Socialism and Sports

written by Lee Levin | October 25, 2013

The two great loves of my father's life were the Green Bay Packers and golf. Every fall Sunday we worshipped at the altar of the Green and Gold. My brother and I learned, at an early age, that we could only talk during commercials and half time. Our Sunday routines created my love of armchair sports. Today, in addition to following pro football, I watch college basketball and football, pro basketball, baseball and tennis. Too often feminists and leftists dismiss the importance of sports in society and only focus on the machismo culture encouraged by professional/college athletics. Although that culture is real to an alarming extent, I dare say it is also an elitist attitude that is not conducive to mass organizing and needs to be re-considered.

Team sports are not just about competition and rarely about individuals but also about how talented individuals can band together and succeed. Players and coaches recognize this — the favorite saying is "There is no I in team." Despite the use of hockey as an example of individual prowess, it is very much a team sport. The six players on the ice work as a unit to score goals. Each position has a specific assignment. If one player plays alone, the team loses. Professional hockey is a violent sport because the owners encourage fighting as a way to sell tickets. Fighting is rare at lower levels.

My expertise lies more with football and basketball. Both require players to cooperate. Granted, there are stars on the teams but the stars succeed by meshing with other teammates. Aaron Rodgers, considered by some the best quarterback in the league, is only as good as the offensive line that protects him for a sufficient amount of time so he can throw razor-sharp passes and score touchdowns. In basketball, teams who play as a unit are more successful than teams who play as individuals. The San Antonio Spurs have won four NBA championships over the past 10 years because the whole is better than the individuals. The New York Knicks fail because Carmelo Anthony, the star, won't share the ball.

The life lessons that children learn through participation in team sports are to respect others, cooperate with and support each other, and to let bygones be bygones. Young girls can get embroiled in petty arguments that may lead to bullying and certainly lead to a rigid social hierarchy where girls on the bottom feel real pain. However, through participation in organized sports, there is less social hierarchy and less bullying.

Those who did not grow up in a sports environment miss the community bonds which are created. Go to any sports bar and you find complete strangers high five and hug each other after great plays. People who attend the same bar to watch games come to know each other and find themselves talking about more than just the sport that brought them together. Certainly, it is an opportunity to begin a discussion of working class politics because we have established our bona fides through our mutual support of THE TEAM. Involvement in the sports culture is an organizing tool.

Furthermore, professional sports are a microcosm of the struggle for economic justice. On the corporate side are the team owners[1]; billionaires every one, many too stupid to recognize that they know nothing about the game they own (football: Jerry Jones of the Dallas Cowboys, Dan Snyder of the Washington (enter racist team name here); basketball: Donald Sterling of the LA Clippers; Jimmy Dolan of the New York Knicks). Then there are the owners who believe their team ownership is a sure way to maximize personal profits (David Glass, (former CEO of Walmart), of the Kansas City Royals whose claim to fame is dooming his team to be the worst in the league for the past 18 years

after reducing team payroll by 50 percent when he took over).

And then there are the owners who believe they can feed at the public trough and get their stadiums built with tax money even though they can afford to build themselves, such as Clayton Bennett of the Oklahoma City Thunder, formerly the Seattle Supersonics. This captain of industry, along with National Basketball Association Commissioner David Stern, moved the team when they failed in their attempt to blackmail the citizens of Seattle into using tax dollars to build a new stadium; and Zygi Wilf, owner of the Minnesota Vikings, and Commissioner Rodger Goodell threatened to move the team to another locale if local state legislators did not approve using tax money to build Wilf a new stadium. Citizens in the Twin Cities (where the team is located) had turned down two referendums on paying for the stadium in the past. These owners[2] have little regard for the communities that support their teams, not unlike corporations or hedge funds that buy businesses, milk the profits dry and then close up shop, leaving unemployment and a reduced tax base in their wake.

While players are paid well compared to a work-a-day guy or gal, their pay scale does not compare to the owners' profits. More importantly, their high salaries are achieved through collective bargaining. The Major League Players Association[3] is the strongest professional sports union in the country. Originally led by Marvin Miller, a former economist and negotiator for the United Steel Workers, the union raised salaries, negotiated an arbitration clause (which took the disposition of grievances away from the Commissioner (an employee of team owners) and gave it to a neutral third party. Miller also negotiated the first free agency clause in major league sports. An enormous victory for the players — no longer did the owners control where they worked.

The National Football League Players Association (NFLPA) has been the weakest, historically. There were several unsuccessful strike efforts during the 1980's, and the last one led to the first use of scabs. Under the reign of Gene Upshaw, a former Oakland Raider, there was "labor peace." Complaints that the peace came at the expense of the players swirled. In 2011, the league announced that if an agreement wasn't reached by March 1, the league would lock out the players.[4] The players were prepared and, ultimately, won.

First, the leadership of the NFLPA took a page out of Marvin Miller's playbook and ensured that the best players were team delegates and alternates. This included Drew Brees, star quarterback of the New Orleans Saints, as the most outspoken union supporter. Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers was an alternate delegate. Another successful union tactic was a focus on health and safety issues instead of money. The NFLPA made a compelling argument about the dangerousness of the sport, the short tenure of players, and the lack of retiree health benefits. For the first time, the union spoke up for retiree rights. A brilliant community-based strategy raised awareness. In the settlement, the players succeeded in preventing the league from instituting an 18 game schedule — two more than the current schedule — a top management priority. An 18-game schedule is a horrible idea for players as it exposes them to even more possible career ending injuries.

All is not sugar and light with professional sports unions. The National Basketball Players Association (NBAPA), also faced with a lockout, signed an agreement that gave the owners over $5 billion in give-backs. Unlike the football players, the union focused on money. There was no community outreach, nor were the best players in leadership roles. This epic failure can be attributed to the incompetence of the NBAPA executive director.

Like it or not, sports are front and center in American life for both women and men. Given our fascination, we must recognize the potential fandom represents in educating and organizing folks to join us in advocating for social democracy. The world of organized sports is a microcosm of corporations vs. workers and community. This meme can also be exploited to our benefit. We must

take advantage of the opportunity! [5]

Notes

[1] The only community-owned team is the Green Bay Packers. In the mid 1950's the team offered stock in the team to raise funds. The stocks were limited to one per person and could not be re-sold. The money raised financed the team and improvements to the stadium. There have been more stock sales under the same rules. That and the NFL league money-sharing rules allow the Packers to stay in a small town market and remain a successful franchise. Community-owned teams were banned in the early 1960's, much to the regret of the rest of fandom.

[2] For a more detailed account, see Dave Ziren's: *Bad Sports, How Owners are Ruining the Games We Love.*

[3] Baseball players

[4] A lockout is management's version of a strike. The good thing (if there is anything good about it) is that the employer cannot permanently replace the players.

[5] To keep up on the latest in sports, read Dave Ziren's column in *The Nation*, or subscribe to receive regular email updates. Email: edgeofsports@gmail.com.

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