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Long Summer of Sport

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - A LONG SUMMER OF SPORT
SEPTEMBER 24, 2021

It has been quite some time since I have written one of these columns. It also has been a time of some wonderful sporting events, the continued disruption of events by the pandemic, and a continuation of troubling issues and chronic problems in the darker corners of sport. Where to begin?

Perhaps, one of the biggest surprises of the summer is the fact that the Tokyo Olympics did not turn into a major disaster, although for some athletes, plans were abruptly cancelled by Covid. As we have come to expect, the Olympics had many inspiring moments and excellent performances. Somehow, the Olympics has a way of enduring in the face of forces, both internal and external, that seem hell bent on bringing this international showcase to its knees.

In tennis, Wimbledon and the U.S. Open offered high level drama and historic developments. On the men's side at Wimbledon, Andy Murray and Roger Federer departed early, while Rafael Nadal did not enter the tournament. That left Novak Djokovic a relatively free path to the defense of his Championship.

In mid-August, Federer announced that he would be undergoing yet another knee surgery, and so neither Federer nor Nadal would be at the U.S. Open. This seemed to leave Djokovic poised to complete the Grand Slam of Tennis, something not accomplished on the men's side since Rod Laver in 1968 and 1969. The last woman to do so was Steffi Graf in 1988.

When Djokovic began his two-week path to the championship, it appeared there would be little resistance. He moved through the first several rounds with ease, losing an occasional set, but never being seriously challenged. In the semi-finals, that many predicted would be his most difficult match, he defeated Alexander Zverev in five sets. In the finals, it was a totally different story as Daniil Medvedev overpowered Djokovic winning his first Grand Slam tournament in straight sets. It was high drama and a fascinating turn of events.

In women's tennis there was considerable drama as well. At Wimbledon, Serena Williams withdrew with an injury in the first round, and Naomi Osaka did not enter the tournament following the issues she faced at the French Open. Ashleigh Barty, the

number one seed, moved through the field with relative ease to the championship.

New York was a different story. Naomi Osaka returned to defend her championship but lost in the third round. She departed in tears, and her future in tennis was left up in the air. Osaka lost to Leylah Fernandez, the 18-year-old Canadian, who then played her way into the finals. There she met another teenager, Emma Raducanu of Britain. The matchup was a surprise to the experts and a delight to the fans. Raducanu became the first British winner of a Grand Slam since Virginia Wade in 1977.

The two finalists were unseeded. Emma Raducanu as a qualifier played three matches to get into the tournament, and six more to win, and did not lose a set along the way. The two teenagers seemed to play without feeling any pressure and with a joy in the experience of the moment. The crowd was delighted and cheered them both long and loud. Raducanu's day was underlined when she received a message of congratulations from the Queen.

It could be that the summer of tennis marks a changing of the guard with two of the Big Three on the men's side, Federer and Nadal, clearly in decline. On the women's side there has been a continuation of the emergence of younger and more international players at the top.

In baseball, this has been a season which at times seemed to defy all logic. Home runs were up, strikeouts were up, in baseball base-stealing was down, batting averages were down, and Covid struck many teams with considerable frequency. The Mendoza Line seems to have become an anachronism. Pitching was disrupted by a decision to enforce the rule against using a foreign substance, and pitchers were frisked after nearly every inning.

Rules were modified. A runner was placed at second base at the start of every extra inning. Known by various names, such as Ghost Runner and the Manfred Man, in honor of the Commissioner, this was designed to speed up the game. There was little noticeable impact, although it did force an artificial ending to the game by altering the nature of the game.

Despite the changes, this has turned into an exciting race to the playoffs with some divisional winners decided and the wild card race living up to its name. It is possible that the Yankees or Red Sox could miss the playoffs entirely, or be bumped in the one-game winner take all game. It is also possible, indeed

likely, that a team with 100 regular-season wins could fail to make the four-team playoff.

It should be an interesting final week to this season.

In college sports, there have been many developments involving the greed of those leading intercollegiate athletics. Conference realignment is going through yet another chapter as television executives and athletic directors are driven by the seemingly endless stream of dollars in college athletics. In the process, the terms "tradition" and "rivalry" have been expunged from the Collegiate Dictionary.

On the darker side, the past two weeks has again seen another reminder of the issue of sexual harassment in sport. The U.S. Congress this week has been holding hearings on that issue as they examine the role of the FBI in the Nasser Case. Nothing seems to shock or surprise any longer, but certainly the failures and cover ups by the Justice Department and the FBI can still produce nausea. When it seems as if the FBI was a chief enabler of Larry Nasser, there is clearly something seriously wrong at the heart of Sportsworld. In a feeble postscript, the Justice Department reported that one of the FBI agents involved was fired, *last week*.

To underline this issue once again, the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice announced this week that San Jose State University would be paying \$1.6M to 23 students who were touched inappropriately by an athletic trainer. Beginning in 2009, athletes reported that the trainer had touched their "breasts, groins, buttocks, and pubic areas" during treatments on campus.

The Justice Department also found that university authorities retaliated against employees who repeatedly reported these complaints to school authorities. This report and many others clearly indicate systemic problems in the intercollegiate athletic world.

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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