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# Some Reflections on Sport and Politics

by  
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The interplay between American sports and politics is approached by defining politics as a process whereby diverse interest-bound communities continually attempt to impose their particular values and norms on one another, or in some cases on the nation and even the world at large. The variety of American communities is depicted from historical and sociological vantage points along with the constant changes in values and ethics that give birth to seemingly endless new community forms. From this discussion the social structure of American pluralism is laid bare for critical analysis. The political implications of such pluralism as it pervades all American institutions is neatly captured by T.V. Smith and Eduard Lindeman in a classic book, *The Democratic Way of Life*. In that book the concept of democratic sportsmanship is advanced. This idea *stresses two sine qua non* principles of American democracy — the principle of diversity and our continuing need to harbor differences in life styles, and the principle of the limited applicability of ideas with its cautionary warning that in an open society one cannot expect to have a single idea accepted by all.

In constructing a political model from such definitions and hypotheses, the thesis is advanced that American politics follows structural changes in American communities. As structured, the pattern of American community resembles a three-layered cake with local political communities in all their diversity at the bottom, nationally oriented political

communities in the middle, topped by an upper layer of internationally oriented political communities. Within each layer and between layers the ongoing interaction, so often appearing as antagonistic competition, presents us with a view of ongoing political processes.

In relating the political model thus constructed to American sporting institutions, the author employs Bil Gilbert's model of the three divisions of American sport. A welcome ray of light in a murky area of definition, Gilbert sees sport manifested as True Sport, a form of social play that is so common as to suggest it as being a basic need of man; High Sport, the interaction of splendid performers whose brilliant exploits attract onlookers; and Big Sport, the commercialization and professionalization of the two other forms of sport for profiteering. The author accepts Gilbert's thesis that Big Sport currently is the dominant form of sport in America. At present Big Sport is the most influential and certainly the most publicized form of sport. Since Big Sport's impact is apparent in all three layers of community interaction, the author attempts the task of describing the political process as it affects local, national and international communities of sportsmen.

At the local level of community interaction, the interplay of sports and politics is reflected in the advocacies of such rival interest groups as coaches, players and information media men. In the struggle of girls to play on Little League teams and of players to free themselves from Draconian coaching policies, we have but two examples of embattled interest communities attempting to impose new values or to modify old ones in sports.

At the national level such local battles are escalated so as to become national issues. The place of nationalism, patriotism and militarism in the conduct of sport spectacles is one such issue. Likewise debate in sport over racism, sexism, unionism and federalism are expressions of local strifes writ large.

Finally, the international level of sport raises sports and politics to its broadest level of interaction. In this cockpit nationalist drives and propaganda clashings are reflected in the promotion of Big Sport spectaculars among nations. In such sporting events as the Olympics, or international soccer or basketball leagues, and even international Little League baseball, nationalist interests are projected into the games. A pessimistic conclusion holds that at present Big Sport functions not as a moral equivalent of war as the psychologist William James so nobly hoped, but rather as a substitute for war. To paraphrase Clausewitz, Big Sport as conducted today is diplomacy practiced by other means.



*Head table at John Betts Address. L-R: Earle Zeigler, John Lucas, David Voigt, Mrs. Voigt, and Guy Lewis.*