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Good News and Bad News

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS
MAY 11, 2021

This weekend, there was some good news, and there was some bad news in sport, a high and low, and both of considerable significance. The good news came from hockey. The bad news, in some ways bigger than the good news, came from horse racing. Both cases involved one of the biggest names in each of the sports: Connor McDavid and Bob Baffert.

First, the bad news. The previous weekend was the first Saturday in May, and that meant the Kentucky Derby. As usual, a field of twenty horses had qualified to make the run for the roses. Not surprising, the well-known trainer Bob Baffert had a horse in the field. Although not the morning line favorite or the post time favorite, Baffert's horse received some attention at the betting windows, primarily because Bob Baffert's horses have won a six-pack of Kentucky Derbies.

There was some surprise when Medina Spirit won the race despite seldom being mentioned by pre-race prognosticators. There was less surprise when news came on Sunday that Medina Spirit had failed a drug test. In a shade over a year, Baffert's horses have failed five drug tests in major races, which gives his horses a total of thirty failed tests. The most prominent trainer in racing today seems to be on the verge of becoming the King of the Juicers in thoroughbred racing.

Once again, Baffert shouted his innocence from the house tops, or better than the house tops, on ESPN and FOX News, as well as, a number of interviews with prominent sports reporters. As he always does, Baffert either denies that he did anything wrong or has some strange explanation for the mysterious failure of the post-race drug test. This time, he came with both. One writer described Baffert's denials as having a "the dog ate my homework" quality about them.

As those who have read these essays over the years know, I love horse racing. I can watch highlights of the great horses and races, as much as I watch highlights of great hits and catches in baseball, or an exquisite performance in any sport. So when this sport is tarnished by Bob Baffert or any other shady character in the game, and he is not the only one, I am dismayed.

I once thought of Bob Baffert as a great sportsman and trainer. Now, I can only see him as the guy who hoodwinked a nation of horse racing fans on multiple occasions while telling us all that he loves this sport, is dedicated to it, and would do nothing to harm it. That tune is getting very old and tired and no longer plays for me and for many others. I am deeply saddened by it.

Fortunately, this bad news was not the only significant development in the last few days in the world of sport.

Connor McDavid, one of the greatest hockey players on the planet and perhaps the second greatest player to ever wear the sweater of the Edmonton Oilers, brought his point total for this odd hockey season to 100 in only 53 games. The 100-point total has been reached in less games only four times in the last thirty years. Mario Lemieux did it twice in 38 games; Wayne Gretzky did it once in 50 games; and Jaromir Jagr did it in 52 games. This puts McDavid into some illustrious company.

If you were lucky enough to see and of these hockey greats play, you know that their achievements were about a lot more than the numbers. They had well developed skating and stick-handling skills; their passing was excellent; and they had great "ice vision."

As expected, McDavid is most often compared with Wayne Gretzky. There are similarities, but there are differences as well. Gretzky's game was centered on finesse, stick-handling, passing, and an amazing ability to see the ice and anticipate the development of play. He seemed to know where everyone was on the ice, and where they were going to be next. He was also creative in his shots and passes, requiring anyone playing with him to be constantly ready for the puck to arrive at their stick. He was not a physical player and seemed to have an ability to avoid the heavy hits that opposing players wanted to put on him.

McDavid has the same stick-handling and passing ability, but he plays a more physical game than the Great One. Perhaps, his greatest asset is his speed that when combined with his stick-handling and creativity can be devastating. Those who have watched the Oilers have seen him on many occasions skate the length of the ice carrying the puck and blowing past all the opposing players on the ice who look like they were statues. When combined with his ability to set up his teammates, McDavid becomes a dominating force in total control of the game. Also, at full speed he can fake, or spin, or turn leaving the

opposition players wondering what had just happened. I have seen him go end to end like this several times and then deposit the puck into the back of the net with what almost seems like an afterthought.

Saturday night, he was center stage on "Hockey Night in Canada." He needed four points to reach the 100-point mark. His first point came on a goal in the first period as he came flying in on the goalie and flicked the puck into the back of the net. The next three points came in the second period on three assists. Here his speed, vision, and passing ability dazzled those watching both on the ice and on the CBC. The goals seemed to come in lightning quick fashion and left everyone breathless.

He is not the next Gretzky; he is the first Connor McDavid. There are comparisons of course, but, in the end, he is a distinct talent and force on the ice, one of a kind and one that is a privilege to see.

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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