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Racism and Sport Yet Again

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Racism and Sport Yet Again
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Last week, Adam Jones of the Baltimore Orioles reported that he had been racially harassed by Boston Red Sox fans in Fenway Park, who, among other things, threw peanuts and shouted racial slurs at him. Jones was upset and demanded that the Red Sox tighten their stadium security and enforce a ban on racial harassment. The reaction across baseball was to condemn the fans for what was described as unacceptable behavior.

Racial harassment of players is not new. It has been present in major league baseball for as long as there have been African American players in the game. In the last decades of the 19th century, African American players were subjected to racial jeers and taunts, as well as physical threats including death. When the final African American player was eliminated from major league baseball, this issue faded into the background for a half century.

When Jackie Robinson became the first African American player in the post-World War II era the slurs, taunts, and threats returned from on-field personnel as well as fans. Most baseball fans are familiar with Robinson's ordeal, although many do not fully appreciate the extent of the harassment.

This behavior did not disappear quickly, nor did baseball desegregate quickly. As more and more African American players entered the desegregated game, the harassment from players and managers faded. In the stands behavior changed, but racism has not entirely vanished in the ballpark nor in the society generally, as the incident in Boston demonstrates.

It is easy to dismiss the harassment of Jones in Boston as confined to Boston. The city has a reputation for racism, which

it has earned over the years. The rioting surrounding school busing in Boston in the early 1970s shocked the nation and imprinted Boston's racist image on the national consciousness. In baseball, Boston was the last team to desegregate, and the experiences of African American players in the city have been problematic. That too added to the image of Boston as a racist city.

One of the more interesting aspects of the current incident is the number of current African American players who expressed their complete lack of surprise over what happened to Adam Jones in Boston. They offered the testimony that racial harassment at the major league ballparks seems to be a monopoly held by the Fenway Faithful and is something they have not encountered in other ballparks.

Baseball is not the only sport that must deal with racism. If you ever were in Tampa Stadium when Doug Williams was the quarterback, the level of racial invective he was subjected to was nearly beyond belief. At basketball games on college campuses racial taunting of opposing players has not entirely vanished. In European football, the level and nature of racial taunting goes much beyond what is found in American stadiums. So racism is a problem that transcends borders and sports, and indeed it is a part of everyday life for many minorities across the globe.

Doug Glanville wrote an insightful piece for the *New York Times* in which he discussed the matter. Among other things Glanville recalled his own problems as a visiting player in Boston, although not in the ballpark. He also points out that racial incidents happen everywhere, although not in every ballpark, and that African Americans in general, not just athletes, face any number of slights and insults on a daily basis.

Glanville puts it this way: "we need to absorb the idea that racism can work covertly and thrive in smaller moments that go under the radar, but that we still must educate ourselves about: redlining, rejection by a taxi driver, biased school enrollment policy, profiling. All of which have happened to me frequently, by the way. These are not rare occurrences like the public way Jones was abused in a major League park, but private slights that are part of daily life for many minorities."

In all walks of life and in all sorts of circumstances, race remains the great divide in American life. I have had African American colleagues who were confronted in incidents involving race on a daily basis. In life outside the university, and indeed, at times inside the university, the color of their skin becomes to others, the most fundamental aspect of who they are. This is the crux of the Adams Jones incident. Or, as Henry Aaron once put it, "Baseball has done a lot for me. It has taught me that regardless of who you are, and regardless of how much money you make, you are still a Negro."

The point of course is that racism is not a sports problem but a human problem. Racial harassment permeates the atmosphere, although it is considerably more visible to those who are members of a minority than those who are members of the dominating group.

In the end, Boston is no more at fault than anywhere else, no worse in its behavior than other towns and cities across America, or, for that matter, across the world. What role sport plays in addressing this flaw depends on the decisions made by sports organizations, athletes, fans, and, in the end, the personal decisions made by individuals.

A long journey really does begin with a single step, and often that step proves to be a very difficult one.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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