

Three Weeks of Madness

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE – Three Weeks of Madness
OCTOBER 17, 2017

It has been nearly three weeks now since I wandered off for a vacation and away from this column. In one of the oddities of the universe, these absences seem to bring about an avalanche of crazy and significant events in the world of sport. Any one of these developments would have launched a “Sport and Society” essay out of my computer, but when on hiatus, I strictly forbid myself from reacting to any of these developments.

So, at this point I want to go back and review a number of the more zany developments of the past three weeks.

Where to begin?

Certainly, the NFL pregame scene has attracted more than a little attention, and not just in the U.S. but also across the European landscape. Just when it appeared that the entire kneeling for the National Anthem business was fading away, it was given new life by the Tweeter-in-Chief who called on NFL owners to “fire those sons-of-bitches” who are disrespecting the flag of the United States and the military.

Of course, they were doing neither. NFL players were involved in a protest against racism in America and police harassment of African Americans. They were very clear about this. The President could not attack protests against racism; no one wants to be seen supporting racism, so the President turned this protest into an issue of patriotism and support of the military.

With this, the stakes were raised. More and more athletes and other public figures began to “take the knee” in multiple venues to show their support for the NFL players and/or their displeasure with the President. Slowly, the ground shifted and NFL owners, who at first seemed sympathetic to the protests, began to wobble, and the suppression of free speech was added to the mix.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell was caught in the middle and tried to look like a patriot while not looking like a racist or an opponent of free speech. As usual, Goodell only looked awkward. Dallas owner Jerry Jones moved from kneeling with his players during the anthem, to being an opponent of any further protests. This led Jemele Hill of ESPN, who had already publicly called the President a white supremacist, to criticize Jones leading to Hill’s suspension at ESPN.

Protest in sport reached a level that has not been attained since the 1960s. The eternal mix of sport and politics has continued, but that mix is only approved by the dominant forces in society when it is serving the status quo. It is proper for the NFL to wrap itself in the flag in a display of PR patriotism, but not for players to protest racism during the national anthem.

Where all of this will end is difficult to predict, but the protests and politicization of the players is not likely to vanish. The genie is out of the bottle, and it is very difficult to put it back.

Never to be outdone by any other arena the world of intercollegiate athletics produced a new round of corruption to overshadow anything the NFL could produce in the past few weeks. There were, of course, the usual low level scandals at several universities where minor cases of academic misconduct, sexual harassment, assault, illegal payments, and varied forms of cheating were scattered across the landscape. These, of course, are simply elements of the new normal and hardly worth notice.

What caught the attention of even the most calloused observer was the announcement that the F.B.I. had charged four assistant basketball coaches at major universities, three employees of Adidas, and three financial advisors and athletics managers with fraud and bribery. At least three major basketball recruits at two universities were reported to have been the recipients of six figure cash payments for signing with “Adidas universities.”

The four coaches have been suspended, and, at Louisville, the Athletic Director and the head basketball coach have been fired; although, in the case of Louisville, it took the University Athletic Association nearly three weeks to dismiss Rick Pitino, who may now be the poster child for intercollegiate athletics. It also answers the question: What would Rick Pitino have to do to be fired?

The relationship between universities, coaches, and apparel companies has been one of the most disturbing developments of the past few decades. Given the amount of cash and merchandise that flowed to universities, athletic directors and coaches from Adidas, Nike, and, most recently, Under Armour, a scandal like this one was inevitable. The F.B.I. investigation that led to these revelations is likely the beginning rather than the conclusion of this story.

Meanwhile the NCAA has gotten into the act by its decision not to take any action against the University of North Carolina for its long running practice of academic fraud. The NCAA, after a decade of delays on this case, determined that this was not an athletic matter because the fraud was available to all students, not just athletes. UNC officials were delighted by the decision

which ended the possibility that the university might face severe sanctions by the NCAA. It was reported that a sigh of relief could be heard across the campus following the NCAA announcement. UNC should be proud that the university itself was guilty of fraud, not just the athletic program. Greatness takes many forms.

If I understand this ruling correctly, it means that academic fraud involving athletes is perfectly fine as long as this “benefit” is available to all students. Does this mean we should expect and accept an uptick in fraud on campus? Some would argue that this day has already arrived.

In Sport, March is not the only month that produces madness.

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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