

# Corruption and transcendence in sport

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
Corruption and transcendence in sport  
AUGUST 1, 2007

The last few weeks for sports fans have been particularly difficult ones. The stories of corruption are so overwhelming that it is a wonder that anyone can keep their focus on sport.

The biggest headlines and the shrillest comment in the United States have been elicited by the Michael Vick dog-fighting story. The allegations of mistreatment and abuse of dogs, including the killing of dogs, in some cases by drowning, have unleashed an outcry against Vick. There are demands that he not be allowed to appear on the football field again. Sponsors have pulled endorsements from Vick, and the National Football League and Atlanta Falcons have told him to stay away until the legal issues are resolved. Even if Vick is found "not guilty", he is not likely to be welcomed by a large contingent of fans.

The second story involves the allegations that an NBA referee was betting on NBA games, perhaps including ones that he was officiating, and that he might have been manipulating the "point spread" or the "over/under." In addition, NBA security seems to have been oblivious to the problem, only learning about it when the FBI contacted them. Clearly, the integrity of the game and the credibility of Commissioner David Stern are at stake.

The third story comes from France where, once again, the Tour de France has been laced with positive drug tests and doping charges. This came despite a much-ballyhooed effort to keep the event drug free this year. Perhaps even worse, the leader of the race in the final week, Michael Rasmussen, was dismissed by his team because he had not complied with drug testing rules prior to the race. He also lied to teammates and team officials. By the end of the event, the field had lost some of its best riders, and the likely winner was gone.

The fourth story is that of Barry Bonds as he is now only one home run from tying Hank Aaron's career home run record. Bonds is operating under a heavy cloud of suspicion from the Balco case, and many fans are booing him heavily as he approaches the record. What should be a time for joy has turned into a time of controversy and ill will.

In the face of all this bad news, it is logical to ask if there might be some sort of irreparable damage to sport? Could this

even kill sport? The answer to these questions is "no." Could it kill a particular sport, or some category of that sport? In that case, the answer is "yes."

Individual sports or events, such as the Tour de France or professional basketball, football, or baseball could suffer irreparable damage. The damage could even be fatal. But to kill sport is impossible.

Sport is something that transcends its individual manifestations. It is a function or the refinement of play and contains elements of the Greek "agon" and "arete." At the level of play, sport will remain healthy in the face of scandal. Children and adults all seek play as a form of physical exercise, recreation, release, and just plain fun. Watch children and see how natural play seems to come to them. Stop by the areas of public recreation in your city and see both children and adults at play. What happens in the pros will not kill this type of play or sport.

Sport as "agon" and "arete" is even more compelling. People use sport to challenge themselves against others or against some standards, they or others have set. They enter the competition. They seek perfection. They love the struggle. It is part of being human. This is why they do sport.

It is also, why they watch sport. They admire the thing done well. They admire perfection. They measure themselves against these standards, knowing they cannot possibly reach the level of the elite athlete, but nonetheless they are filled with awe at the sight of elite athletes performing at their very best. When an athlete does the near impossible it is a joy to watch and it delivers a message about human possibilities.

Then there is the art or the artistic within sport. The perfectly struck ball; the high arcs and parabolas that are formed by the ball in flight; the stretching of the body beyond the natural to achieve the impossible; the coordination and grace of the body; the meeting of the athletic and the balletic; all offer both athlete and spectator an aesthetic experience of the highest quality. There is truth and beauty in sport and it is on display daily all across the globe. It does not depend on those who confuse sport and entertainment, a line that is badly blurred these days, but a line that remains real.

Beyond the individual manifestations in sport, there are the team actions and achievements where all these qualities shine

again. Add to that the amazing fact that the whole is often greater than the sum of its parts and the appeal heightens. Individual achievement is superseded by group or community achievement. The disparate become the whole in a small miracle caught in a short twinkling of time. In some instances, this can be degraded as nationalist excess, but oftentimes it can be much greater. It can bring the diverse elements of the community together in common cause and common celebration.

If you saw or read anything about the Iraqi football team winning the Asian Football Championship, you could only wonder at what sport can produce, even under the most unlikely of circumstances. All of Iraq celebrated that championship as an achievement of the nation and people of Iraq, even knowing that to do so in a public way invited a death-dealing bomber, as indeed happened in the celebrations after the semi-final game.

This is why what Michael Vick did or did not do what Barry Bonds did or did not take, what cyclists in France did or did not take, and what an NBA referee may have done to challenge the integrity of his sport, cannot kill or even severely damage sport.

Authentic sport remains bigger and more important than any mere activity of mortals.

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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