

# In the Arena

## Is our public fascination with sport a misallocation of American resources?

South America adores its soccer. Europe lauds its cycling. The former Soviet Union has its hockey. Greece reveres basketball. Japan appreciates its baseball. Here in the United States, we champion all of those sports, plus football (that most American of games that exists at the nexus of skill, violence and an aggressive battle for territory), and we do so with the all the fervor and gusto of our pioneering ancestors. Why? What is it in our in our national character that impels us to play hard and to cheer harder--to align ourselves so fiercely with iconic sports figures, recreational teams and professional sports franchises? And should we be so captivated or is it a waste of our time?

At a mere 230 years old, a global adolescent, the U.S. lacks the tradition and history of more mature countries. Barred from us is the deep sense of history and connectedness offered by the opportunity to walk into a 500-year old building or to travel the same paths as our distant ancestors. Without a millennium of tradition upon which to stand, Americans must find another way to found a connection with land and countryman. Is it any surprise that we've chosen to do so, in part, by elevating and revering sport, a pursuit that rewards those fundamentally American virtues: courage, perseverance and self-reliance?

For better or worse, most Americans can probably tell you the name of their favorite football team's starting quarterback before they can tell you the name of one of their state's senators. My guess is the average high school senior can name a dozen Olympic medalists before she can list the names of a dozen American presidents. This says less about the state of American education than it does about our obsession with athletics. In these United States, country and sport are indivisible. Success in the athletic arena presupposes the same qualities that constitute the bedrock of our nation's identity. Aren't the American Dream and the athlete's dream one and the same: pick your passion, work your tail off and ultimately reap your justly-rich reward? To engage as a participant or a spectator in the arena of sport is to play out, in real-time and in microcosmic stadia, the American struggle for independence and ascendancy.

To the extent that we have a distinctive American culture, we have a sporting culture. Few lives, if any, in this country are untouched by sport. Whether you prefer NYC's Rucker Street hoops fest or Boulder's high-altitude athlete camps, Florida's annual spring training rites or the Brickyard's hallowed grounds, you will find yourself among equally-committed sports enthusiasts. The opportunity to pay such close attention not just to *a* sport, but to so *many* sports, is uniquely American. The only other nation that approaches our degree of sporting fanaticism is Australia, and they're in the same historical boat: low on tradition, high on athletics.

In our neophyte nation, sport offers an opportunity for the creation and perpetuation of the rituals that link generations and cement communities. Ball parks are places of worship (ask a Boston Catholic to choose between a trip to the Vatican or a visit to the Great Green Cathedral of Fenway) and referees preside over sporting events with sacerdotal authority. Stadium peanuts are manna and sporting lore is passed from generation to generation with the care and attention given an oral history. Year-in, year-out families make pilgrimages to recreational soccer games and NBA post-season playoffs with equal regularity. American communities, virtual or geographic, have been and continue to be forged in the athletic arena, whether you're talking about Lance's legion of cancer survivors or the West Texas camps of rivals Permian and Odessa High. In the U.S. we've developed our sense of place by establishing tribes of sport-loving brethren.

But athletic allegiances aren't only efforts to join an insta-community, they're also passport imprints, offering a glimpse into an individual's geographic profile: where you're from, where you've landed and by what route you navigated between the two. A man wearing a Hasselback jersey in Philadelphia signals the fact that he has roots in the Pacific Northwest. My brother, a born and bred New Englander, is a die-hard Bears and Cubs fan because our father, a Chicago native, could always be found in front of the TV rooting for Chicago teams over all challengers. I distinctly remember

watching Superbowl XX from our TV room in Rhode Island and being uncomfortably conflicted as my brother cheered the Bears on to a 46-10 rout of the New England Patriots. When my brother wore his Jim McMahon jersey to school the next day, he signaled to the rest of the community our family's migration from the mid-West to the Northeast.

But even if all this is true, even if sport provides the mortar that bonds the bricks of our young and olio country, is that justification enough for the colossal amount of time and money that Americans allocate to sport? What if the average American family dialed back their seven point two hours of daily TV, a portion of which one can reasonably assume is dedicated to sports programming, and did something more productive with that time, something that had nothing at all to do with sport? And what if the networks and the commissioners of the NFL, NBA, NHL and MLB banded together and handed over a significant portion of their sport-generated revenue to community funds? We might be a fitter country and we'd have an even more flush independent sector. But those hypothetical achievements would come at the cost of a fundamental source of our citizens' inspiration.

If a man sitting on his sofa last July watched Lance Armstrong win his final Tour de France and concluded that if *Lance* can beat cancer and rebound to win the world's toughest endurance race seven times, *he* can get up off the couch and pedal his bike to work tomorrow and the next day and the next; if a woman standing on the sideline of a high school lacrosse game has marveled at the enthusiasm and athleticism of the players and decided to set a personal goal of completing a 20-mile Walk for Hunger; if a child has watched a heavily-muscled NFL player reach down and give a hand-up to an opponent buried beneath a human pile and resolved to do the same in his peer playground games, then isn't sport making good on the rent for the space it occupies in our nation's heart and mind?

The lessons of sport, positive and negative, reverberate from coast to coast. Sport is inspirational, curative, redemptive. It's a ready-made antidote whose power can be leveraged to combat myriad of our country's most fundamental problems, the ones that lie at the root of discrimination, homelessness and illiteracy. To engage in sport, as participant or spectator, is to take a seat in a classroom where patience and understanding are the teachers, ignorance isn't tolerated and there is no substitute for hard work. If we stem the tide of our attention to athletics, we rob ourselves of the unique opportunity to galvanize the human spirit and mobilize human capital. Rather than boasting a fitter population and one more equipped to solve community problems, reducing American exposure to sport would result in a more lethargic, less engaged population. What would we, as a country, be fit to do then?

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