

Commercial Sports and Kids
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This writing is a follow-up to the writing two sources down on this site, “How They Get Us to Watch the Super Bowl: An Inquiry into Sport Marketing Strategies.” It would probably be best for you to read that one before this one, though I don’t think it is absolutely necessary.

I ended the Super Bowl essay with this:

I hope this examination of sports marketing gets both you and me thinking more about how things are marketed, pitched, sold, to us. That includes truly important things such as wars, ideologies, social policies, cultural ways, and political agendas and candidates. With reference to the sport show companies, the big question that remains is what impact their operations have on this society and culture, and on our individual lives and the lives of our children. I believe the consequences of the commercial sports industry and the way it sells its product are huge, especially for children and adolescents, and that we need to look hard and critically at that concern. I’ll go into detail on that in another writing.

I’m going to pick up here on the last sentence and consider here the impact of the commercial sports industry on kids (kids broadly defined; I’m thinking of children, adolescents, and young adults from, say, seven or eight years old to college age). By commercial sports industry I mean the companies whose products are sport exhibitions for a paying clientele, the people who attend their games and the television networks and cable companies that pay to show them and thereby generate advertising and cable licensing revenue for themselves: the Boston Red Sox, Dallas Cowboys, New York Knicks, and the like. The employees of these businesses and related enterprises include athletes, coaches, trainers, sports executives, public relation people, and media personnel, including the producers and announcers of the games on ESPN, Fox, YES in New York and so on. Add those who write about the commercial sports industry in print and on the

Internet. And include those who produce sports-related video games and operate sports web sites and fantasy leagues. And put big time university sports in the mix; Ohio State football may be semi-professional or pre-professional, but that's nitpicking. Same with the Olympics. Important to note, much of kids' connection with commercial sports is mediated, indirect. That is to say, they don't take in the games themselves, but rather something and someone stands between them and a game and shows it to them and tells them what it means. I'll say some things about the medium of television in this context.

Below, I outline some of the effects the sports entertainment industry, professional sports, has on kids: on the way they view sports and how to play them; on the way they define themselves in relation to sports; on their personal aspirations with regard to sports and generally; and how they involve themselves in sports and other areas as well. The thesis is that, for many kids, the activities of sport performance enterprises, yet another way to label them, have a significant impact on how they perceive and engage in sports and other activities, and since one thing connects to everything else in life, this impact can, and many times does, have important consequences for the direction and quality of their lives in the years and decades up the line; and more, that on balance that impact is negative.

It's helpful to look at the commercial sports industry as a school of a sort. It functions much like a regular school: it has what amounts to a curriculum (contents, topics of concern), and it teaches lessons, instructs, on what is true and important and how to think and act with reference to sport, and really, other things as well. Whether they realize it or not, a lot of kids, both boys and girls, are attending commercial sports school and getting its lessons and assignments--"It's great to win Wimbledon." "Don't miss March Madness!"--along with those of Davis Grade School, Monroe High School, and the University of Minnesota (the school names are close-to-home examples).

When looking at things from a school angle, it helps to take into account that the forms of media are schools in themselves. Apart from what's *on* television, to use that

example, the particular program, sports in this case, television itself—the set, the apparatus, the way pictures and sound are transmitted on it, how someone turns it on and sits motionless in front of it gazing at images on the screen with a remote control in hand—teaches lessons and effects people in particular ways. Many years ago, the Canadian media analyst Marshal McLuhan got at this dimension of television with his oft-repeated aphorism, the medium is the message. Note the two ways of pronouncing message, with the accent on the first or second syllable—both meanings apply. McLuhan’s insight applies to other technologies as well: the laptop, the video game console, the mobile phone, and so on. They too embody messages (stress on the first syllable), lessons; they too message (stress on the second syllable), knead, shape, their users. So anything that attracts you to television—which the sport entertainment companies do—enrolls you in television school and subjects you to all its teachings and manipulations. A couple of examples: it’s important to be attractive, entertaining, cool, and a star, and watching other people do things is good, so stay tuned and come back tomorrow.

Though I won’t be dealing with them here, performance sports operations are also filtered through social media—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and so on, and I’d add texting—and these media too shape the way youngsters perceive and engage in sports. I’m gathering my ideas on the influence of social media on young people, and I’ll write about that for this site in the near future. For now, why don’t you ponder the effects of social media on kids generally and with reference to sports specifically.

What are the lessons of the sports entertainment industry school—which includes sports-related media, both content and form--aimed at kids? (Again, I think USC football and Kentucky basketball are in the same category as Sunday Night Football on NBC—commercially driven entertainments.) I’ll list four that come to mind that seem to me significant. Keep in mind that I’m generalizing. What any phenomenon means, what anyone takes from it, kids or adults, has to do not only with what’s out there in the world but also the what’s going on with the individual taking it in. Subjective reality, what ends

up inside someone and what he or she does with it--- conclusions, predilections, etc.--is the outcome of an interplay, exchange, between the perceived and a particular perceiver. To understand what a child or young adult will derive from commercial sport one has to take into account what's going on with that individual, his or her make-up and circumstance. That said, I've concluded that enough kids respond in similar ways to warrant my offering for your consideration four lessons, as it were, that kids enrolled in commercial sport school are exposed to and often take to heart. As you read through them, deepen and improve upon them and come up with other "lessons" to add to this list.

Lesson number one: *These are the sports to play.* The sports that attract spectator interest and generate profits become *the* games. Football, basketball, baseball, hockey, and soccer; those are the ones that count. When you think of sports, think of these games. If someone calls Philadelphia, say, a good sports town, assume they are referring to how many tickets the sport exhibition companies sell and how much attention they draw to themselves—the Phillies, Eagles, 76ers, and Flyers. They aren't getting at how much volleyball, table tennis, or competitive rowing goes on in Philadelphia. They are talking about commercial sports activity; that's sports. If you want to get involved with sports, sign up for those sports.

Lesson number two: *This is the way to play these games.* Play like the pros—all out, all the time, twelve months a year, get super good at it, take it on as an identity (you don't just *play* basketball, you *are* a basketball player, or an athlete, or a student-athlete), put on a good show, be a star. You don't just get together on Saturday afternoons at the park and play soccer and then go get a Coke and a pizza. Even if you are fifteen years old, you practice soccer every night of the week for hours under the direction of a professional coach (you attended a summer camp in the summer), and you put your sober game face on for the publicly-attended and media-reported performances that you may have had to miss school classes and cut back on your studying to participate in. And this sports involvement is the number one, all consuming, all-

you've-got, every-waking-moment priority in your life; no time for the school newspaper or the theater productions or debate teams or for reading Dostoyevsky. Playing ball precludes that. Playing for the high school or university soccer team is serious business in the same way that playing for the World Cup is serious business; or darn close to that anyway.

Lesson three: *If you get really good at these games you'll be a big deal, really somebody.* In the Super Bowl essay, I made the point that one of the market strategies of commercial sport companies is to hype their employees—the shortstops and quarterbacks, and so on—as special people. These aren't just skilled craftspeople akin of a really good carpenter, or facile performers, like a fine juggler perhaps. They are celebrities, movies star equivalents, even heroes. And look at all the money they make (sport exhibition companies make sure the public knows how much they pay their employees). Get their autographs! put their posters on your wall! wear their jerseys! Wouldn't it feel terrific to be a big deal like that? It sure would. Better than getting good at math, that's for certain; who cares about math nerds. Playing center field for the Yankees is a better ticket to fame and glory (central values in both commercial sports and the mass media) than curing the sick or teaching the young or writing a great novel. So every spare minute, be working on your batting swing. Add in the fact that television makes anything and anybody on it important and attractive—it is inherent in the medium itself—and the result is that more than a few children and young people with minds and bodies given over to making it big as a sports performer.

Lesson four: *It's good to pay a lot of attention to these games.* Bottom line, the message of commercial sport operations and the media enterprises that transmit them to the public is follow these games, care about them, don't turn away from them, stay tuned in, and make sure you come back for more tomorrow. Nobody paying attention and caring about the sport shows means nobody at the games and nobody watching television transmissions and nobody watching SportCenter and nobody checking out ESPN.com., and nobody reading

Sports Illustrated and the sports pages in the newspaper, with the result that these outfits go out of business. So whatever else is going on, there has to be one major hard sell coming out of the commercial sport industry: it's good to give time and energy, lots and lots and lots and lots of it, to what we do. If it works, and it does work, the point of the Super Bowl essay was just how good this industry is at selling its wares, the result is huge numbers of sixteen-year-olds who get caught up in organized sports and become pro sports aficionados, which sets the stage for them being forty-year-old avid fans of the Denver Broncos, and that sets the stage for their ending their lives with a fatal heart attack at fifty-three or seventy-five eating Doritos and drinking beer watching the NBA play basketball in June. Since individuals can only do one thing at a time, every second and minute and hour they give over to consuming the products of the sport industry, whether they realize it or not, means giving up thinking and doing every other possible thing they could have done with time they will never get back as their finite lives proceed relentlessly toward their inevitable and final conclusions.

So much more that could be talked about in this area, head injuries in football, the pressure to use performance enhancing drugs, the way sport can shape one's persona and relationships and connection to social issues, and so on and so on, but I'll stop here with these four lessons, as I am calling them, and invite you to take this inquiry further. I encourage you to give this matter time and energy because commercial sport is increasingly pervasive in the lives of our children, both boys and girls, including in their formal schooling—schools at all levels are into sports industry-influenced athletics in a major way. I am convinced that if you care about children and young people, this concern, this issue, is at the very top of the list in importance.