

Some Sports Figures Are More Equal Than Others

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Thomas Jefferson's famous line: "All men [and women, too] are created equal" does not seem to apply to all sports figures. I refer both to big name players in sports being treated differently than are lesser known players and to players in select sports needing "special attention" to their personal sensitivities.

On April fools weekend, I took time to watch a women's NCAA basketball game and an NBA basketball match. I witnessed college referees enforcing the game's rules as I remember them from the rule book. Traveling was called on a few occasions where it was appropriate. In the professional game, however, I was forced to use my VCR to validate what seemed obvious laxity in referee's traveling calls. On numerous occasions during a twenty minute time span, I saw numerous players taking 2½ steps, others taking 3 steps, and a few taking 3½ steps; and none were called for traveling. I know that the NBA has some different rules from the NCAA; however, I am not aware that traveling is defined differently in these two settings. I realize that many professional players move more deftly and swiftly than do most college players; however, NBA referees are supposed to be the "cream of the crop" by referee standards and they are remunerated accordingly to do a tough job. If, in fact, one step is too few for NBA stars, let's change the NBA rules to accommodate that need. Children view such capricious rule enforcement and conclude that if you are a star, the rules are different for you. This is not a desired consequence of the game.

While watching a tennis match on TV [yes, I watch lots of TV sports], I noticed the public address announcer asking the crowd to "be quiet" as a player prepared to serve. The TV announcer denounced fans who were boisterous as boorish and recommended they not come to see players engage in sports if they could not be respectful and quiet. Such a view, in my opinion, is pompous and elitist. Fans deserve to be able to cheer, shout, complain, and make a ruckus if they choose. If a baseball batter or hockey goalie [each having a hard missile hurled at him at amazing speed and from short distances] can withstand crowds of thousands screaming while the projectile comes forth, why do tennis players require silence? Golf players, too, demand silence while teeing off or putting. Why? It's the remnants of a country club mentality, a vestigial sign of a rich and pampered culture that was expanded to include us "normal" folks years ago. Now, if a basketball player can make a free throw with thousands of fans screaming, chanting, howling, and doing the wave while the act is in progress, why do golfers need tomb-like silence to do their job? Could it be that such tennis and golf players do comparatively more difficult tasks? I

think not. I believe tennis and golf players and event organizers ought to "chill out" as the popular term goes and fit in with the rest of the sports world in terms of fan treatment and in terms of image making by joining the ranks of their fellow professional sports colleagues? Could you imagine a game ending NFL field goal being kicked only after an announcer demanded that fans hush their anticipation for the kick or that preceding the final pitch in a no-hitter baseball game, the game was delayed to silence the throng? Such ideas evoke derisive laughter to almost everyone.

Claims that players' hearing ability and concentration demands prevent professional golf and tennis players from doing their best fails to be convincing when measured against baseball, football, hockey, and soccer players who employ hearing and need concentration just as often and just as delicately as do golf and tennis players. In addition to fan treatment and professional athlete sensitivities being unequal, capricious sanctions for major rule violations are plainly visible in professional sports as well.

Pete Rose was banned for life from baseball for wagering on sports while an active participant and he is in jeopardy of not being elected to baseball's Hall of Fame even though he was one of the game's greatest players. Paul Horning, a former professional football player, was only banned for a short term for the same offense and was eventually inducted into football's Hall of Fame.

New York Yankee owner, George Steinbrenner, was banned from baseball "for life" a few years ago and has now been reinstated. His "life sentence" was less than 5 years. There was a talented professional football player who tested positively for drug use on multiple occasions and on two such occasions was banned for "life" from the game only to be reinstated after "promising to be good and stay off drugs." If sports are going to ban someone for "life," let that term be longer than a few years or drop the "life term" from possible sanctions. Again, children interpret such goings on as proof that stars are "special" which means they are immune from the rules and punishments that the rest of us mere mortals have to contend with.

We often wonder why cheating, violence, rule breaking, and bizarre behaviors occur with such frequency in sports. Well, if present players, who were once children, witnessed how sports establishments treat its stars, they, too, likely came to believe that they could get away with whatever they chose to do. It's no wonder we have a class

of dysfunctional playing the games.