

Sports and society

By watching sports, we can learn a lot about society and observe transformations as they occur. Since the 1980s, athletes have changed how they act, and many of these changes are reflections of changes in the attitudes of people in our country.

For instance, in the 1980s, baseball games seemed to erupt into brawls much more frequently than they do today. Back then, players identified with their teams, and they were willing to risk injuries to punish a transgression against one of their team members. Today, players do not identify with their teams; instead, they worry about their own careers.

Joe McGarrity



Just as baseball players have deemphasized team interests and emphasized their own interests, workers have less loyalty to their current employers. The workers view their current employer as a stepping stone to their next job, not an organization worth making large sacrifices for.

The move toward a more self-interested mindset has benefits and drawbacks. In sports, the self-interested behavior has reduced violence, which is good. But it has reduced the teams' incentive to develop players. For example, the Yankees will not spend a lot of effort developing players, because the players are so likely to move that the Yankees will not benefit from the skills they transferred to the players. Other teams will get that benefit.

In the broader economy, the enhanced self-interest has a benefit – it makes it less likely that workers will stay trapped in jobs that do not let them reach their potential. But the new self-interested emphasis hurts workers in the same way it hurts young ball players. Just as teams have less incentive to develop players, firms have less incentive to develop workers.

Here is a second change. Sportsmanship seems to have declined since the 1980s. In the 1980s, at the end of a game, little league teams would line up and shake the hands of all of the other teams' players. The mindset is different today. For instance, in the most recent NBA playoffs, Victor Wembanyama left the court and did not participate in the traditional handshake. This kind of poor sportsmanship has become more common in sports, and we can certainly see it in politics. Hillary Clinton lost the presidential election and called Donald Trump an illegitimate President and claimed the Russians helped Trump cheat to get elected. I doubt that Trump has ever lost anything without claiming that the other side cheated.

The recent World Cup gave me a chance to observe a sport that I rarely watch. Two things stood out. First, after the games, the players talked to each other, shook hands, and hugged. This provides an excellent example of good sportsmanship for US athletes, US politicians, and US citizens. Hopefully, some people are inspired to follow the good example they saw on the soccer pitch.

The second thing that stood out was more negative. It seemed that players would fake a serious injury after being slightly bumped. These players were trying to get a foul called on their opponents. This approach may reflect a victim mentality that has become pervasive in society. People go out of their way to concentrate on how others have harmed them.

When I played sports in the 1980s, we had a much different mindset. We wanted to show that we were tough. This toughness was a useful approach. It taught us to work through problems.

I have argued that sports can be a reflection of society. And changes in society will show up in changes in the way sports are played. But sports can also be aspirational and provide examples for us to copy. I was impressed by the collegiality of the World Cup players after the games. I hope that collegiality catches on.

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