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Sports and Politics in America

By JAMES RESTON

Sport in America plays a part in our national life that is probably more important than even the social scientists believe. New York City is a jungle of human conflicts these days—over commerce, education, transportation, pollution, the churches, the races and everything else—but the Mets are now in the race for the National Baseball League pennant and they are almost the only unifying force in the Big City.

The reason is perfectly clear. This is the classic theatrical New York story: it is Cinderella; the country-boy who broke Wall Street; the hopeless, even ridiculous "loser" who hits the jackpot. The New York theater has gone cynical and nude and is in trouble, but Shea Stadium out by La Guardia Airport is now the best theater in town, not because it is new and nude but because it is old and square.

The Ideal of Sports

Like Cinderella, the Mets will get to the decisive stroke of midnight, not with the Chicago Cubs, but probably in their nine games this month with the Pittsburgh Pirates, but even if they don't make it for themselves, they have made a point about sports for a lot of other people.

For sports and games, in a funny way, are not only Amer-

ica's diversion and illusion but its hope. The world of sports has everything the world of politics lacks and longs for.

It has a set of rules. It has an umpire or supreme court that cannot be challenged, even by Leo Durocher, and even if wrong. In short, baseball and football are conflict under control, and they have other advantages.

Unlike the world of politics, business, or universities, the conflicts of sports can be seen, and have a beginning and an end. In the political or academic world, you can have weak Senators or university presidents for a while, but in the sports world, a weak tackle or pitcher is an immediate disaster.

The Big Show

The results show. A baseball pennant race is not like a foreign policy: you don't have to wait twenty-five years to get the results. It will happen for the Mets between now and the end of September. Their youth will either carry them through with Tom Seaver and Jerry Koosman or the pressure will be too much and they will collapse.

But either way, it will be the best show in New York. For the struggle will be in the open. It will not be like most of the back-stage conflicts of politics. Seaver and Koosman will either have speed and control or they

won't, and unlike Bill Rogers in the State Department or Henry Kissinger in the basement of the White House, everybody will know whether they are effective or not.

Maybe this is why Seaver and Koosman of the baseball Mets and Joe Namath of the New York football Jets are the most popular personalities in New York today. They are the underdogs from the "sticks" making good against the odds and doing it on television, where all the other underdogs can see them.

Mayor Lindsay, running for re-election, is a minor character in this larger sports spectacular of New York. He has no central forum like Shea Stadium. He roams the streets making sensible arguments about the future of New York City, but his audiences are small, his arguments vague and philosophical—and for the moment nobody is listening.

Sports are now more popular than politics in America, increasingly so since the spread of television. The great corporations are now much more interested in paying millions for sports broadcasts than they are for all political events except the nominations and inaugurations of Presidents, because the general public is watching and listening.

Even President Nixon takes

time out from his responsibilities to recognize the popular attraction of sports. Not since Calvin Coolidge have we had a more awkward uncoordinated locker-room character in the White House than Richard Nixon, but he buddies up to Ted Williams of the Washington Senators, and never misses an opportunity to demonstrate that he is a "real American" following all the batting and passing averages in the land.

Nixon and Sports

This is not a wholly cynical or political exercise. He is genuinely interested in sports. Games fascinate and divert him from his problems. They have more pageantry and even dignity than most mass occasions in American life; more teamwork, more unity, more certainty at the end than most things—so he watches the games, not only because it is good politics, but because it is an escape from his normal problems that have no rules and no end.

Will the Mets make it after those nine games with the Pirates? Will Joe Namath repeat in the Super Bowl this year? Will Arnie Palmer come back after 40 or merely make money? Nobody knows, but America will be watching, probably more carefully about these sporting questions than about the larger issues of politics.

Spectator Sports

To the Editor:

James Reston in his Sept. 12 column discussed the importance of sports in America. This is precisely a point I have made in a course I teach on the sociology of religion.

Sociologically, one of the major functions religion serves is the public celebration of the values and norms which hold a society together. The public celebrations of most churches and synagogues have lost much of their plausibility, which is not the case of professional sports.

Professional sports publicly re-enact America's "true-blue" values. In this sense they serve as a functional alternative to traditional religious expressions in America—and a very popular one at that.

Sociologically I label spectator sports a religious phenomena because to identify with professional sports is to identify with the values and norms which have made American society tick in the past. Unambiguous instant justice: an umpire's decision. The "unbeatable" combination of American power and know-how: symbolically represented in the brains and brawn of Joe Namath.

All the old "verities" are properly staged and acted in professional sports: "regulated competition," "super stars," "fair play," and all in 180 minutes.

However, while Reston is right about America's enthusiasm for professional sports, that's exactly what is wrong

with American society. Professional sports like TV Westerns—both American morality plays—embody America's moralistic simplicity which didn't really work in the nineteenth century and is totally unworkable at this point in the twentieth.

Competition of Unequals

History, reality, life is closing in on America's illusions. Vietnam has dealt a severe blow to our Jack Armstrong complex, and unlike pro football, the war just isn't finishing in four quarters—despite that "unbeatable" combination of power and American know-how. And as for fair play and regulated competition, ghetto blacks, California grape-pickers and Appalachian poor whites are making it painfully clear that the story of America is really a story of competition between unequals.

What we Americans really have to decide is whether to opt for more sports, Westerns and the Roman circuses of many of our poverty programs, or to

grow up and deal with the problems of being human in a highly complex world—a world in which many, perhaps most, of the problems are intractable. The cities, the population explosion, peace, the widening gap between the rich and poor at home and in the world—such problems won't be solved by being "taken out to the ball game."

Interestingly, many of today's college youth are turned off by spectator sports. Some would rebut this by saying, "Yes, but they're turned on by LSD and pot." Frankly, that's a put down. They're also turned on by sophisticated political awareness, a quest for human values, and a commitment to facing the hard truths about today's world in a meaningful way.

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