

3/16/1999

Mickey, Willie, and the Duke: Some Observations on Sports and Society

I

In the 1950s, the three major league baseball teams located in New York City (excuse me, Brooklyn)—the New York Yankees, New York Giants, and Brooklyn Dodgers—were each led by a Hall of Fame center fielder. These multi-talented, charismatic players—Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, and Duke Snider—brought excitement, even drama, to the summer in our leading metropolis. Mantle was a switch hitter from Commerce, Oklahoma. Duke Snider batted left, threw right, and was born in Compton, a suburb of Los Angeles. Willie Mays was right handed all the way and grew up in a suburb of Birmingham in the deep South. The teams they played on included other Hall of Famers, like Yogi Berra, Jackie Robinson, Pee Wee Reese, and Whitey Ford. In nine years, the teams won 15 pennants and 8 World Series.

Mantle was known for his gargantuan homers, including shots that went further than anyone had hit the ball before him. Along with the power came great speed—the ability to bunt and steal. A Triple Crown winner, he hit for average, knocked in runs, and hit the deep ball. He joined Ruth, Gehrig, and DiMaggio as Yankee immortals.

Willie Mays was known for his speed, ability to get to the ball wherever it was hit, and his great arm. He is remembered for his catch and throw in the 1954 World Series against Vic Wertz and the Cleveland Indians. In his early years he was not known as a home run threat, but ended with 660 and had two years with more than 50. If he had not missed the '52 and '53 seasons for his Army stint, he may have broken Ruth's record before Aaron did. For five consecutive years he also led the league in stolen bases.

Duke Snider was known for his clutch hitting, his batting average, ability to hit the home run, and his grace in the field. He was considered a well-rounded athlete. Power, speed, strength. Only Babe Ruth and Ralph Kiner before him had hit 40 home runs in five consecutive years.

One observer has noted that center field “on a baseball diamond is the most commanding and far reaching assignment.” (Honig, 1987, page 1) He felt it took a player with a great arm, skilled in the field, fast, and a great hitter. Mantle, Mays, and Snider had it all.

So, in the 50s, the discussion at the soda shops, parks and offices, the Polo Grounds, Ebbets Field, and Yankee Stadium focused around the question of who was the best center fielder in New York. The Dodgers, the Yankees, the Giants, and their center fielders caught the imagination of the fans of New York. And baseball fans everywhere.

Let us consider some observations on sports and society including how sports are derived from society, mirror the society, and some potential future directions. Then we will return to Mickey, Willie, and the Duke in center field.

II

In the Greco-Roman tradition, sport emphasized exercise, health, and in its competitive aspect, endurance and strength. Across the ocean and centuries, in America, Henry David Thoreau advocated connecting body and soul with nature—walking, swimming, rowing. The “Muscular Christians” advocated recreation with missionary zeal. It was the antithesis of the earlier Victorianism and Puritanism that sought to repress overexuberant recreation. By 1850, recreation transformed into entertainment, circuses, racing, sporting events, boxing.

In the Theory of the Leisure Class, (cited in Sports, Culture and Society, 1969, page 3) Thorstein Veblen “saw sports as a reversion to barbarian culture. Whether...engaged in by the leisure class or the working class, they were ‘marks of an arrested spiritual development.’” (I guess we wouldn’t find Veblen at the Horseshoe on a fall day to cheer on the Buckeyes.)

The interaction of sports with society is evident when we observe how sports have been derived from the basic elements of our society. Sports come from the varied means of transportation: walking, running, swimming, skiing, boating, rowing, horse racing, auto racing, and many others. Sports deriving from fighting reinforce Veblen’s view that barbarian culture is a source—wrestling, boxing, the more sophisticated fencing. These forms of combat become stylized in sporting contests. War and survival activities generate other sports, including the use of guns, rifles, bow and arrow, and perhaps the javelin. Some sports are derived from work, including rodeo events like roping and riding.

In a 1951 study of Samoan society, Helen Dunlap (Sports, Culture and Society, page 113) concluded that warfare in the Samoan culture was interrelated with the element of games and sports in that “the skills of war were perfected through the specific amusements of disc and stick throwing for distance, spear throwing for accuracy.” She concluded that the physical strength and endurance essential for success in their games was also essential for success in war. The skills in our rodeo are useful on the range. Likewise, in the Samoan culture “fishing and pigeon netting were organized sports, as well as food procuring activities.” So in such matters as working, seeking food, fighting, and moving about, we find that sports are clearly derived from society.

Bart Giamatti, former president of Yale and briefly Commissioner of Baseball before his untimely death in 1989, noted that baseball was one of the invented sports, although it includes many of the activities—throwing, running, batting—that may be found in early cultures as sports. Giamatti offers a simpler concept of sport: a shared moment of leisure. Although Giamatti took a classical view of sport as a vehicle to fulfillment, his view may also be a precursor to our spectator culture.

The growth of sports in America was tied to religious values. Sports were viewed as a way to train boys in “manly ideals” for teaching “independence, self-reliance, courage, and discipline...” (New American Sports, 1997) “Basketball was invented in 1891 at the YMCA’s leadership training institute in Springfield, Massachusetts,” by James Naismith. (Sports in American Culture, page 279). The method for spreading such sports were the 250 YMCA gyms in place in 1895 promoting swimming, baseball, football, weightlifting, and now basketball. Healthy mind, healthy body, healthy competition.

III

But as we know, sports also reflect society. Our leisure time, our sporting competition is not immune from what is going on around us. Abuses invade what Giamatti described as our paradise—the games we play—and undermine the healthy mind, healthy body, and healthy competition.

What is happening in our community enters our games. The norms and behaviors that are prevalent in society manifest themselves in our pastimes as well. Drugs, gambling, cheating, violence, excesses of every kind find their way onto our playing fields. James H. Frey, writing in “The Coming Demise of Intercollegiate Athletics,” (in Fractured Focus, 1986) cites the 1950s as an example of a time of corruption, brutality, illegal recruiting, bribery, jail for athletes, and suspension for coaches.

Rather than examine each aspect of society that has influenced sports, let us focus instead on one fundamental characteristic of society that has played an historic and pervasive role: the treatment of Black Americans.

Let us return to baseball. Just a few years before Willie Mays joined the New York Giants, Jackie Robinson was given the status of the first Black to play major league baseball, integrating the crosstown Brooklyn Dodgers. The story of Jackie’s courage and ability have been told over the years and celebrated recently on the fiftieth anniversary of the event. Perhaps a recounting of the rules for Robinson’s behavior will underscore the partial integration that took place:

- Robinson could not endorse any product
- Robinson could not sign his name to a magazine or news article
- Robinson could not object to an umpire’s decision

- Robinson could not accept social invitations nor go to night spots
- Robinson could not respond if insulted by another player.

These were the rules created by the enlightened challenger of accepted practice, Branch Rickey in 1947 and accepted by Jackie Robinson, an American who understood the culture he was about to enter. “The Jackie Robinson Case” (in Sport and Society) also reports some of the response to Robinson playing for the Dodgers:

- The Phillies turned the visiting team dugout into a “verbal cesspool”
- A teammate requested a transfer
- There were informal petitions against Robinson playing
- He was spat on, thrown at, and spiked. He did not respond.

Robinson followed the rules and baseball, at least on the field, today includes people of diverse backgrounds.

Why did Robinson endure this unequal treatment? Why did Martin Luther King, Jr. place his own life in jeopardy? The yearning for access, opportunity, and fair treatment is as fundamental to our culture as is hatred, bigotry, and discrimination.

Bart Giamatti, in his work, Take Time for Paradise, published around the time of his death in 1989, argues that baseball changed America in 1947. Jackie Robinson played without an executive order from the President, without action from Congress, without a trial or decision by a court. Baseball voluntarily desegregated—an extraordinary event.

The Hall of Fame is beginning to recognize great Americans of color who played baseball. A museum in Kansas City includes their photographs and some of their records. Who were the greatest baseball players in America?

“Walter Johnson, the gentle, white Idahoan who disproved in advance the theory that nice guys finish last (in a twenty-year career ending in 1927, he won 416 games in the majors), told reporters that he had faced some Black pitchers better than he. James Wickware of the Mohawk Giants for instance. Johnson (a Hall of Famer regarded among the best of all time) also ranked himself below Cyclone Joe Williams, a huge right-hander from Texas with a smooth overhand delivery and excellent control.

‘If his hair wasn’t curly and his skin too bronze,’ said Walter Johnson, ‘this fellow Williams would be the very best there is.’” (from 200 Years of Sports in America: A Pageant of A Nation at Play, by Wells Twombly, 1976, page 117.)

In other sports there was a recognition of the accomplishments of Black athletes at an earlier time. Who can forget Jesse Owens and his four Olympic gold medals at the 1936 Olympics with Adolph Hitler in attendance? Joe Louis was idolized as an American boxing hero.

Even today, we have a long way to go in dealing with racial differences in society and in sports. The acceptance of the Black quarterback in the National Football League is relatively recent. The appropriateness of Black managers and coaches is still infrequently accepted in professional sports. Some progress has been made at the collegiate level. A 1986 study by Richard Lapchick entitled “The Promised Land” (from Fractured Focus, 1986) found disparities in income for white and Black players in the NFL. White offensive players earned \$4970 more than Black offensive players. White defensive players earned \$11,100 more than Black defensive players. White starters earned \$121,050 compared to \$112,800 for Black starters.

On balance, sports have been a great equalizer for some Black Americans. Sports have created access and opportunity that have not existed universally throughout our culture. When more CEOs of major corporations are Black, then fewer Black youth will look at sports as their only or best option. Parenthetically, while not addressing the role of women in sports and in society in this essay, I acknowledge the significance of that topic.

IV

The discussion of economic opportunity leads us to the economics of sport, sports and business, or in honor of Mickey Mantle, commerce. Societal forces created entrepreneurial opportunities in sport. John Rickards Betts, in "The Technological Revolution and the Rise of Sport," (Sports, Culture and Society) cites industrialization and urbanization as factors in the last half of the nineteenth century giving rise to spectator sports. Urbanization brought about a decline of hunting and fishing while industrialization increased leisure time and resources. Combined, there was a growing market or audience with commercial potential.

The commercialization of sport included the sale of leisure products such as bicycles and baseball mitts. Businessmen invested in teams. Gentry sports, such as fox hunting, were dominant in rural areas while team sports developed in urban areas.

"By 1900, sports connoted athletic games played by professional or highly trained amateurs under clearly spelled out rules with masses of paying spectators cheering their favorites in specially built stadia." (The New American Sports History, 1997, "Sports Through the Nineteenth Century," page 33, Elliott J. Gorn). America developed its own variations of team sports including football, baseball, and basketball.

In college, many sports were initiated by individual students who had an interest in a particular game. Football at Yale, for example. Rivalries followed and coaching, stadia, and budgets came later. In 1956, the Ohio State University football coach received total compensation of \$98,000 including salary, benefits, and all outside contracts. A few weeks ago the *Columbus Dispatch* reported that the current Ohio State University football coach now receives a total package worth \$1 million.

When Babe Ruth was asked about earning more than the then president of the United States, Ruth responded that he had a better year. Today, substitutes on NBA and major league teams routinely earn more than governors, senators, or presidents.

When Willie Mays, as a youth, discovered that his father was actually paid for playing in the Negro leagues, his profession was chosen. In fact, he commented more than once that he would pay to play the game. This was the view of many of our leading team players until very recently. Media has changed all this.

On April 11, 1921, KDKA was the first commercial radio station to air a description of a boxing match. In 1927, for the second Jack Dempsey–Gene Tunney fight, one New York department store sold \$90,000 in radio equipment at \$22 per unit in two weeks. In those days, \$22 was a handsome weekly salary.

Now the expectation is that a professional sports career will lead to millions. Radio and television contracts play a major role. For television, it began inauspiciously enough on May 17, 1939 at 12:30 p.m. with Bill Stern as the announcer for the first televised sports event. It was a baseball game played between Columbia and Princeton. The New York Times critic wrote: “It is difficult to see how this sort of thing can catch the public fancy.” (Two Hundred Years of Sport, page 210). Today, we have television channels and networks dedicated only to the presentation of sport. We are in the midst of March Madness this week including access to 64 men’s and 64 women’s basketball teams. Spring training has begun and a program called Baseball Today is available each evening.

According to data drawn from the U.S. Department of Commerce with assistance from the Wharton Econometric Forecasting Associates Group, the gross sports national

product in 1987 was \$50.2 billion. That was prior to the escalation in player contracts and the value of teams. The sale of team garb has also exploded. According to a report in *Nation*, in August of 1998, the sports GNP has expanded to \$350 billion, growing tenfold over the last decade. Society has created sports and today sports are a dominant force for many in our society.

V

So where is our society tending and where are sports tending? What are the trends that both bode well or ill for our use of leisure time and the sports that we play? That promise better or worse health for us individually and as a society? First some trends in competitive athletics.

Have you noticed that football lines in the Big 10 are undersized if the players weigh less than 300 pounds? Some now are approaching 400 pounds. Returning to the Greco-Roman ideal, these would not be attractive specimens except perhaps in Japanese sumo wrestling. In addition, one must wonder about the health of the individual player and particularly the smaller player he may fall on. One might conclude that participation in athletics is potentially detrimental to fitness and health.

How does one gain within a short period of time tremendous bulk and strength? Some of it certainly can come from an excellent trainer and hard work, but we should observe and question when athletes take on surprising size too quickly.

Who is watching these games at our colleges and universities? Now that we are building professional facilities for amateur sports, we are selling boxes to corporations and serving alcohol on campus. Students either feel unwelcome or priced out of the market. Fewer students (sometimes very few students) are at the games. What is the purpose of college athletics?

Very few of us enjoy watching a consistently losing team. Even fewer enjoy watching a team that plays poorly. Accordingly, we join in the cheers for a successful coach, but success on the field seems to be the primary or only measure. What about the

classroom and the graduation rate? What choice does the coach have if a losing season or seasons results in forced relocation? What values should the university represent and espouse? Behavior does speak louder than words.

A current trend is for individual trainers for those who can afford them. For those who cannot, there are spas and health clubs to balance our lives. On the whole, these have been financially successful ventures. A recent article cites examples of well paid individuals in successful occupations who have given them up for the interpersonal rewards of service as a personal trainer: namely, the sincere appreciation of the client.

The violence prevalent at soccer matches and other sporting events in other nations has not come to the United States. With spectator sports growing and fanaticism on the rise, we should be aware of the potential for antisocial behavior.

With a growing sports industry, the impact of a financial failure may be significant. More important, the ability of owners and teams to uproot from a community may leave it financially and emotionally damaged. The Brooklyn Dodger fans and supporters of the New York Giants experienced significant loss in 1958 when the teams moved across America and became the Los Angeles Dodgers and San Francisco Giants. Closer to home, Cleveland Browns fans hope to end their period of mourning.

Who should own these teams? The Green Bay Packers—not one of the larger markets—are owned through shares held by many local citizens. Recently, the Kansas City Royals were given to a community institution in that city. Maybe we can encourage a trend of community owned sports teams.

What other societal trends may influence sports? What other sports trends may influence society?

VI

Intervening variables render all such prognostications to a level of conjecture. So let us turn from these observations on sports and society back to our New York heroes. Mickey, Willie, and the Duke.

Who was the best center fielder in New York? If we could call back their fathers who spent hours preparing them to play, each would inform us of the special abilities of his son. Ward Snider made Duke a left-handed hitter so he could get down the line to first faster. Mutt Mantle named his son to play baseball and made him a switch hitter. When Mickey was sent down to Kansas City his rookie year in the show, Mutt challenged him and the Mick responded. Willie Mays, Sr. was an example and role model for his son.

Who was the better player?

Easy. In 1956, Mickey Mantle hit .353, had 52 home runs, and 130 RBIs, winning the Triple Crown. Although Snider led the National League with 43 home runs, Mantle was far superior that year to both his New York rivals. In 1957, Mantle's stats were diminished but on a par with Mays and Snider. It must be remembered though that he was walked 146 times; one of ten years in which he was walked more than 100 times. The pitchers knew: don't to pitch to Mickey Mantle.

Who was the better player?

In 1953, the Duke hit .336 with 42 home runs and 126 RBIs. Mickey Mantle hit less than .300, 21 homers, and had fewer than 100 RBIs. Willie Mays was not at that level in his development and was serving in the Army. In 1954, Willie Mays hit .345,

had 41 home runs, and 110 RBIs. In 1955, his batting average was .319, he had 51 home runs, and 127 RBIs. Of course, in 1954 he made the catch and the Giants swept the Indians.

So who was better?

Pick the year and I'll tell you.

How about an outfield of Mantle, Mays, and Snider?

*James I. Luck
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March 16, 1999*