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The death of Nick Adenhardt

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The death of Nick Adenhardt
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For all us fans the opening of the baseball season is one of the first signs of spring. The teams have ended training in Arizona and Florida and are now ready for the long grind of the regular season. April is full of optimism and hope. It is the time of renewal, a time to begin again as an equal in the standings. Reality will set in eventually for all but the very best, hopes will fade, champions will be crowned, and then the following spring it will begin again.

For players it is also a time of hope. The older players with fading talent hope to hang on. The younger players who have spent time in the minor leagues hope that this will be their year to take that step to the major leagues, and perhaps to star on the big stage. Those who don't make that step will go back to the minors and work on their game with the knowledge that there will be another opportunity when the next cycle begins.

For those who do make that step, it is a dream attained as well as a new challenge to establish their credentials for what will be a long, productive, and rewarding professional career. These are familiar stories and part of the larger drama that works itself out in sport.

Every now and then the story takes a different turn. This week in Los Angeles a 22-year-old pitcher named Nick Adenhardt was living the dream of all minor league players. After four years in the Los Angeles Angels' system Nick Adenhardt arrived and succeeded at the major league level. Having made three appearances for the Angels in previous seasons, Adenhardt found himself on the major league roster as a starting pitcher as three of the Angel's starting pitchers were on the disabled list. On Wednesday night given his chance he made the most of it, pitching extremely well while holding the Oakland Athletics scoreless for six innings.

It was a near perfect evening as Adenhardt's father was in the stands, having flown out to Los Angeles to see his son make his first start of the new season. Nick Adenhardt had called his father, urging him to come to Los Angeles for the game. "He told his dad that he'd better come here, that something special was going to happen," said Adenhardt's agent Scott Boras.

After the game, Adenhardt left the ballpark with friends for a small celebration. A few hours later the car in which he was traveling was hit broadside by a drunken driver who ran a red light. Three of the four people in the car, including Nick Adenhardt died.

This sort of thing happens with considerable frequency across America each week. It is so frequent it gets very little attention outside the immediate area.

For those who follow baseball and sport it was a dramatic death that got immediate attention. The young promising pitcher had his life snuffed out in an instant, within hours of the greatest moment of his budding career. For Los Angeles Angel fans a member of their team was gone, for the Angel family the loss was highly personal, and for Nick Adenhardt's family and friends the tragedy was devastating.

I was reminded of the spring training boating accident in Winter Haven, Florida, in 1993 in which two Cleveland Indian players, Steve Olin and Tim Crews were killed and Bob Ojeda was seriously hurt. Again it was the time of hope and promise, when the death of young men left families and friends to mourn their loss, and left the city of Cleveland and baseball fans in shock.

It is amazing how quickly things can change, how fragile life really is, and how death can strike at any moment. We are reminded how tangential existence is, how meaningless the games we watch and play are within the larger scheme of things.

The case of Nick Adenhardt also reminds us of the dangers on the roads, especially when alcohol is in the mix. It should remind us of just how big a problem this is, and lead to a greater determination to find a way to reduce it.

It is difficult to know what ultimately will be the effect of this tragedy on the Angels team. In sports a loss such of this can sometimes inspire a team to new heights of performance. Emotion can carry teams in many sports, but in baseball that emotion can not be sustained over the course of 162 games. It may be a positive for a few weeks, but in the end the grind of the season will see a team's weaknesses exposed, and no amount of emotion or dedication can overcome these flaws.

For the individual Angel players the challenge is to somehow transcend the loss and recapture the spirit of the spring, the

spirit of renewal and hope. They must reset themselves within the cycles of the game and the long struggle of the season.

In baseball failure is a statistical reality. In all sport you finally lose, to time, if not to the opponent. Each loss, some say, is like a death. A little piece of you dies, and then you go on to the next contest seeking to triumph over death.

The loss on Thursday was enormous and this loss was not just figurative. It was literally death. The challenge now is the existential one, to find meaning and hope in tragedy. This is the new task and great challenge that each player will face in this new and now very different season and a challenge we all face many times during our lives.

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.

I have often been asked about the closing tag line in these commentaries, particularly its meaning. I always say that it is simply the statement of the self-evident.

It is however a line that I picked up as I was growing up in Minnesota from Steve Cannon, a local radio and television personality. I remember him from my childhood as "Wrangler Steve," the weekday afternoon host of western films for us little buckaroos.

By the time I had reached high school and college Steve Cannon had established himself as the most popular personality on morning radio. On that show he did a number of characters and one of them was a sportscaster named "Morgan Mundane." Morgan had a jaundiced and hilarious vision of sportsworld that I, and many others, found very appealing.

After each of his off-the-wall and often critical morning reports on sport and other strange goings-on in the life of the Twin Cities, Morgan would close with the line, "remember sports fans you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser." For some reason it was one of those aphorisms that stuck in my brain and seemed to me to be some sort of occult wisdom. So when I started doing these essays, first on radio, it seemed natural to me to use that line to close each broadcast, and I have retained it in print. So today I would like to say thanks to Morgan and to Steve Cannon, and to say goodbye to Steve Cannon who died in Minneapolis this past week at the age of 81. He told friends in the last few weeks of his life that he hoped to make it to the

start of the Minnesota Twins baseball season. He did, just barely, which somehow seemed fitting for Steve Cannon, creator of "Morgan Mundane," the charter member of my Sportscaster Hall of Fame.

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