Sports and Society

By: Gabriel Adams | Posted: Nov 18, 2008

Sports are an essential part of pop culture, in the United States and around the world. It's almost impossible to quantify just how influential sports have been on everything we do.

Sports analogies are the norm, as are sports terms and catch phrases. People talk about sports, even when they're not actually talking about sports directly.

Sports bars are common everywhere. People who love sports and love to hang out and have a good time can't resist getting together in public or at each other's homes to watch the big game!

In the US, football has basically replaced baseball as the national pastime. Soccer is very popular around the world (and is called football in some countries). Tennis, golf, hockey, polo, racing, and many other sports are also widely enjoyed.

Why is it that people love sports so much? Is it the hype in the media? Is it the activity involved, the physical movement? Is it the competitive nature of sports? Is it the adrenaline rush people get when they play and watch sports? Is it the connection people feel to each other and the camaraderie that results when people partake in sports activities together?

Just what is it that makes sports so popular, so infectious, and so influential? Why are people so drawn to them? Most likely it is a combination of all of the aforementioned reasons, and perhaps a few others.

One thing that makes sports so eternal is that they are just plain fun. It's fun to play and fun to watch sports. That is undeniable. Even before we can speak, most people like to play and kick balls around. It's almost as if sports are hardwired in the human psyche.

The same can be said for things like enjoyment of movies, music, and dancing. It's likely that everyone is hardwired on some level to almost instinctively feel drawn to entertainment. It's also likely that this "hardwiring" is not necessarily all genetic either; it's also probable environmental factors are at play as well.

What's great about sports is that the concept can be applied to many other things. People can discuss things like politics, entertainment of all types, and even religion and make a "sport" out of the whole act of conversing.

What it comes down to is that we all love to communicate and interact with each other and our world, including nature, animals, technology, etc. We are very thankful to have a chance to live and
experience, whether we acknowledge that readily on our bad days or not.

In the back of everyone's mind is the fact that this adventure of being alive is an amazing blessing and gift. Perhaps it would behoove us all to remember that each time we do anything we enjoy, whether that's sports, movies, music, cooking, reading, creating, partaking in other things, or otherwise. Perhaps we would have a thousand more reasons to smile, millions of reasons to want to live a million more years here on God's grain earth.

It's food for thought. If you grasp it, perhaps life itself can become a home run or touchdown for you and those around you!

**About the Author**
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Something terrible happened on my street when I was kid, something that I had screened from my consciousness for many years until last weekend. My neighbor Scott Holderman and I were futzing about near the side of his house, setting up one of those epic Star Wars tête-à-têtes or digging for earthworms or doing whatever children do on nice days in quiet neighborhoods, and then there came a horrible screeching, the braking of an automobile that could not stop in time. The car had crested the steep hill of our street and slammed into a child who wandered into it. I can still see the child lying there, and I can still hear the mother's tortured shriek when she realized it was one of hers. An ambulance arrived, and then a medevac helicopter touched down 30 feet from our house, and they took the child away. He survived, but he wasn't the same.

A few years earlier, back when I was 5, my parents moved from suburban New York City to State College, Pa. They did this because my father took a job as a professor at Penn State, but I assume they also did this because State College was considered a good place to raise children, a placid college town set in the geographic center of Pennsylvania. Those of us who grew up there like to say we lived three hours from everywhere. We resided in a development called Park Forest, on a street named after a British county.

The kids from the neighborhood would gather to play basketball in my driveway, not because I was particularly popular, but because we had a good hoop. In high school, we engaged in epic pick-up football games in Sunset Park, a little patch of grass right next to a house owned by Joe and Sue Paterno. In the second grade, my Little League coach was an enormous neighbor of ours named Mr. McQueary, and his son Mike was the best player on our team. We went to school at Park Forest Junior High, and then we went to State College High School, where we learned how to drive and how to date and how to do quadratic equations. We were the sons of farmers and college professors and football coaches. One of my brother's classmates was named Sandusky, one of my classmates was named Sandusky, too. I goofed off in the back of Latin class with a kid named Scott Paterno. We knew who their fathers were; their fathers were royalty to us, even if we acted like it was no big deal. Our football team's nickname was the Little Lions. There was no way to extricate the happenings at our school from the happenings at the university, and the happenings at the university always centered around football. Everything in State College — even the name of our town — was one all-encompassing, synergistic monolith, and Joe Paterno was our benevolent dictator, and nothing truly bad ever happened, and even when it did, it was easier just to blot it from our lives and move on.

I can't add a lot to what's been written about the facts of the burgeoning scandal at Penn State, except to tell you how strange it feels to type the phrase "burgeoning scandal at Penn State." I know that I'm in denial. I know that I'm working through multiple layers of anger and disgust and neurosis and angst. I know that I'm too emotionally attached to the situation to offer any kind of objective take, though I don't think I realized how emotionally attached I was until this occurred. I never understood how much of an effect both football and a sense of place had on my persona. I apologize if what follows seems disjointed, because I am still coming to terms with the fact that this is real. "What can I say?" my mom wrote me from State College on Monday afternoon. "We're sort of going around in a daze."

I do not mean to make excuses for anyone involved, nor have any of the alums or townspeople I've spoken to or corresponded with, including my friend Brad, who is the most rigidly optimistic Penn State booster I've ever met. There's a group, about 15 or 20 of us, who have kept in touch since college, and I haven't seen some of them in years, and I've never met some of the others, but I still consider them close friends because we share a bond that was forged through football. And I know that, if you attended a secondary institution where football was not a priority, that sounds like an absurd basis for a relationship. But this is why college football evokes such extreme emotion, and this is why schools work so damn hard and often take ethical shortcuts to forge themselves into football powers: If they are successful, then the game serves as the lifelong bond between alums and townspeople and the university, thereby guaranteeing the institution's self-preservation through donations and season-ticket sales and infusions into the local economy. It is a crass calculus, when you put it that way, which is why there will always be skeptics and there will always be those of us for whom college football is (other than our own families) the purest emotional attachment of our adulthood, and there will always be some of us who bound between those two poles.

Every year, Brad sends out an eight-page e-mail, a meticulous scouting report on a team that is inevitably destined for an Outback Bowl berth but that Brad believes really has a shot at 12-0 this time around. This is what Brad wrote on September 6, a few days
before Alabama pounded Penn State in a game none of us believed we could win: "We're gonna hang on Saturday. I think we're gonna give 'em a run."

And this is what Brad wrote on Monday: "The nature of this crime is the worst that has ever happened anywhere."

We moved to State College in 1978, the season Penn State lost to Alabama on a goal-line stand in the Sugar Bowl. I was in first grade, and I didn't have much in the way of social skills, and Penn State football was the language by which I could relate to the world and through which I could speak to the adults around me. I drew pictures of Curt Warner and Todd Blackledge; I memorized the rosters so that when people in our section at Beaver Stadium would ask who made that play, I could tell them. To this day, when I try to recall the combination of my gym locker or a friend's birthday or the license plate of my rental car, I think in terms of uniform numbers. It is not 31-17-03; it is Shane Conlan-Harry Hamilton-Chip LaBarca. Those were great years, and Penn State was in its heyday and Joe Paterno was the Sportsman of the Year and State College was a community that never gave in to the ethical lapses of the '80s and early '90s, because our coaching staff would not stand for it. One former player called it Camelot, and that sounds apt enough.

Jerry Sandusky had been promoted to defensive coordinator the year before we arrived in town. For decades, Penn State defined itself through its ability to stop people when it mattered, and, speaking from a strict football perspective, Sandusky was as responsible for the school's glory years as Paterno was. Linebacker U. thrived under Sandusky, and Penn State won its first national championship in 1982, and then won another in 1986, defeating Miami 14-10 in the Fiesta Bowl in a game predicated entirely on defense. It is widely acknowledged that Sandusky's game plan was the difference, that he rattled Vinny Testaverde and Miami's impetuous wide receivers by devising confusing coverage schemes and instructing his defensive backs to hit Michael Irvin until he cried. The day after it happened, they played that game on a continuous loop in our high school cafeteria. It is still my favorite football game of all time, a metaphoric triumph of the unadorned hero over the flamboyant villain. I wrote a long piece about it for ESPN, and a portion of a book, that now rings completely hollow. I have the original video recording of it in my living room, and I have thought several times over the past couple of days about taking a hammer to it.

I remember one Saturday morning in the autumn of my adolescence, the coach shambling along in his parka, brow furrowed, glasses shadowed in the sharp glare of the sun, black sneakers kicking at the leaves as they eddied and then parted on the asphalt path before him. I did not intend to follow him; it just happened that way, so that one moment I was headed to a football tailgate and the next moment I was trailing along behind Joe Paterno.

I walked behind him for several miles that day. Back then, in the late 1980s, it was still a routine of his to walk from his house to the stadium where he coached, slipping across the Penn State campus, past science labs and classroom buildings and parking lots occupied by stunned tailgaters who could never quite get over the fact that it was really him. Sometimes we were guilty of regarding him as more deity than man, as if he presided over us in mythological stand-up form. He was as much our own conscience as he was a football coach, and we made that pact and imbued him with that sort of power because we believed he would wield it more responsibly than any of us ever could. Maybe that was naïve, but we came of age in a place known as Happy Valley and naïveté was part of the package, and now that word isn't in our dictionaries anymore.

As a journalist, of course, you're taught to be skeptical of everything, and in college, we tried our damndest at the college newspaper to cover Penn State football like professional journalists did. At one point, a talented young reporter thought she'd caught Paterno in a loophole regarding the housing policy at the school, but nothing much ever came of it. Most of the time, Joe got what he wanted. We grew older, and we came to understand one of the central truths of human nature, which is that when you brush up against a truly powerful force, it is never quite as benevolent as you imagined it to be. In order to acquire power, you have to be at least a little ruthless. All you can hope for is that those who do acquire power operate by some sort of rough ethical standard, and even if I no longer deified Paterno, I continued to believe that the monolith I'd grown up inside was essentially a force for good. They did things I found untoward, but I always presumed they did them for the right reasons.

A few years ago, I drove down to the University of Maryland to research a story on Len Bias. I'd gone to see his mother speak at a high school, and now I sat in her office, and I asked her what went wrong at Maryland, whether the administration and the people in power deserved to share any of the responsibility for her son's death, and I remember precisely what she told me. "There was no covering," she said.

I don't know if there are any apt analogies to anything when it comes to this case, but this seems a little bit like our Len Bias moment at Penn State. Our leaders failed to cover, and while they deserve the benefit of due process, they deserve to be held accountable for whatever mistakes they made. If it means that this is how Joe Paterno goes out, then so be it; if it means that 30 years of my own memories of Penn State football are forever tarnished, then I will accept it in the name of finding some measure of justice. Every sane
person I know agrees on this. It took Maryland the better part of two decades to regain its soul, and it will take us many years, as well, and in some way it will never be the same. We've come to terms with the corruptibility of the human soul in State College, and we've swept away the naïve notion that this place where we lived so quietly was different from the rest of America.

I have two close friends, a husband and wife, both alums, who moved to State College from New York City a few years ago. They did this because they couldn't afford to raise children in Manhattan, but they also did it because he couldn't imagine a safer place to raise their kids than a little town in a valley situated three hours from everywhere. I don't know what it feels like to grow up there now. I want these things to disappear from my consciousness, but they won't. The place where I grew up is gone, and it's not coming back.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Mike McQueary, now an assistant coach at Penn State, was allegedly the graduate assistant in the horrifying grand jury report who witnessed Sandusky in the showers of the Penn State football building with a young boy in 2002. The graduate assistant allegedly reported it to Paterno, who passed some form of this information on to his superiors, but no one in the chain of command ever called the police. The outrage at both Paterno and the graduate assistant appears to be moral rather than legal, none of which makes it any less of an emotional bombshell.

2. While the Sanduskys could not have children of their own, they adopted six, which is one of those facts that feels telling only in retrospect.

3. Joe Paterno's youngest child. One of Scott's older brothers, Jay, was also a quarterback at State College High and is now the quarterbacks coach at Penn State. He often serves as a ready scapegoat for the Penn State fan base when things go wrong.

4. The irony to this, of course, is that Paterno tried so hard, at least in the media, not to present himself as anything more than a common man. And yet this only elevated his public stature.

5. See: Jobs, Steve, et al.
Sports are an essential and important aspect of American society; they are indispensable when it comes to their impact on a plethora of public arenas, including economics and the mass media. Sport coincides with community values and political agencies, as it attempts to define the morals and ethics attributed not only to athletes, but the totality of society as a whole. Fans of spectator sports find a reaffirmation of key societal values through sports, as they give meaning to their own lives. “By becoming fans, spectators engage in certain kinds of pleasures, fulfilling their own desires through fetishism, voyeurism, and narcissism,” writes Brummett (21).

Sports provide key dynamics when it comes to the augmentation of communal principles by enhancing the physical and mental well-being of individuals and the integration of social classes. The idea of “winning” in sports serves as a prime exemplar of success: a highly valued commodity which often results in elitism and superiority. The world of sports affords us the opportunity to gain vital insight into the sensitive issues of racism, sexism, and classism. Delaney writes, “to ignore sport is to ignore a significant aspect of any society and its culture” (7), continuing to note, “sport is the opiate of the masses, due to the fact that we are in the age of the sport consumer, which is dissimilar to the age of the sport spectator” (Delaney, 14). By placing a “value” on a specific athlete, you are not only defining that athlete based on his or her attributes, you are bestowing upon them a specific worth which ultimately translates into the worth of that specific sport en masse, which is why we unjustly deem certain sports more imperative than others.

The “Americanization” of sports is something that we, as both fans and consumers, rely on to provide us with not only a means of entertainment, but a method in which we can derive the hidden values embedded in competitors. The understanding of the “Americanization” of sports is crucial to encoding the unseen cultural and communal significance many athletes possess. The norms and standards of society go tainted by many athletes throughout the country, who believe that that American spectator sport acts as a platform for the expression of individual principles onto humanity. Society places value on competition, therefore value is placed on all sports and their participants.

As a society, we construct “types” of athletes based on their economic and social value, which acts as a connotation for their overall significance to the universal spectator. The idea of “winning” is something that fuels competition, which in my view is one of America’s greatest vices; we compete
not simply to enhance our own physical attributes, but to provide ourselves with a sense of achievement at the expense of another’s failure. Sports, like the film or television industry, has major financial repercussions which might not be as beneficial to the consumer as he or she may think; the passion fans share for their favorite team or player is getting in the way of what significance these “games” truly have. Are fans paying their hard earned money to be a part of an experience they place value upon, or is it simply to line the pockets of already overpaid athletes and business gurus?

The New York Giants win the Super Bowl and a parade is thrown for the team as worshipping fans stand shoulder to shoulder in a small, enclosed street way hoping to get a glimpse of their favorite player, or any player for that matter. These fans act as a prime example as to why businesses, such as the National Football league, thrive on the unquestioned reliability of their consumers and enthusiasts. The New York Giants won the Super Bowl, great, but what does it all mean? Besides the financial upside for the NFL, what are the fans actually gaining besides the opportunity to cherish the athlete that is spending their own money? The athlete clearly benefits, so in my view, it is every professional athlete’s moral obligation to act as a role model for young kids and to give back to the community. If we, as a society, feel the urgent need to participate in and assign value to sports and competition, we must make sure that it is for all the right reasons. Many sports organizations are billion dollar businesses, but when the Super Bowl gets more viewers that the presidential race, is anyone really “winning?”

When an athlete makes it to a professional level in any sport, their commitment and obligation to perform at a high level shouldn’t be simply desired by the fans, but expected. Televised sports, specifically, create assured fixations by commodifying athletes and their actions. Within the Steve Yzerman video, spectators and the media label him as a “hero” or the “model” athlete based on the fact that he was willing to play through a severe injury for the betterment of his team. Therefore, we place a higher “value” on a player like Yzerman, than on an athlete like Floyd “Money” Mayweather. Some may view Yzerman’s action as an act of stupidity which could’ve resulted in further injury, while others may deem him invaluable. I view athletes like Steve Yzerman and Derek Jeter as a commodity or product; someone who I invest money in to perform at a high level and win. Playing a hockey game injured or diving into the crowd is expected for a twenty-five million dollar paycheck.

Some “casual” athletes perform not for financial gain or professional esteem, but simply as a way of living. Take Kathy Martin for example, who runs not just as sport, but as a way to improve her lifestyle and to become an inspiration for a younger generation. Athletes like Martin have no quandary when it comes to becoming a role model; she doesn’t need twenty-five million dollars to execute her craft at a high level. Martin places expectations and limitations on herself; she doesn’t have fans placing those expectations on her like certain professional athletes do, being that they are on television during a weekly basis. “The expression of “spectator sport” itself insists on seeing that which is viewed as a performance.

Television and other media have their eye on sport precisely because sport and games are so highly performative (Brummett, 18).” I question why sports such as basketball and football are shoved down are throats by the media, while sports like the senior Olympics harbor little value in terms of communication by publication or broadcast. One can argue that because so much revenue is plugged into teams like the Yankees or Giants, fans feel obliged and compelled to watch them, whereas “low key” sports such as track simply cannot contrive that much revenue. This is due to the fact that they
are rarely televised and the media following is virtually nonexistent compared to the popular spectator sports. I understand that placing a “value” on players is crucial in terms of essentially defining their worth within their respective organization; better athletes earn more because they’re simply a better commodity. Although I don’t believe that placing a “value” on sports themselves is imperative in terms of characterizing the importance of that specific sport. Athletes like Kathy Martin work just as hard as athletes like LebRon James; the difference is that she does it for an empty pocket and diminutive admiration.

Contemporary sports sociology theories can ultimately be assigned to sport, assessment, and the placement value on athletes. “Functionalism views society as an organized system of interrelated parts that seek equilibrium. Sports can play a vital role in maintaining such balance (Delaney, 36).” One can argue that sports counteract religious morals; guarding society from bleak realities and instilling a false sense of achievement. The world of sports encourages commercialism, sexism, and most importantly, nationalism. “The Iraqi national soccer team ultimately became an agency of national identity and pride for their country (Brummett, 12).” Many argue that the Iraqi soccer team help tackle the issues of terrorism in Iraq, as even the media was depicting their “heroism.”

Overall, it is essential that we examine sports from both a business and societal viewpoint before we view them as spectators or fans. Sport is a human institution, a universal phenomenon which serves to instill a sense of belonging or meaning to many individuals lives. Let us not place value on athletes, let us place value on the impact their profession has on humanity; the realization of athletes as commodities and sport as a political and pecuniary service will help reshape the perception that sport is merely a means of amusement and diversion from personal hardships. Our world can exist without the arrogance and egotism attributed to certain athletes, and it can surely exist without the barefaced disregard several sport organizations have for their dedicated fan base. But, we may question whether or not this world can function without the hidden values embedded in competitors and the communal insight sports give us on a national scale.

References
