

Government Jocks and Jockettes

"I like the baseball strike," said my neighbour, "it's the first time I've had the pleasure of booing so many millionaires!"

It was a laugh. But it got me thinking, and then grieving that all sport, pro and amateur, is no longer properly conceived. And that is sad, because sport, especially when done for its own sake, keeps us grounded.

Every child racing breathless through an autumn field, or carving an icy turn to snatch a speeding puck, or passing a ball to a friend who scores the impossible goal, has felt the thrilling capacity of sport to connect us. With each other. With the enduring truths and brute limits of power, courage and ability. It's a great leveller, and teacher.

And sport has always been a kind of ideal for society, a place where heroic effort and decent behaviour were possible in the context of the same rules for all. No political distinctions. Increasingly, however, sport is not an ideal for society, but simply reflects its worst aspects. Consider the pros - people who do sport not for itself, but for money. Not my cup of tea.

Nevertheless, how do we react to the news that five years ago there were only five millionaires in NHL hockey, and now there are 75? Well, despite the fact that no single citizen is exploited, nor forced to buy a ticket, and televised sport is free, there have been howls of outrage. Zowie. Here, from a bankrupt nation that in the mere space of thirty years has tried to control so much of political, economic and social life that it is itself out of control - we get a knee-jerk control response to a growth industry that creates millionaires.

If pro athletes make "excessive," or "obscene" salaries, there is a call for "luxury taxes" on the successful teams, for "salary caps" on high earners, and for "minimum wages." We have an owners' union, a players' union, and now, Fans Inc, an Ottawa-based "union" for fans who figure they will soon have the financial clout to boycott sports. Even more sad, however, is that amateur sport - sport for its own sake - has fallen to the corruptions of money, politics, and drugs. I say corruption, because you cannot do a thing for itself and also as a means to an end, such as a salary. The pay perverts the principle. Some years ago, sport Professor Bruce Kidd actually argued that all Canada's ranked "amateur" athletes should have a guaranteed minimum wage of \$36,000 per year (again, from the taxpayer). Another professor argued seriously that taxpayers owe Canada's Olympic athletes "compensation for lost education."

Such talk about sport is just an expression of where the whole country is headed: straight into a polite, government-nurtured holding tank for jostling, at-your-throat, political groups seeking advantages from the public trough. Societies that go this route soon become control crazies. They

see each other not as humans, but as political integers. The concern becomes whom to envy, to avoid, or to avoid speaking about. Whom to fear.

Already, we walk gingerly with a frosted bubble over our heads. At first, we see only shadows. Then, what could this be? Ah yes, I see now, it's aaaa...Black. There's another shadow. It's aaaa...White. And another. It's aaaa...Francophone. And here comes aaa...Turban. And this must be aaaa...Homosexual (woops, I mean a "Gay." Got to be careful, don'tcha know?). It's a recipe for alienation.

Canada is a country whose spontaneous cultural and community roots and values have been engineered almost out of existence by dreamlanders who happily substitute state policies and programs everywhere possible. High-level amateur sport has been taken over by the state. The most destructive and subtle result is that the normal forms of community-based volunteer sporting activity, formerly so distinguished by proud independence from government, are diluted, then abandoned.

Alas, today's big time amateur athletes are mignons of the state, government-subsidized jocks and jockettes, many of whom get big advertising and prize money if they place. Many literally bank on the secret use of drugs to win.

For my kids? No thanks.

Some of the honest "sport cripples" (because so undeveloped in other aspects of their lives), who hang on for money long past their useful prime, admit privately that without the commercialism, government dependency, and drugs, they couldn't succeed.

So to solve it all, I say let the market correct the problems of pro sport. They are openly beholden to money, but at least not to the state. As for amateur sport, except for the building of public facilities, we should get the state out of it entirely.

Then let's invent a sporting ideal kids can look up to, so communities can rely on their own local efforts to get the kids into those facilities and help them succeed. To be eligible, you have to have a job, or be in school. You can't be paid a penny. And drug use means banning for life. We used to have something like that.

It was called the Olympic Games.

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