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Conflicted tradition: It's all the rage!

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Jul. 23, 2009

This past weekend, my dad and I made our annual pilgrimage to St. Louis. It was to visit the temple there, of sorts. We've gone nearly every year since 1991, sometimes just the two of us, sometimes our spouses have come along for the journey. We went to cheer on those we thought had god-like qualities and to reject those demons who try to bring us down. This past weekend, we saw the Arizona Diamondbacks take on our beloved St. Louis Cardinals at Busch Stadium.

It's a tradition we have that I feel conflicted about in various ways. You have tickets that cost more than many peoples' weekly paychecks. You have domestic beer that costs almost as much as the tickets. Players are making more than I'll see in a lifetime, and owners are making more than most of the players will see in a career of just trying to make it. The employees of the Cardinals that we come in closest contact with -- the vendors and ticket checkers -- are making somewhere in the ballpark of minimum wage. One of the things I have never been able to fathom is how many landfills are created from the waste of a large sporting event. What do 45,000 hot dog wrappers look like?

On the other hand, there is nothing in baseball right now like seeing Albert Pujols play. He gets intentionally walked or pitched around nearly every time he steps to the plate, and when he is pitched to, he's dangerous. There may actually be more pressure on the guy who hits before and after Albert, because they're the ones who will see strikes. Meanwhile, Albert became this year the first player to hit at least 30 homeruns in his first nine seasons and is chasing the triple crown -- something that hasn't been done in baseball since my parents were beginning high school.

And there is nothing like having a tradition to share with my father and anyone else who dares to tag along with us. We typically get to St. Louis on a Saturday afternoon, catch a night game, and then go early to the ballpark the next day to see some batting practice and take in an afternoon game. Sometimes we'll check out the Arch. It's really about having some quality time together. We don't talk much about politics because that subject turns our conversations into a lot of dead ends. We participate in completely different sports -- he's into golf and tennis, I'm a runner and basketball player. There have been times in our lives when it's been tough to find much to connect over. The trip to St. Louis for baseball has been something built into our summers to do together. I've stuck with it even amidst the values that Major League Baseball supports that conflict with my ideal world envisioned through some of the fundamentals of Catholic social teaching.

It has only been recently that I have found a sportswriter who has a unique take on organized, professional sports. His name is Dave Zirin, author of such Howard Zinn-esque works as *A People's History of Sports in the United States*. He looks for how sports fit into the historical landscape of social change (as well as lends a critical eye to how sports support imperialism in this country). Zirin argues against the notion "that sports and politics don't belong in the same zip code, the same country, the same universe." However, Zirin argues that you can no longer separate the sports section from the rest of the newspaper, not with publicly-funded stadiums and scandals that affect the way we raise our kids.

He notes the ways sports precede social movements -- most prominently detailing Jackie Robinson breaking into the big leagues with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, seven years before the Supreme Court decision *Brown* v. *Board of Education*. Then there was the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, when John Carlos and Tommie Smith won medals in track and field. On the medal stand, they wore black gloves, bowed their heads during the national anthem and raised their fists in a Black Power salute. They wore no shoes on the medal stand to protest black poverty and beads around their necks to protest lynching. It may be a forgotten Olympic moment -- it sure doesn't get as much replay coverage as the 1980 U.S. hockey team's "Miracle on Ice" in terms of a David overcoming a Goliath. Unfortunately, Russia will probably always be viewed as a bigger oppressor than slavery. The mainstream press characterized Carlos and Smith as having Nazi-like salutes. However, San Jose State University has recognized the greatness of the struggle by commemorating their actions on the medal stand with a statue on campus.

Now, back to St. Louis. After Robinson broke the color barrier, the Cardinals caught on rather quickly to how talented African-American and Latino players were in baseball. After the team didn't appear in the World Series throughout the 1950s, they started to add talent that got them two victories and three Series appearances in the 1960s with names like Orlando Cepeda, Bob Gibson, and Curt Flood. (It should be duly noted that while the Red Sox Nation said they didn't win a World Series for so long because of the Curse of the Bambino, they were the last team to integrate in 1959, thus losing out on a decade of utilizing the most talented players on their team when Ted Williams could have used some run support. All of this is detailed in the book *Shut Out*.)

St. Louis is proud of its tradition, as evidenced by the All-Star game last week, bringing together three generations of Hall of Famers during the opening ceremonies. It is a shame that the Cardinals haven't retired Flood's uniform number on their leftfield wall with the other greats, if not for the contributions he made to the 1964 and 1967 World Champion teams but for what he did off the field. Flood died too young and quit playing too early. He started the idea of free agency that allows players to get a more fair share of the proceeds from the owners. During the same time that Carlos and Smith were raising their fists in Mexico City, Flood refused to show up in Philadelphia after the Cardinals traded him to the Phillies, saying he didn't want to be sold like a piece of property. He took Major League Baseball to court, represented by Marvin Miller, a huge labor advocate in the steel mills. To Miller, Flood epitomized the first player to think of the possibilities for a labor union in baseball. Flood ultimately lost in a 5-3 Supreme Court decision in 1972, but paved the way for the destruction of the reserve clause that have allowed players like Alex Rodriguez to earn their fortunes.

I will admit to all my left-leaning spiritual friends that sports have a lot of shortcomings for achieving growth into the Kingdom. However, I also challenge them: Because of the effect it has on society, the playing field cannot be ignored.

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