NCAA Basketball, Baseball

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Two of my favorite groups have been quite active over the past few days: the baseball owners and the NCAA. As usual the activity involved a malfunction of gray matter.

First the NCAA. There is a story out of NCAA headquarters that this august body is about to seek the ban of freshman eligibility in men's basketball. Not football, not baseball, not hockey. Only basketball. Only men.

One might make a strong and reasonable case against freshman eligibility on academic grounds. The NCAA, of course, is not interested in academic issues and so they want to ban freshman only in basketball. Part of the rationale being given is that the freshmen need time to adjust to campus life. If that is so why only basketball? Freshmen football players are on the gridiron before classes ever meet on most campuses. Where is their time to adjust to campus life? Perhaps they never experience much of campus life anyway so they don't need a period of adjustment.

What is this really about?

The issue is economic, pure and simple. If universities can keep freshman from competing in basketball they hope that they can keep them on campus through their three years of eligibility, or will it still be four? Too many young men who come in as freshman are leaving after one or two years of play to go to the NBA where the pay is a bit better.

This attrition is not cost effective and does not allow for a "building of the program." If the university is to get a fair return on their investment in a basketball player, if they are going to adequately exploit their box office appeal, they can not let them get away early.

Men's college basketball is high level profit and loss in a highly competitive entertainment industry. Stars must not be allowed to move on to big money on their own. They must be persuaded to remain on the campus through all their years of eligibility. The university has too much invested in them, and the coaches who are under too much pressure to entertain the public, must be allowed to maintain and develop their product.
College basketball recruiting has become too much like the futures market. High return, but at way too much risk. Management must get more control over labor and be able to maintain product quality. If they can not they will face losses of an unacceptable nature both on and off the court.

Don't let anyone pretend this is about academic issues. Freshman eligibility has been an NCAA issue for most of this century and every time a decision has been made on the issue it was made on economic, not academic, grounds. This time will be no different. If this was simply a means to address abysmal graduation rates, then the freshman ban would include men's football, baseball, and hockey. If academics were paramount there would be no freshman participation in any sport for any gender.

I suspect that women are not included in the ban on freshman participation because there is no economic need to do so. Women don't leave early for the WNBA and they don't bring in major television dollars. That of course might change.

Two other proposals are also on the table. One would delay the start of the basketball season until Christmas and the other would tie scholarships to graduation rates. It will be a cold day in Maui when these two sensible notions sneak past the NCAA poobahs.

Meanwhile the baseball owners, or at least a few of them, are in the news for making foolish statements and then trying to cover them up or pretend they were not important.

Drayton McLane Jr., owner of the Houston Astros was reported to have made several astounding and disparaging remarks about the Hispanic population to executives of a Hispanic TV Station in Houston at a community function. This is astounding for several reasons, not the least being that Houston is a city with a huge Hispanic population.

Equally astounding was Commissioner Bud Lite's reaction saying that he had called his old pal Drayton and it was all a big misunderstanding. Nothing there really, no problem, Drayton is no racist. This overnight clearing of McLane by the Comish came with no discussion with the television executives who first heard and reported the comments, after McLane had changed his story, and with no further investigation of any kind.

If the comments had been made by Marge Schott you can be sure there would have been a full investigation. Bud Lite would have
put a great deal of distance between himself and Schott immediately. There would have been a firestorm in the press and other owners would have been publicly wringing their hands.

Why this mild reaction then? First, Drayton McLane is one of the boys and not a woman who is roundly disliked by everyone in the game. Second, McLane does not have a bad track record on race, although there is a scarcity of Hispanics in the Houston front office. Third, Hispanics do not have the same cache as other minorities on the issue of language sensitivity, at least not nationally. So Bud Lite followed those instincts that he has so finally tuned during his years in baseball. Hunker down, cover up, let it blow over.

Usually it does and it would it appear that it will do so for McLane and the Comish this time around.

One would hope that Drayton McLane would come out in public with a forthright admission of his mistakes, an apology, and a commitment to try to bring more Hispanics to the ballpark and more into his front office.

This, of course, is both too much and too little to ask.

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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