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SPORTS AND SOCIETIES, SOCIETIES AND SPORTS

Introduction

Sports occupy a unique place in the world. Many people participate in sports, albeit on a limited level. Many people also attend sporting events or follow sports activities through the media. In the United States, the highest rated television program for the past several years has been a sporting event. Large blocks of newspaper space are devoted to the coverage of sports. Some of the largest buildings ever built were constructed for the purpose of hosting sporting events. Sports is an activity that is woven into the fabric of many societies around the globe. However, one may ask how that interweaving occurs. A question is sometimes asked about the relationship of art to civilizations-Does art imitate life or does life imitate art? A corollary question may be asked about sports. Is sports a manifestation of society or an aspiration of it? The purpose of this paper is to explore what sports is and to briefly investigate the relationship between sports and culture at selected points in history, with a particular emphasis on contemporary times.

What Is The Definition of “Sports?”

The term “sports” has been described in different ways. It is defined in Webster’s New World Dictionary as an “activity or experience that gives enjoyment or recreation; pastime; diversion.” Yet, not all agree fully with that definition. Writer Earnest Hemingway felt there were but three sports--auto racing, mountain climbing, and bull fighting. They were sports

because they involved the risk of participants' lives. To Hemingway, all other sporting activities were just games (Hemingway, 1997). Yet, not all consider the word "game" with the hint of disdain that Hemingway did. The word "game" can also have a significant meaning in sports. Consider the Olympic Games, the college football "bowl games," or the results of a game played by two teams. Philosopher Paul Weiss, in his seminal work on the philosophy of sports, considers a single event a game, but the term sport implies history and memory of an athletic activity, i.e. baseball is a game, but collectivity over time makes it a sport. However, he also distinguishes between "game" and "contest." Contests include athletic activities such as boxing, wrestling, and marathon running. Weiss felt such activities place a primary emphasis on struggle, with oneself as well as in the competition with others (Weiss, 1969).

Another word often associated with "sports" is "play." The concept of play is inferred in Webster's definition, Indeed, individuals who "play a sport" often do so for enjoyment. Many years ago, Huizinga (1955) wrote that the words sports, game, athletics, and play share the commonality of being detached from everyday life and were not serious endeavors. Caillous (1961) did not fully concur, believing that while play is free, separate, certain, and unproductive, it can be governed by both make believe and real-world rules. Yet, implied in both definitions is that the detachment is from a daily world of work. Yet, many sports, games, and play can be physically and mentally strenuous. In his concepts of Theory X and Theory Y, industrial psychologist Douglas McGregor noted that similarity and observed that the differences between work and play are not necessarily the amount or intensity of activity but the level of involvement and enjoyment of each. To McGregor, work, if structured and managed properly, could be made as interesting as play (Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson, 2001).

Just as there are different perspectives on the definition of sports, there are differences of opinion about what activities should be considered sports. The most popular sports, such as

football, both European and American, and baseball feature direct competition between teams or individuals. However, in several sports, such as gymnastics, figure skating or field events such as the high jump, competitors are not participating at the same time, yet these activities are considered sports. Auto racing, though dangerous and requiring quick reflexes and stamina, is not considered a sport by some, since it does not require the level of demonstrable physical activity as other sports (Cooper, 1998). Conversely, in recent years, the idea of what constitutes a sport seems to be expanding. For example, the International Olympic Committee has recognized competitive ballroom dancing as an Olympic sport. A relatively recent concept are the X Games, that feature non-traditional sports often involving skateboards, roller blades, and non-racing bicycles, while the Winter X Games include snowboard and non-traditional skiing events. Both games emerged from sports created by a younger population for whom established sports often had little appeal (Youngblut, 1998).

The involvement in sports is not necessarily limited to participants. Spectators may also be highly involved. To return to Webster's definition of a sports as a "recreation that gives enjoyment, pastime, diversion," this might certainly apply to spectators as well. Weiss (1969) states the involvement of followers of a sport can sometimes be as high as that of the participants, whether that participation occurs at the event itself or via media. Observing a football game or a baseball game shows that spectators can become emotionally involved with the events of the game and its outcome. Also, there are rituals built around the contest-the pregame tailgate party or the post-game event, the fan clubs, or purchasing merchandise emblazoned with a team's logo all reflect an identification with that particular team and that particular sport.

Sports and Societies Throughout History

The concept of sports developed in various cultures for various reasons. Often, the early sports were an extension of either combat skills or life skills. They were pastimes at first and later became competitions. However, in some cultures, sports, such as martial arts, were considered a part of religious training. In others, organized sports competitions were established for religious or quasi-religious reasons, such as honoring a god.

Life skill derived sports included swimming and fishing. Among the earliest combat based sports was fencing, which can be traced to Egypt, circa 1200 B.C., when depictions of fencing matches began appearing in the artwork decorating the temples of pharaohs (Cohen, 2002). Fencing was also widespread throughout Asia and was a sacred rite in medieval Japan. It was also mildly popular with the Romans, who tended to use it more for combat training. The dark side of fencing was its use as a mechanism for fighting duels, particularly in Europe in the late Middle Ages through the Age of Enlightenment, despite being outlawed by the Vatican under penalty of excommunication (Cohen 2002).

Sports were also a part of early Phoenician culture, now modern day Lebanon. Believed to be initially related to worship rites, some evidence suggests that Phoenician sporting events were significant enough to be held in dedicated facilities, called satiums, located near religious temples. Because of Phoenician immigration into Greece, it has been theorized that the Phoenicians may also have had an influence on the development of sports in Greece, including the Olympic Games (Boutros, 1979).

A significant year in early sports history was 776 B.C., usually cited as the beginning of the Olympic Games in Greece. Olympia was the original site for the games, which were held in honor of the Greek god Zeus. The games were of such importance that wars were stopped between the city-states and a divine peace proclaimed during the weeks they were held. Despite

the religious influence, the sporting contests (including wrestling, boxing, javelin throwing, discus throwing, archery, and marathon running) were often an extension of combat activities. Other events were often held in conjunction with the Olympic Games including drama competitions (Raschke, 2002).

In ancient Greece, there was no distinction between amateur and professional athletes. Greeks often did not participate in sports for a living, but when they won a major event they received prizes of value for their victory. Indeed, the word “athlete” is derived from the Greek word “athan,” meaning prize. Some athletes received private subsidies. Philammon, a boxer, was said to have received financial assistance for training from Aristotle. What was most important was “arete,” the sense of skill, excellence, and honor in their sports (Miller, 1991). However, commerce also played a role in funding the games. By the third century B.C., fees were charged for spectators who wished to view the major games. (Raschke, 2002).

The Olympics were not the only games held in Greece. Eventually, others took place, including those in which women’s events were included. Because of the respect they generated as athletes, the women who participated in the games were the only females permitted to be spectators at the Olympics (Raschke, 2002).

Just as religion was the reason for the founding of the games, religion was the reason for their demise. By the early fourth century, Greece had become a predominantly Christian country, and games held in honor of a pagan god were deemed unsuitable. Thus, the games were discontinued (Golden, 1998).

In Rome, sports, particularly the gladiatorial games, became an important piece of the social fabric. While some of this interest was an influence of the cultures conquered by Rome, others possessed a more Roman identity. There is some question about whether the Romans

adopted gladiatorial games from the Etruscans, the Campanians, the Samnites, or if they emerged from Rome itself. The first games were staged in Rome in 264 B.C. in honor of Junius Brutus Pera, who had recently died. His sons paid for the games, and the concept of private funding of the games would continue for several centuries. The games were often held in conjunction with the death of a prominent citizen (Harris, 1972).

While gladiatorial contests were individual combat fought to the death, for a time early in their existence, and to a lesser extent later, the games were quasi-religious symbol to Romans of their own mortality. This was an era when many people, both citizens and slaves, would not live to age 30, and, in a sense, the games showed both men and women (for both were permitted to attend and both genders fought in the games) how to deal with death. Of course, the games later also became a convenient way of eliminating undesirables, including Christians (Kyle, 2001). Yet, gladiators, despite being an outlaw class, were, in a curious way, sports celebrities. Furthermore, the resources built to host the games, such as the Colosseum in Rome, and facilities in other cities, reflected the tremendous popularity of the games. That popularity necessitated a more cohesive operation, and a *xystus*, a professional organization, was formed to run them and other athletic events. Over time, despite their quasi-religious origins, the gladiator matches became entertainment, and, in retrospect, a symbol of the brutality of Rome (Bates, 2002).

In Asia, sports have been a part of culture for millennia. Health building activities appeared in China over 4,000 years ago. The first known sports were archery and cauldron lifting, which emerged in the Zhou Dynasty in the eleventh century B.C. Hunting, archery, and rowing are also known to have occurred there. Some Chinese scholars argue that the first forms of soccer and golf originated in China over two millennia ago, although they differed somewhat from the later forms developed in Europe (Shaun, 2003). A unique fusion of athletic activity and

religion were the Bodhisattva warriors, who were Chuan Fe monks in the Buddhist faith. Both monks and warriors, they drew on the practices of the North Chinese Chann Movement of Meditation and on the South Chinese Mi Chiao School (Nagaboshi and Dukes, 1994).

In Japan, sumo wrestling was among the earliest sports. As in China, it initially had a religious connection to martial arts. The earliest written account of sumo was found in the *Kojiki* (the Record of Ancient Matters). The text, written in 712, recounts legends of sumo contests among the gods held over 2,500 years ago. The *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), originating in 720, states mortals fought in 23 A.D. The first authenticated sumo bouts took place in 642 A.D. at the behest of Empress Kogyoko to entertain visiting royalty from Korea. These matches began a tradition of sumo being a sport organized by royalty for their own entertainment, unlike the gladiator contests of Rome, which were organized for public consumption (Cuyler, 1979).

In Europe, during the Dark Ages, as civilization declined, so did interest in major sports events. They reverted to being more a pastime or a localized competition. By the Middle Ages, as civilization began to revive, so did sports, but as in earlier times, the sports were often combat based. Archery was popular, as was jousting. As the era progressed, more sports were played, they often became a barometer of social standing. Thus, nobles engaged in versions of billiards, tennis, and handball, while peasants played versions of rugby, soccer, bowling, and cricket (Carter, 1998). As the Middle Ages yielded to the Renaissance, the first recorded account of modern golf occurred in 1457 when King James II issued a parliamentary decree criticizing “golfe,” because it interfered with archery practice, a skill necessary for defense. However, there are claims, albeit unsubstantiated, that golf began in St. Andrews Scotland, at the Royal and Ancient Golf Club, in 1350 (Peper and Nicklaus, 1999).

In the second half of the 19th century, with the exception of soccer and rugby, many of

the most popular modern sports began to be developed. While work weeks were still long, more free time permitted an increase in recreation. New sports emerged which were not a derivative of combat or life skills; rather, they were pastimes in their own right.

Although Abner Doubleday is often credited with inventing baseball after the Civil War, some researchers refute this. Instead they credit Alexander Cartwright with inventing the game in New York in 1845. Baseball was derived from a game called rounders to which Cartwright added more rules and structure. The first organized game between two clubs occurred in Hoboken, New Jersey in 1846. By 1869, the first professional baseball team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings (later the Redlegs and finally the Reds) was organized. The forming of the Red Stockings was also an early example in the modern era of players engaging in a sport for money. The players received about seven times the wage of the average worker in that era, the best paid receiving \$1,400 for the year (Abrams, 2000). A professional association, the National Association of Professional Baseball Players was formed, which gave way in 1876 to the rival National League of Professional Baseball Clubs. In 1883, the American Association of Professional baseball Clubs gained national status. The two organizations played a set of series championship games the following year, but the modern iteration of the World Series would not occur until 1903. It was during this period that baseball became what A.G. Spalding, founder of the sporting goods company that bears his name and a proponent of the sport, termed a “systematic business,” i.e. one organized and operated as a for-profit enterprise (Abrams, 2000).

For the first half of the 20th century, baseball was in lock step with the country regarding racial equality. Black baseball players played only in the Negro leagues. However, in 1947, that

changed with the arrival of Jackie Robinson into major league baseball. Robinson withstood tremendous personal pressure, yet won the National League's Most Valuable Player award in 1949. The United States Supreme court ruling on Brown vs. Board of Education would come years after Jackie Robinson entered the major leagues (Peterson, 1992). Don Newcombe and Roy Campanella would follow Robinson into major league baseball. Newcombe later recalled a conversation he had with Dr. Martin Luther King, who felt their entering major league baseball made it easier for him to accomplish his goals in civil rights (Newcombe, 1996).

Entertainment and Labor Relations

Two other variables, entertainment and labor relations, have curiously intersected in sports. In the former, sports is seemingly in lock step with the Zeitgeist, while in the latter, it is an anomaly. Yet, the combination has made sports teams and players a more valuable commodity. The baseball player's union did not emerge until 1960, a time when organized labor, while still influential, had passed its zenith. However, the power of unions in major league sports would grow. In 1964, the Curt Flood case resulted in the abolition of the reserve clause in baseball, which had permitted teams to retain the services of a player indefinitely. It was replaced by the concept of free agency, giving players the right to set fixed term contracts, at the end of which they have the option of entering the open market and offering their services to another team. The new system brought many players considerable wealth (Abrams, 2000).

The demand for players could not have been sustained without an increase in the demand for professional sports and its increasing perception as being another aspect of entertainment. Major league sports are a major draw on television and radio. For the past several years, the National Football League Super Bowl has been the highest rated program on American network television. There are several cable channels devoted not only to sports, but to specific sports,

such as the Golf Channel.

Because of the popularity of major sports, many cities now consider a major sports franchise, or even multiple franchises, as one of the barometers of their being significant. Consequently, many cities have actively sought franchises. As a result of these elements, the value of many professional sports franchises has become substantial. Acquiring a major sports franchise may cost more than \$300 million. However, the increased cost in acquiring franchises, combined with the increased labor costs, have caused the expenses of owning and running a major sports team to rise dramatically. Ticket prices can no longer fund the cost of operating a franchise (Abrams, 2000).

In the modern era, television and radio contracts provide up to two-thirds of a team's revenue. Traditional television networks, which for decades were the major purchasers of broadcast rights claim the costs of acquiring those rights are now a money losing propositions. Revenue from those rights comes from advertising sales, and while many sponsors will pay a premium to advertise on sports events, the revenue still does not cover the acquisition costs. Thus, the cost is ultimately justified by using the events to promote other shows and as ratings bulwarks in Nielsen "sweeps weeks" when detailed ratings data is generated. However, leagues and their member teams no longer look to network television alone for revenue; cable and pay-per-view television provide also provide increasing sources of revenue (Rowe and Rowen, 1999).

Today, sports are not removed from the problems in society. Charges of drug abuse among players are now a part of sports reporting. Corruption is not new in sports. In 1929, a Carnegie Commission report on college athletics questioned the recruitment practices of some schools (Turner, 1995). Recent stories about recruitment problems in a major college in

Colorado raise the issue once again. Finally, the half-time show at the 2004 Super Bowl was taken by some as symbolic of the interaction between sports and entertainment and symbolic of erosion in the ethic of entertainment as well.

Conclusion

Sports has been a part of the human fiber for millennia. That is unlikely to change. On a personal level, as a source of enjoyment, fulfillment, socialization, and personal improvement, sports mean too much to too many people. As a spectator activity, sports has changed from quasi-religious activity honoring ancient gods to a communal activity honoring sport itself. For some, it can be consuming, almost like a religion, but perhaps without any ultimate realization. For others, it can still be the inspiring experience of watching someone do something well, perhaps better than anyone else. Perhaps, sports no longer leads society-no more Jackie Robinsons. Perhaps, neither does it follow. In contemporary times, sports are more global, more visible, more expensive, and its participants, at least on the professional level, are more idolized, and more expensive. Perhaps, sports now stays in lock-step with society, and that is what society wants.

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