

Too much sports

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When I was 12, I could recite the names of most lineups in the Major Leagues (aka, baseball). In fact, the first thing I did every morning was open the front door and quickly pick up the newspaper, hoping no one would see me in my underwear. I then proceeded to analyze the box scores for a good hour. It was fun and even valuable (this is how I first connected with math — calculating batting averages and win percentages as well as projecting season totals). I even cut out and collected each Red Sox box score. This often required going to the public library and obtaining the microfiche version of late games that didn't appear in my home copy. These activities lasted from opening day in early April to the close of the season in October for probably ten years of my life. Suffice it to say, I was hooked. Similar daily rituals took place during the off-season as I tried to recreate the same passion for other sports. I not only watched but also took to the fields and courts myself. I was driven by a longing to be recognized or famous like these superstar athletes.

My addiction to watching and following professional — as well as a few collegiate — sports teams and athletes remained into my 30s. Even now, I still check the box scores (online) daily though it is more of a quick check than an analysis at this point. Having lived vicariously for so long, then having taken a significant respite (once I got rid of cable TV in 2001), I've think I gained more perspective on the sports world.

Professional athletes shouldn't be role models. Most big time athletes have very different lives from the majority of us. They have been told since they were young that they have supernatural powers to perform godlike feats. As such, their ability to

maintain normal human relations has been compromised. So, it is very unrealistic to expect them to do ordinary things or behave in "rational" ways. Thus, the actions they take or the things they promote (often Hummers, sneakers, etc.) shouldn't be admired or emulated. Sure there are exceptions — e.g., Dikembe Mutombo has raised huge sums of money to build hospitals in his birth country, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Lance Armstrong's Foundation has done much for people with cancer. Yet the horror stories, like those of Mike Tyson, Chris Benoit, O.J. Simpson, and Michael Vick, saturate the news and overwhelm the few positive messages that children could get. Do we know the cost of this?

A professional sports career is pure fantasy for most. So few people will play professional sports, it is ridiculous to aspire to be a professional athlete. Even among high school basketball players, very, very few will ever make any money playing sports (about 1 in every 730, according to Dr. D. Stanley Eitzen at Colorado State). Thus, it is very unrealistic to pump children's minds (through television, posters, advertisements, and news coverage) with ideas of athletics as being somehow superior to other forms of success. We are all to blame for this. How much space does our local paper allocate to the goings-on of local high school sports teams and how much to the academic or community-oriented achievements of our young people? We've even had superstars from our local schools drop out of school, thereby losing out on almost any chance of a professional career of any sort, much less one as a professional athlete. Have we learned anything from this?

Watching and following others play sports is a major drain on our time. I



recall how many hours I spent watching sports during graduate school. Every night there was an "important" game to watch, perhaps two or three. The weekends were packed with key matchups and one could literally spend most waking hours in front of the tube. Saturday was for College Football or Basketball. Sunday was for Professional Football or Golf. And that was in the early 90's. I can only imagine how accessible games are now, at least for those with cable or a satellite. I shudder to think how much of my "youth" was wasted sitting, staring at the TV. Now, without a TV that gets stations (it is purely a DVD box), my house is devoid of this distraction and "excitement." Now, I spend nearly all those "wasted" hours in front of my computer screen. Not much of an improvement, but at least I don't have to watch all those penetrating and manipulative commercials. Also, time not

spent in front of a television is potentially time spent doing civic volunteerism and activism.

Professional athletes make so much money because we support their activities. We hear all the time about star athletes making 10's of millions of dollars annually to "dribble and shoot" or "hit, run, and catch." Even coaches are making many millions; Nick Saban, head coach of the University of Alabama's football team, is raking in over \$4 million a year (about the equivalent of 100 veteran school teachers). The new Yankee Stadium cost over \$1.5 billion and many teams are near the \$1 billion mark in "franchise value." With all these huge sums of money going around, is there any doubt that we must be shelling out serious dollars to watch (not play) sports? We pay for the tickets, we purchase memorabilia, and we buy the merchandise (as advertized on the billboards, on TV screens, in magazine spreads)—this is what pays for these commercials. And, after all this, we have the audacity to complain that: (a) we have no money to pay for health care or schools?; and, (b) our children are becoming overly materialistic.

I love sports but I think we can do a lot better with them. It is time to stop giving so much attention to other's playing them and more time to what we ourselves can do. Our children shouldn't idolize sprinters and spikers so much as "regular" people who really make a difference in their lives (i.e., politicians, farmers, writers, doctors, builders, nurses, teachers, lawyers, plumbers and trash collectors). If we can't find time to honor and emulate these people, then it might just be that we've wasted too much of it viewing sports.