

CITY GAMES  
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# WRAP-UP

By JEFF GREENFIELD

A lawyer for a hundred of America's best athletes calls the 1970's "the Golden Age of sports." The Harris Poll reports a sharp upsurge of interest in virtually every major sport. Radio and television spends more than \$100 million a year to bring games into our homes. Athletes who would have made \$15,000 a year a decade ago now earn five, ten, twenty times as much. From the White House to Main Street, our fascination with the games of grown men grows.

Why? Is it really because athletics reflect an American lust for violence and conquest? Baseball is a national pastime in Castro's Cuba, and third-world countries have had fatal riots, even a war, over soccer matches. Is it that we worship the big money superstars now command? The world's highest-paid athlete is not an American, but Brazil's soccer star Pele. The ideological clap-trap with which we surround athletics — Nixon's locker-room-sycophany, pre-game prayers, half-time salutes to the Americans still missing in Vietnam and Cambodia and to the navel orange — exploit sports' popularity, but hardly cause it.

Our fascination with sports is, I think, far simpler to understand, and far more revealing about that sense of discontent which is so much a part of our lives. The athletic arena is one of the few places where good and evil are clearly defined; where the participants in the contest adhere to the rules of fair play; and where logic and merit, instead of privilege, wealth, or brute force determine the outcome. (To rebut the obvious: there are a great many immoral practices surrounding sports, from recruiting high school athletes, to illegal payments to the use of drugs. We are talking here about what happens *on* the field, not in the locker room or front office.)

Suppose you read this account in the pages of your newspaper:

Informed sources yesterday reported that the New York Knickerbockers and the Boston Celtics played a basketball game. First

reports were unclear, but observers generally agreed that the Celtics scored more foul shots, while the Knicks hit more of their outside shots. "Willis Reed really outrebounded Cowens," a New York press aide asserted. A Celtic official, however, insisted that Dave Cowens came out ahead in that important category. "Maybe," said an observer, "it depends what you mean by a rebound."

"What kind of drivel is this?" you would yell. "Who *won* the game? Who got more rebounds, Reed or Cowens? *What happened?*"

We demand such clarity because sports are clear. If a team scores more than its rivals, it wins. If it wins more games than any other team, it finishes first. A player is judged by objective standards against both the present and the past to determine his ability; that is one of the reasons sports fans are so hypnotized by statistics. Bill Russell was not personally popular in Boston — he was too honest and outspoken for a black athlete in the 1950s. But he played and coached for thirteen seasons and in that time the Celtics won eleven NBA championships, and not even the chapter chairman of the KKK can argue away Russell's right to be considered one of the greatest basketball players ever.

It is just this kind of certainty that is so missing in other aspects of our lives. Can you imagine a political reporter writing that "Senator Smith scored a .378 on his economics speech today, moving up 3.5 per cent among urban Catholics, but dropping 2.4 per cent among Indiana used car salesmen?" There are no such standards. Historians still debate the relative success of Metternich and Henry IV, much less Roosevelt and Kennedy, much *much* less those in the midst of current political battles. In any "objective" sense, we don't "know" what is happening in the world of public policy.

The same sort of uncertainty shadows us wherever we turn. Art, literary, and movie critics can prove that the efforts of Picasso, Hemingway and Truffaut effort are lasting works

of art, a failure, or a sign of degeneracy. Our laws mean completely different things to judges, lawyers, and litigants, even assuming witnesses remember events the same way. A businessman may think himself a worthy soul for bringing a new plant to a depressed town, only to find himself accused of polluting the air and water or manufacturing a dangerous product. Economists can prove conclusively that a policy will promote jobs, or cause a depression, or shrink the dollar, depending on their ideological sympathies. Not long ago we thought of science as a discipline to bring reason to our lives, but somewhere between Hiroshima and Thalidomide we changed our minds; the same miracle drug that will prevent pregnancies may also cause strokes. The most basic questions of life itself — what is happiness, what makes a marriage work, how long should eggs boil — are fought out on a darkling plain.

Sports is a world of certainty in a very uncertain world. It is something more: the very nature of an athletic contest is a celebration of reason and fair play.

Sometimes, things are very exact — and also very irrational. Anyone who has worked for a big company, or gone to a huge university, has been assaulted by rules which don't make any sense; army veterans can fill hours relating stories of massive wastes of time and money spent complying with completely mindless procedures. The rules of sport, by contrast, are generally rational; there is a purpose to the exercise.

Baseball, for example, is built around sequential movement; it is our tribute to the assembly line. A team scores a run the way a car is built: one step at a time. A player who breaks any part of the sequence — by batting out of turn, failing to touch a base, passing a teammate on the basepaths — is out. They must bat in turn, and move to another base when a ground-ball is hit, just as if they were cans on a conveyor belt.

Basketball is already dominated by

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## HANDBALL HUSTLING

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Western Union?"

Barely under his breath, Irving was saying, "Like a fag shoemaker . . ."

Mr. Gross, the old man who has never bet more than one dollar for a whole day, suddenly snapped up from his beach chair. "Two to one on The Beautician!"

Two voices responded at once, "Where were you before the game?"

Mr. Gross pulled his chair closer to the court.

Back to the game. Benny swung at the next serve like Babe Ruth going for the fences and slammed a perfect shot. He took the serve, made two more angry hits and ran his team back to 17-16. He couldn't hold The Goniff's next shot off the paddle, but he still looked over to Irving Action and stuck his tongue out at him. Irving smiled, "Way to hit, slugger." Irving, himself, couldn't add a point.

Somehow, Irving and Benny then held Louie's side scoreless. And when they got the serve back, they rose from the grave. Two ace serves and they were in the lead for the first time at 19-17. Irving's next serve went deep and low. Louie was going to let it go out, but he saw that it was going to hit right on the rear line. He lunged backwards, actually incapable of getting to the ball. He was falling directly toward Mr. Gross's recently moved chair. Just before the ball touched down for its second bounce, Louie tripped over Mr. Gross.

"No point," The Mayor quickly called.

"WHAT?" Irving yelled. "He couldn't get that shot. He couldn't never get that shot."

"Doesn't matter. Interference," The Mayor replied firmly.

Irving was livid. He was going to scream. He would have let go with every epithet he had ever learned, if his teeth hadn't fallen out. The Fates had added another insult, another statement of Irving's lost position. It was a sign from above. The Beautician-Goniff team reeled off four straight. The crowd reacted silently to the result.

Louie The Beautician was sorry the game ended as it did. He was the first to speak, "Irving, double or nothing."

Nothing.

"Play you again, Irving, double or nothing."

Irving's head was hanging low. But, he answered, "We get two points and the serve."

The bargaining began. One point, but no serve."

"One point AND the serve."

"The point and we flip for the serve."

"Go ahead and flip."

A woman who had just joined the spectators offered 6-5 on heads.

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## WRAP UP

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big men, so many of its rules work to limit the advantage of height. An offensive player can't stand under the basket waiting for a pass; that violates the "three-second" rule. Nor can he put his hand over the basket, either to guide the ball in or knock it away. Even hockey, which is the most difficult sport to appreciate, has fashioned its rules with a sense of precision: you can't loiter around the opposing goal hoping for a break, you can't escape offensive pressure by flinging the puck down the length of the ice. Skating and passing make the game be played with those skills emphasized.

The rules of sports make sense. A 12-year-old can understand what they say, and what they're for. Is that true of many other things? Do you understand your income tax form? Your insurance policy? Your automobile engine? The world is a complicated space; the playing field is not.

Perhaps the most satisfying pleasure sports affords is a degree of fair play that would be considered saintly or insane in the outside world. Put aside brushback pitches, raised hockey sticks, elbows under the backboard, and blind-side hits, and go back to basics.

For example, teams play with the same number of players. Obvious, isn't it? It would be completely unfair to play nine against eight. Okay. When was the last time a rich politician gave enough money to his opponent to even things up? How many B-52s did the United States lend to North Vietnam? Muggers very rarely give their victims advance warning, or a 30-second head start. Life, John Kennedy once said, is unfair. Fairness is built into the structure of every athletic contest. Move beyond the line of scrimmage

before play begins and your team loses five yards. Hold a man about to shoot a basket and he gets to score points unimpeded; do it six times and you're out of the game.

The sort of questions legal philosophers have been asking for centuries — how do you properly punish wrongdoing and deter future acts — has long since been settled in the world of sports. Certainly referees make mistakes, and some athletes get away with illegal play. But compared to such corruptions as fixed traffic tickets, fixed anti-trust settlements, special favors in return for campaign cash, and the pervasive non-accountability of privileged people, the unpunished wrongdoing in sports is minimal.

The world is often a confusing place, sometimes a very nasty place, indeed. It is also a place where pretense is a long way from reality. In the 1960's we learned that institutions often don't do the things they claim to do. In the 1970's, we're learning that institutions often do the things they claim not to do. Universities that celebrate learning while treating students as commodities; labor unions that enrich their officers and ignore the grievances of workers; executives who laud the free-enterprise system while fixing prices and buying legislation; governments which call themselves peace-loving while bombing strangers; politicians who undermine the political system — all these revelations have shaken our capacity to believe the claims of legitimacy.

What sports provides us, then, is solace. For a few hours, the world we witness is exciting, ordered, logical, and fair. That is why the behind-the-scenes exposes of big-time athletics, while interesting, are also irrelevant to our enjoyment of the game. We need to believe that fair play is something more than a childish fairy tale. We need to believe that somewhere, success can be earned, rather than bought or stolen. We need to believe that the rules we live by are sensible, equally applicable to rich and poor. In the arena of sports, we can grasp those values which have taken such a terrible beating everywhere else. When we cheer our heroes, we are cheering up ourselves.