

An Interview on Sport and Society

Robert S. Griffin

www.robertsgriffin.com

In early 2103, the editor of *Le Harfang*, a journal of a Canadian organization, the Alliance of Ethnic Quebecers, requested a written interview with me on the impact of sport on society with particular reference to nationalism. These are my answers to his emailed questions.

Now, in Canada, sport, especially hockey, has been a very unifying facet of our nation, especially when we played hockey against Russia. It is a very important aspect of our mythos as a nation. Is this big frenzy surrounding international sport events good for nationalists? Does it really help strengthening the national feeling of unity, or is it simply superficial?

It appears to me that sport competitions between nations can strengthen national unity. America's hockey victory over the Soviet Union in the 1980 Olympic games and the American women's soccer team's World Cup victory in 1999 seemed to heighten nationalism in this country. We have to keep in mind, however, that all sports occurrences don't have the same impact. We need to examine them on a case-by-case basis to identify their particular consequences: for example, I believe the American Olympic hockey win—the “miracle on ice,” as it was called—had a bigger and longer-lasting effect on national affinities in my country than the one in women's soccer. On the other hand, the soccer win had significant outcomes in another area: it made women's soccer more salient and promoted girls' and women's participation in the sport in the U.S. You are in a much better position than I to weigh the impact of the Canada-Russia hockey games.

Also, we need to discern what actual difference it makes that national sentiments are heightened: specifically, in what ways are they altered by a sport competition, and what tangible, external changes result from that, and how long does it last? I've never looked into this in a concerted way, and perhaps by and large the lift in nationalism from sports is superficial, as you put it, although my guess is that in some cases, and in a lot of countries, the World Cup in men's soccer a prime example, sports has a significant

impact on nation state loyalties.

If we are concerned about a particular group within the nation state—which is the case with your organization, French-heritage Canadians—we need to look at the outcomes of sports contests for that group. I have written about individuals and groups in my country for whom nationalism has a racial meaning—they view themselves as White nationalists. Even if a sporting event contributes to nation-state unity, they wouldn't be enthused about their racial kinsmen cheering for an all-black American Olympic basketball team. Are you OK with your people getting excited about English-speaking Canadian athletes?

We need to stay aware of the fact that whatever results sporting events may have in general, some individuals have the exact opposite reaction to them. In 1980, for example, I was turned off in by the jingoistic “USA! USA!” nationalist chest beating that accompanied the accomplishments of some American Olympic hockey players. The whole thing seemed to me out of proportion, immature yahooistic, and unseemly. It made me less nationalistic, not more so.

As well, we have to realize that despite what's true overall, some people aren't affected in the least by a sporting contest. With your example of Canada-Russia hockey as an illustration, a significant number of your fellow Canadians don't care a whit about hockey and didn't even notice that the games are being played. And that group undoubtedly includes individuals with significant status and power in your country, and to that extent their response, or lack of one, to sports matters for a lot.

A last point, we need to stay open to the possibility that some other phenomenon may be more consequential to what our concern than what we are looking at. For instance, while hockey players are icing the puck, people are busily engaged in social media, exhibiting themselves on their Facebook pages and tweeting and texting, and that could shape the meaning and impact the hockey games have for them, and even for all practical purposes obscure the hockey, negate it, wipe it out.

Does commercialization of sport actually kills sports?

These days, when we talk about sports, we are most often referring to the operations of private, profit-making companies whose

product is sport exhibitions. These companies tap into the loyalties people have to their home areas by naming themselves after cities (rather than Johnson Sport Shows, Incorporated it's the New York Yankees or Toronto Blue Jays). They create leagues and standings and play-offs and championships to give their shows a narrative line and drama and make individual games appear important, but what's really going on is the employees of one sport exhibition company playing a game against the employees of another one in front of paying customers—or as they are cleverly defined, fans or supporters--and they do it over and over and over again, year after year after year.

I wouldn't say the commercialization of sport kills sports, but it does shape the way the culture perceives and participates in sports. It gets across the idea that certain sports on the most important ones—namely, the ones that best lend themselves to spectating, hockey being one of them. And it promotes the sports entertainment way of playing games: elite athletes soberly going all out to win—winning and losing are what drive the sport shows' story lines—in front of an audience willing to pay for the privilege watching them do it.

I think of a book I read recently about the way sports was thought about at Harvard University back in 1890 or so. The ideal back then was sports participation for everyone—you did sports, you didn't observe them. Sports was something to be kept in balance with the whole of one's existence and not a preoccupation that pushed out other concerns and involvements. The idea was that sports contributes to the development of a gentleman, a honorable and dignified and physically graceful and action-oriented person, one who is responsible and effective in the areas of life that truly matter—family, work, community, nation. In that time, if you took sports too seriously, focused all your energies on it, tried to get super good at a sport, it was an indication that something was off kilter in your life. Especially if you were eighteen or twenty or twenty-two and still obsessed with sport, it was considered childish and misguided and even kind of pathetic. And certainly there was nothing laudable about aspiring to play a game for a living.

How times have changed. The ways of sport performers, which make perfect sense for them—do whatever you need to be the best at your sport, including cutting corners or outright cheating—gets carried over to the rest of us. Fourteen-year-old kids are

playing like the pros: all-out, every day, all year, professional coaching, think about sports day and night, everything else takes a back seat to it, make the sports world your world and sports people your reference group. For so many young people in our time, girls as well as boys and young men and women of university age, sports is more than just something they do, it is who they are: athlete, student-athlete (notice the equivalence of student and athlete).

In this era, the idea of amateurism is not only considered passé, it is ridiculed, debunked; of course the Olympics should be a competition among professional sport performers, why not, what else? I think of Roger Bannister, a British middle distance runner who competed in the 1952 Olympic games (and, a couple of years later, ran the first four-minute mile). Bannister's training periods for the Olympics were his lunch hours during his medical internship. That little training, squeezing it into a full workday, seeing his sport as subordinate to another calling, doing it without pay, would be absurd in our time. Are things better now with professional runners taking time off from the pro circuit to compete in the Games? The answer to that is a matter of one's values. As for me, I'll take the way it was done in Bannister's day: go to medical school and run when you can fit it in. Curing the sick has a higher priority than running around a track oval between television commercials.

If people want to give over their hard earned money to watch professional athletes perform and they have a good time doing it, that's fine with me. My problem is when commercial sports becomes equated with sports, and it is very close to being that way now. To me, an informal hockey or basketball or softball game at the park has as much importance as does corporate sports' World Series or Stanley Cup, if not more. But again, it comes down to values, what you think life should be about, and each of us has to work that through for ourselves.

In Canada with hockey and in Europe with soccer, most of the working class people seem to be more interested in the fate of their local team than in the fate of their country. Karl Marx referred to religion as the people's drug a century ago. Would it now be professional sports?

For some people, professional sports is a once-in-a-while fun

activity—go to a game or watch it on television with friends and family and that's it, while for others Marx's point applies. Getting caught up with how "your" team is doing can distract you from what's going on collectively and in your personal existence, and yes, become a fantasy world to live in rather than the real world, and deaden you, drug you in a way. But then again, that is not always bad. For some people, fantasies, fictions, imaginings, are better places to be in than the unrewarding real circumstances of their lives. Religion, drugs and alcohol, and yes, pro sports (as well as big time university sports, essentially the same thing) can make life less aversive. Marx used the term opiate in his reference to religion. To be sure, you pay a price for opiate use, but at the same time, it can get you through your day, and so can games on TV when there's really nothing good going on in your life.

Back to the example in your question, even if pro sports leaves working people less interested in the status and fate of their country, there is the question of what difference it would make if they were more interested. That gets us into how much power working class people have over anything beyond what does on in their immediate lives regardless of what perspectives, insights, and predilections they possess. If we look at it carefully, we might find it to be none, or so close to none that they might as well get whatever satisfaction they can by caring about teams and athletes that don't know they are alive and advertising sport exhibition companies by wearing their tee shirts and hats.

What impact does that have on society?

We need to be careful not to confuse abstractions, words, ideas, conclusions, and theories with concrete reality. Society is a mental construct, a word and an associated meaning, and it's a useful one, it helps us organize our thinking and direct our actions. But we need to remember that this construct, this concept, does not capture the complexity of the reality to which it refers. American society, Canadian society, includes very different people living very different lives: rich people, poor people, urban people, rural people, educated people, uneducated people, professional people, working people, intelligent people, slow-witted people, decent people, immoral people, capable people, incompetent people, socially connected people, isolated people, powerful people, powerless

people, healthy people, sick people, men, women, White people, black people, Asian people, Hispanic people, Indian people, native people, immigrant people, and so on and so on. For that matter, every individual human being is different from every other one: You and I may be in basically the same category—we are both educated European-heritage White men—but nevertheless what is true and preferable for me is not necessarily true and preferable for you. I'm not you; you aren't me. While we should respect abstractions, we need to be grounded firmly in the reality behind those abstractions.

Frankly, I see pro sports as repetitive cheapjack entertainment along the lines of circuses, rodeos, and tractor pull contests. I'd rather read a good book or see a good film than watch strangers play a game and go along with the pretense that its outcome matters for anything. That perspective on commercial sports, that bias, prompts me to think that American society and culture would be better off on the whole without it. But thinking that way that doesn't preclude me from realizing that you might think just the opposite, and that you might understand in ways I don't how the existence of the Montreal Canadiens makes Canada as a whole, or a subset of Canadians you care about, better off than if it didn't exist.

As Occidentals, sport events have always been part of our culture (Olympic games, gladiators, medieval tournament), are today's pro sports the continuity of this tradition?

Actually, the ancient Olympic games and the gladiators fell victim to the same abuses (in my view) as the modern games have: specialization, elitism, professionalism, an emphasis on victory over participation, showboating, cheating, and the promotion of spectatorism, voyeurism. I don't know enough about the medieval games to comment on them. That modern pro sports continues this unfortunate tradition shouldn't surprise us. Entrepreneurs do their best to make anything people do in their lives into a product and sell it to them in its elite or finest, or at least most appealing, form. We eat food, so there are restaurants. We make music, so there is a music industry. We have sex, and here comes pornography and racy HBO shows. And we play sports, and sure as the sun coming up in the morning, somebody is going to package our games and take our money for the privilege of watching others play them. There are upsides to all of that—for sure, pro sports can be an enjoyable

pastime and palliative--but everything has its downside. In the illustrations I've mentioned—eating, music, sex, and sports--we could develop a penchant for junk food, crappy music, weird and depressing and alienating sex, and sitting on couches munching tortilla chips and slugging down beers in front of television sets while our stomachs spill ever-more-alarmingly over our belt buckles.

I don't think anything is going to happen at the collective, societal, level about any of this. The only thing I can think of to do that might make a positive difference is if individuals declare to ourselves that they are going to take charge of their lives and, one decision after another, do what they think best for themselves: Do they eat at McDonald's or cook a good meal at home? Do they buy the latest pop CD or play a traditional song on the piano? Do they surf porn sites or make gentle love with someone dear to them? Do they subscribe to premium sport channels or drop cable? And if they have a public voice, as you do with your site, do they invite others to do the same?

You have often talked about the benefits of sports for children's healthy bringing up and have even written advises for kids in that regards. What is the impact of commercial sports on children nowadays? Is it positive or negative?

I'm an extremist here. I have an eight-year-old daughter. I see commercial sports as poison to her, and to the degree I can I'm going to keep that poison away from her. I hope sports to her is skiing, or playing soccer or volleyball informally with her friends, or bowling for an hour or two, or camping or boating or hiking or climbing or bird watching. I'd prefer she take dance classes or play ping pong or read a good book or paint a picture than sit anonymously in a stadium or in front of a TV watching someone try to hit a baseball.

That said, I hope I don't forget that my daughter's life is hers to live, not mine to dictate. If she really wants to give all her energies to being on the basketball team—wear a number and have a coach put her in and pull her out of games and tell her how she has to play them, become a foot soldier in that army--that's her call to make, and while I'll share my perspective on this activity with her, I'll also respect her right to do what she wants to do, and I'll do everything I can to make it a rewarding and productive experience

for her.

In many commercial sports like football, soccer and basketball, the athletes we present as heroes are Blacks. Can this have an impact on the ethnic consciousness of White kids?

With the it-depends-on-the-kid qualification on the table, yes, I think White kids' ethnic/racial consciousness is dampened, discouraged, deflected, by hero-worshipping non-White sports personalities, musicians, television and film performers, and the rest. Whomever you admire, set on a pedestal, fawn over, whoever's stories you follow, whoever's fate you care about, you tend to identify with and defer to and emulate. The people in control of matters in our time don't like the idea of White racial consciousness, commitment, solidarity, and collective action, so they very much like the idea of White youngsters cheering on non-White athletes and conducting their lives to a backdrop of hip-hop and, a movie playing at the time of this interview, watching Whites get slaughtered by blacks in "Django Unchained."

I have the impression that you aren't enamored of the ways promoted by those currently dominant in your province. What you do about that, whether there is anything you can realistically do about that, what will happen to you if you do anything about that, is what you have to deal with right now. In fact, that's a good way to sum up this interview: what really matters is not what I think about sports or anything else; it's what you think, and most important, what you do about what you think. To employ a sports metaphor, the ball's in your court.