Sport Commemorates 9/11

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If there was any doubt about the significance of sport in American life this past weekend should put those doubts to rest. The events of Friday night in New York at Shea Stadium alone were a reminder of just how sport can bring a community together, sometimes to celebrate and sometimes to mourn. In this case to do both.

Pre-game ceremonies at Shea Stadium, like those in many baseball parks all through last week, paid tribute to those who died in the attacks of September 11 and to those whose heroism became nearly ordinary in the midst of the crisis. The twenty-one-gun salute and the other tributes were a moving reminder of what had transpired, and the fireman, policeman and rescue worker hats being worn by the Mets are a constant reminder of the heroism of those who put their lives on the line in public service. The singing of “Amazing Grace” once again showed why it is the most important song of hope ever written in the Western world.

Diana Ross sang the national anthem and this too offered a reminder of just how much things had changed in less than two weeks. It was Ross who had sung an overblown version of the anthem at the U.S. Open Tennis Championship prior to the Saturday night historic women’s final. In that rendition Ross was clearly the star, while Friday night the song itself along with the occasion was the center of attention. It has also been pointed out that many present that night at the U.S Open were likely victims of the attack in New York.

The seventh-inning stretch rendition of “New York, New York” by Liza Minelli was a bit too rousing for some tastes, but again the backup dance line of firemen and policemen somehow saved the moment. Throughout the night the place was full of emotion as even Mayor Giuliani, a Yankee fan, took part in this communal ceremony of mourning and gratitude.

As if to underline the occasion the game itself gave the fans everything they could have wanted and more. Trailing late in the game Mike Piazza hit a two-run home run in the eighth inning to propel the Mets to a 3-2 win. It was better than the World Series, and according to Todd Zeile this game was more important than any World Series game the Mets have played.
Mets players donated their salaries for that night, no small sum indeed, to the fund to support the survivors of city workers who lost their lives in this catastrophe. Mets fans went home having experienced the joy of victory, but more importantly having taken part in a community exercise of hope in the face of disaster.

And of course it wasn’t just baseball that provided the occasion for community expressions of unity and patriotism. The NFL is both very good and generally excessive in these moments of national patriotic expression. The opening of each game was the same with the singing of “America the Beautiful” televised into the stadiums and across the country from the streets of New York. This was followed by a moment of silence at each stadium and then the singing of the national anthem.

The size of the flag on the field seemed to get bigger at each venue, while the singing of the anthem evoked a variety of emotions among both players and fans. In the stands NFL fans who are experts in costume design outdid themselves as they dressed in as many forms of the red, white and blue as could be imagined. Despite this excess it did seem that for the first time in memory the national anthem had the undivided attention of everyone in the stadium.

Perhaps the best tribute of all came in New England, where the Patriot’s Joe Andruzzi was joined for the coin toss by his father and three brothers as Patriot co-captains for the game against the New York Jets. Andruzzi’s father is a retired New York City detective and his three brothers are New York firemen who were deeply involved in the events of September 11. It is now clear that in this crisis it is the heroism of firemen that is the worthiest role model for all Americans. It is they, and not our athletes, who need to be shown to the community for emulation. In New England on Sunday that was underlined.

In addition to the NFL and Major League Baseball, Saturday brought the return of college football. At hundreds of games involving hundreds of thousands of fans in an atmosphere that is unique to college football, there was another opportunity for the expression of community mourning and thanksgiving.

It wasn’t the games that mattered so much over this past week and weekend, it was the opportunity for people to come together to express themselves as a community in thanks and in mourning. This of course has happened in churches, in community halls, and concert halls, and wherever people gather in numbers. However
none of these venues brought such large numbers of people together in person and united them with the nation via television as was done through sport over the past week and weekend.

Like it or not, Sport is an integral part of our national community life and culture, and this past seven days showed that over and over again throughout the land.

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