackie Robinson's first spring training, at a meeting in Florida in the mid-70s. I can't put a precise date on that event, but I know that at the time he was still at the University of Tennessee and was just finishing his Ph.D. work at UCLA.

Jules was among the first of those who came out of Ph.D. programs in History Departments to have done work in Sport History. He was also among the first to have some considerable commercial success with a book on Sport History, that being *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*, published by Oxford University Press in 1983. This beautifully written history of the desegregation of baseball remains in print to this day.

In my view, *Baseball's Great Experiment* is not simply a great piece of sport history, but a great piece of American historical scholarship. It is the one book in our field that I wish I could have written, and the one book that has been read by students, baseball fans, intellectuals, and people who care nothing about baseball or sport, with great interest and pleasure. I am always struck by the number of my students who have told me that they have no interest in baseball, but found this one of the best books they had read while in college. Certainly the power of the story of Jackie Robinson is compelling, but it is the superb writing and analysis that drive the narrative.

As with many who came into the field of history in the 1970s, Jules struggled to find a permanent position. He was a year at the University of Tennessee, another year at the University of Virginia, and before he left for San Francisco State he told me that if this did not work into a permanent position he would likely leave academic life. We know of course that the position at San Francisco State quickly became permanent. Shortly, Jules' life was transformed when he met and married Luise Custer. His two sons, Charlie and Sam, blessed them in different ways and they were a joy to Jules and Luise.

Jules' career at San Francisco State was full, and his partnership team-teaching The History and Literature of Baseball with Eric Solomon was a model for many of us around the country. Jules and Eric were a wonderful team and their collaboration was a rare opportunity for those students lucky enough to have gotten into the class.

Jules was an active member of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) where his on-line postings stimulated controversy and discussion and provided another vehicle for teaching and learning. Jules was a founding member of The Pacific Ghost League, one of the first, if not the first fantasy baseball league in the United States. I first became fully aware of it while attending a Milwaukee Brewers game with Jules and Luise in Milwaukee during a SABR meeting. Jules kept cheering at odd times and for players from both teams. I was enlightened as the game went on and vowed I would never succumb to this evil that had befallen the delusional Tygiel. This is my fifteenth year in a fantasy league.

There are so many stories and so many great achievements that could be catalogued here, and I am sure that many who will read this will have their own stories and memories of this brilliant, kind, and gentle person. Since the struggle with cancer began I have seen Jules several times. Each time I was struck by the will power and optimism he brought to the struggle. Each time I marveled at how well he was doing, and indeed his regime of exercise and diet worked wonders on his body and against the cancer within it.

The last time I saw Jules was at NASSH in 2007 when he was given the NASSH Recognition Award for Distinguished Service to Sport History. It was a few months later that his health began to deteriorate again and by the end of the year he was hoping to enter an experimental treatment program, but complications prevented that from happening.

I marveled how he remained so strong and always looking ahead. He was ambitious to do more in his classes and with his research. He and Luise dealt with his struggle and with their children with great strength and courage as Sam became a young man and Charley continued to require extraordinary care and attention. The toll this has taken must be considerable. To say that the lives of Jules and Luise is an inspiration may seem trite or clichéd, but it is no less the truth.

In early January I asked Jules what he saw ahead if the experimental treatment was not successful. What I meant was, were there other options? Jules read it more directly as a question about how he would face death. His answer from an e-mail follows:

"As a devout atheist, I have no fears of dying, but whatever suffering is entailed is another matter. I feel that I have lived a full, rich life and have, like yourself, been fortunate in the two most important areas: the choice of a life companion and the choice of a profession. I do resent the fact that I won't get to watch Sam, who is now 16, grow up and mature and I won't be there for him as he meanders through life. I also had anticipated growing old and traveling with Luise. Leaving her to face the challenges of Charlie alone seems cruel. In the short term, I am hoping to shift into a more productive mode. The new chemotherapy has been milder in its effects than the last one. I have more energy and have been able to face my office for the first time in months. I can't imagine taking on any major projects, but I'd like to be able to write more short pieces. . . .both on sports and politics, and I'd love to get back into the classroom next Fall. When I am feeling well, all things seem possible."

In sports there is a lot of talk about role models and heroes. Jules Tygiel is a good choice for us all in both categories.

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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