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What We Miss

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE - WHAT WE MISSED

April 17, 2020

It has been several weeks since the world changed. The regular patterns of life have been disrupted, and keeping track of what day it is has required some effort. Sport with its familiar patterns and rhythms is gone. March Madness took on a very different meaning; the NHL and the NBA shut down; spring training in Arizona and Florida ended abruptly; the Olympics have been postponed for a year; and across the world, sports at all levels have been cancelled or postponed.

For those who pay little attention to the World of Sport, these developments are of no great concern. For sports fans, the games and competitions are missed. For the sports fanatic or sports junkie, withdrawal has been painful. With considerable impatience many wonder when the games will return. Will the NHL and NBA conduct playoffs? Will there be a full baseball season, or at least a partial season?

For some fans, watching video of historic games, classic playoff series, or just great performances are proving a pale substitute for live action. Horse racing has continued with no fans in the stands, and there has been some interesting competition in Derby prep races, as well as a few stakes races of interest. Gambling online on these races helps sustain some interest. However, even for a fan of horse racing like myself, it simply is not enough.

For NFL fans, the great non-event of the NFL year is coming up next week. The player draft, an obsession for many fans, will sustain some of them though these dark days. On sports talk shows, the NFL draft is virtually the only topic under discussion. However, the event will lack a considerable amount of its luster. There will be no live gathering of players, coaches, executives, television network analysts and commentators. Also absent from some over faux regal venue will be the fans. The inability to boo Roger Goodell and to denounce the choices of particular players by fans will drain the event of much of its energy.

So the lament continues. We miss our sports! Bring back our sports! The withdrawal is killing us!

While listening to all of this and sharing many of these feelings, I have been trying to arrive at some understanding of what it is we are missing, when we say, "we miss our sports."

At this time of year, I am usually caught up in the final push by NHL and NBA teams to make the playoffs. As a night person, I fill my late nights with games from the Western time zones. One year, I inexplicably became obsessed with the San Jose Sharks. The last few years, it has been the Golden State Warriors who provided a happy ending to my day. Moving into April, the other great joy is the start of those playoffs and of the baseball season.

Why do I watch all this stuff and much more? Is it the teams, the rituals, the players, the drama of the competition, or is it all of these? Or something more?

Certainly, the attachment to particular teams and their fortunes are an important element for any sports fan. I am a baseball lifer, and since I was undergraduate at the University of Minnesota when the Minnesota Twins moved to the Twin Cities, that team has held my attention and my loyalty. Prior to that, it was the Milwaukee Braves. The same holds true with the Vikings, who arrived in my undergrad days, while prior to that the Packers were my team. Since then, my fan interests have widened depending on where I was living and what was available via television.

From a very early age, hockey and ice skating were important to me. Living in Minneapolis these were part of life in winter. My interest in hockey clearly began there, as did my interest in figure skating. Both developed over time into something well beyond an interest in these sports. With figure skating the Olympics led to an appreciation of the amazing skill and the artistry of that sport. It has never left me. In hockey too, there was a maturing of interest beyond the outcomes of games. The skills with stick and puck, as well as, the power and speed of the skating were nearly hypnotic.

My appreciation of basketball came from my childhood and young adult years where I was able to watch the greatest basketball players in the world come through Minneapolis to play the

Lakers. I have memories of those NBA Champions led by George Mikan, Jim Pollard, and Vern Mikkelsen. But maybe more important was seeing, in person, such great players as Bob Cousy, Wilt Chamberlain, Hal Greer, Dolph Schayes, and Bob Pettit. Just prior to the Lakers departure for Los Angeles, it was Elgin Baylor who revealed to Laker fans, as no one before or since, the full possibilities of basketball as an aesthetic form.

And then there was baseball. It was part of my family. When I was born in 1941 my father wanted to name me Theodore William after Teddy Ballgame who was having a historic season. My father was overruled on that one, but it indicates the place baseball had in the family. My father was at times a coach and umpire, a fan, and someone who deeply loved the game. On holidays, he took my sister and I to at least half of the St. Paul Saints and Minneapolis Millers home and home doubleheaders; One game in the morning, then a streetcar ride to the other city, with the second game in the afternoon. These rivalry games were lessons in baseball appreciation and baseball fanaticism, and a lesson in the civic importance of sport.

That was the beginning of baseball for me, and it became part of who I am. The interest in and love of the game grew over the years having been able to see great players such as Hall of Famers Ray Dandridge and Willie Mays, both of whom played for the Minneapolis Millers. Then came Carl Yastrzemski and Earl Wilson after the Millers became a Red Sox farm team. Major league baseball arrived from Washington with the Senators renamed the Minnesota Twins. The first decade featured Harmon Killebrew, Tony Oliva, Zoilo Versalles, Jim Kaat, Bob Allison, Camillo Pascual and Mudcat Grant. And a decade later when I wound up in Orlando, the Twins were still here for spring training with Rod Carew, Bert Blyleven, Rich Rollins, and many more, allowing me to retain close ties to the Twins.

So what is it about sport that I miss?

Looking at what I have written, there are some tentative answers. I miss the teams and the players caught up in the competition. I miss the attempt to reach perfection that each athlete strives for and never quite achieves. I miss the attachment that sport gives to place. I miss the personal attachments that sports provide, especially family, but also the community of fandom.

The language of sport is pervasive and the social interaction surrounding sport is ubiquitous. Sport is the second or third topic that surfaces after people meet one another socially, be that for the first time or with old friends. Sport is the safe topic when talking with new acquaintances and the staple of casual conversation. It is one of the significant elements of community cohesion. So I miss all of that along with the face-to-contact with fellow fans that we no longer can enjoy.

Perhaps more than anything, I miss the chance to watch the struggle of competition, the striving for perfection, and above all the pure aesthetic beauty which to me is the essence of sport. As proclaimed on ABC's Wide World of Sports, I miss, "The Thrill of Victory and the Agony of Defeat." The fact that I often misremember the first part of the phrase as "The Joy of Victory" may reveal even more.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau in semi-isolation reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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