

Calgary, Dean Smith

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
MARCH 21, 1997

It was about as varied a week in sport for me as I can remember. I have been off to western Canada where the big story was the Brier, or I guess I should say the Labatt's Brier, Canada's national curling championship, being contested in Calgary at the Saddl edome, or rather the Canadian Airlines Saddledome. Some things don't change even when you cross the 49th parallel. The television and newspapers were full of stories from the Brier, which drew almost a quarter of a million people to the Saddledome during the week, riveting the attention of a nation.

The storyline was particularly attractive as Alberta's team led by Kevin Martin knocked over opponent after opponent, ending the run on Sunday by defeating Manitoba, 10-8, in a final that drew a sellout crowd of over 17,000 to the dome, and several million more to their television sets.

I must say that I don't have a clue when it comes to curling, expect that it looks like it may be similar to shuffleboard. The spectacle of men running down the ice lane with brooms sweeping frantically in the front of the stone seems silly to the ignorant eye, but believe me the attention and enthusiasm of a city and a nation can be appreciated even by those clueless to curling.

The other spectator sport of note in Calgary was youth hockey. Our friends have a son playing in the eight and nine year old league and we were off to several games. I was surprised by the level of play as these undersized hockey players skated, stick-handled, and passed with remarkable skill. Their enthusiasm for the game was evident and it was great fun to see, while the stands were nearly devoid of Little League parents.

In addition the opportunity to skate outdoors and to skate on the Olympic Oval, along with the chance to give cross-country skiing a serious try for the first time, made this trip to winter a good one.

On our return we plunged back into the middle of March Madness where once again it was apparent that college basketball remains a coach's, rather than a player's game. It was John Chaney's Temple Owls and Mike Krzyzewski's Duke Blue Devils and Roy Williams' Kansas Jayhawks.

The biggest story of the first weekend was Dean Smith's elevation to the position of winningest coach in college basketball history. With the win that put him over the top, number 877, Dean Smith's teams have now reached the sweet sixteen in fifteen of the last seventeen years. At age sixty-five Smith is in his 36th season of college coaching. For the 27th season in a row Smith's Tar Heels have reached the 21 win plateau, a remarkable record of consistency. The numbers are indeed impressive.

Dean Smith has been head coach at Carolina since 1962 coaching a variety of types and styles of players, but almost always winning. In a profession that has changed dramatically over the past three decades, Smith has been a constant. His teams have won a dozen ACC championships and two national championships. He coached the United States to a gold medal at the 1976 Olympic Games after the U.S. had failed to win the gold in basketball for the first time in 1972.

Dean Smith has seen many changes in the game and caused one of the most significant of those changes. Nothing that I can remember irritated me more about college basketball than the use of the stall, and no one used it more effectively than Dean Smith. His famous four-corners pattern drove me up the wall, and I cheered lustily the few times it failed. It was so effective that it finally produced a radical change in the college game, the introduction of the shot-clock. It is one of Dean Smith's monuments.

Smith's achievement brought to mind the coach he passed on the total wins board, Adolph Rupp of Kentucky, another of my least favorite figures in the history of college basketball. Rupp's career at Kentucky remains a legend but my memories of him are really two-fold.

One was the arrogance with which he reacted to the college basketball point shaving scandals of 1951 which he was sure did not involve his team, only to learn that they did. The other was his racism which received its just reward in 1966 when Kentucky lost the national championship game to the all-black starting five of Texas Western, and which got another jolt when he lost his final game as a college coach to Florida State in an NCAA regional final. The FSU win was engineered by two black Louisville athletes, Ron King and Otto Petty, who never got a look from Adolph Rupp of Kentucky during the annual recruiting wars.

So maybe it is more than a coach's game.

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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