

Sports, bin Laden and the New Normal

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Howard Cosell said that “rule number-one of the sports jockocracy” was that sports and politics don’t mix. And yet last night, at the ballpark in Philadelphia, we received another reminder that some political expression is deemed not just acceptable but glorious.

When the killing of Osama bin Laden reached the Philadelphia Phillies fans, amidst their fourteen-inning loss to the New York Mets, boisterous chants of “U-S-A” filled the park. This was praised across the sports landscape as a remarkable, yet altogether appropriate moment of national joy. “It was beautiful,” said one radio commentator. “It reminded all of us what is so wonderful about sports in our society.”

The eruption of patriotic emotion at the park should surprise no one. Since 9/11, the sports arena has been an organizer of patriotism, a recruiter for the US armed forces, and at times a funhouse mirror, reflecting the principles of freedom in a manner so misshapen and distorted as to rise to the level of farce.

As the Phillies faithful cheered, I thought about the NFL postponing games following 9/11, but only after a players revolt led by Vinny Testaverde made clear to Paul Tagliabue that no one was in a condition to play a game. I thought about the spread of “Military Appreciation Nights” at the stadium and the increased prevalence of jet flyovers and troops processions in the field. I thought about the military recruitment stations organized outside preseason NFL games.

I thought about Major League Baseball adding the second national anthem, “God Bless America” to the seventh-inning stretch. I thought about the late Yankee owner George Steinbrenner having chains put up along the side of the bleachers and hiring off-duty police to make sure no one did anything but pay fealty to the flag. I thought about a young man named Bradley Campeau-Laurion who was led from the park in handcuffs because he left his seat to use the bathroom during this celebration of freedom. I thought about ESPN’s week of SportsCenter from Iraq in September of 2004, which allowed the network to do what George W. Bush couldn’t: connect Iraq to 9/11.

I also thought about the athletic dissenters. I thought about then Toronto Blue Jay Carlos Delgado who refused to come out for the second seventh-inning stretch anthem, saying, “I don’t [stand] because I don’t believe it’s right, I don’t believe in the war. It’s a very terrible thing that happened on September 11. It’s [also] a terrible thing that happened in Afghanistan and Iraq. I just feel so sad for the families that lost relatives and loved ones in the war. But I think it’s the stupidest war ever.”

I thought about then Washington Wizards forward Etan Thomas electrifying a mass antiwar rally in DC in September 2005. I thought about Steve Nash wearing a T-shirt at the start of the Iraq invasion that read “No war. Shoot for peace.” I thought about NASCAR’s Dale Earnhardt Jr. imploring people to see Fahrenheit 9/11. I thought about the fiercely brave Manhattanville women’s basketball captain Toni Smith turning her back on the anthem and igniting a firestorm with her courage. I thought of Adalius Thomas, Josh Howard, Nick Van Exel and all athletes who used their platform and spoke out.

But more than anyone, I thought about Pat Tillman. I found myself wondering if the 19-year-olds who were turning Ground Zero and the White House into a frat party last night even knew who Pat Tillman was. And if they were aware that a man named Pat Tillman once walked among us, which Tillman did they know? Did they know the Tillman the NFL wants us to remember? That Tillman was a star safety who turned down a multimillion-dollar contract after 9/11 to join the Army Rangers, only to die in combat twenty-two months after enlisting. In the immediate aftermath of his death Tillman became a caricature, used to promote and encourage war.

But the Pat Tillman his family has fought to be known is the actual, thinking, opinionated human being. This Pat Tillman believed that 9/11 had been manipulated to justify an illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq. As journalist Jon Krakauer said, "He thought the war was illegal. He thought it was a mistake. He thought it was going to be a disaster. And in the Army, you're not supposed to talk about that. You're not supposed to talk politics. And Pat didn't shut up. He told everyone he encountered, 'This war is illegal as hell.' " He started reading the antiwar theorist Noam Chomsky and sent word that he wanted to meet Chomsky upon returning to the states.

This Pat Tillman died not at the hands of the Taliban but in an incident of "friendly fire," a fact hidden from his own family for weeks after his nationally televised funeral. Pat's family has spent years fighting to get the true facts of his case known. I thought about Pat's brave mother Mary and I was just so sad. We killed bin Laden and all it took was three wars, a million deaths, a trillion dollars and countless broken families and broken hearts.

Yes, sports has been co-opted, exploited, scarred and turned inside out by the aftermath of 9/11 and the hunt for Osama bin Laden. Some have wondered if now that bin Laden is dead, life will "go back to normal." But as we saw in Philly last night, this is the new normal and will continue to be so, until every last troop is home. Maybe then we can enjoy sports as an escape from, rather than a promoter of, this country's culture of war.

Dave Zirin, May 2, 2011

P.S.

* From The Nation:

<http://www.thenation.com/blog/160329/sports-bin-laden-and-new-normal>