

More than just a game?

Take a sip of life's energy drink

Sport. Is it only a game?

That is the question. At least that is the one posed by this week's Brown/*Providence Journal* Public Affairs Conference. The twentieth anniversary conference features such distinguished speakers, writers, broadcasters and athletes as David Halberstam, David Maraniss, Chris Berman B'77, Dick Schaap, Frank Deford, Andy Zimbalist, KC Jones, Willie Davis, Pam Shriver, Tony DiCicco, Jennifer Azzi and Sara DeCosta—all talking about sports.

My first reaction upon hearing the topic and guest list for this year's conference was, "cool." This is a conference that usually focuses on politics or education or the media. Last year the title was *One Nation Under God? Spiritual Life in America*. Needless to say, the choice of sports as the topic in my senior year was a pleasant surprise. I mean, these were actual lectures I wanted to attend for the first time since sophomore year.

This week in sports

But then I began to ponder the subject. What exactly has sports become? Is it truly more than a game? Was it ever just a game?

David Halberstam, the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, opened the conference Sunday with the lecture "Sports in an Age of Megabucks," in which he called sports "a window on, or better still, a mirror to society."

David Maraniss, another Pulitzer Prize winner and the best selling biographer of Vince Lombardi, followed the next night with a talk entitled "The Cost of Winning: Competition and Character." The other sessions address the athlete as hero, honor in sports, the exploitation of college athletes and what professional athletes do when they retire out of the spotlight.

By merely initiating such a wide variety of discussions, it's as if the conference already had an answer to its question. If all these topics play a role in sport, it obviously cannot be just a game. As Halberstam said, sport "reflects who we are, and equally importantly, where we are." In proving this point, he invoked various anecdotes from the late 1940s to today—from Jackie Robinson, to multi-million dollar contracts, to the rise of women's athletics—that demonstrated the intercourse between sport and American society.

It seems almost obvious that sports are more than just games. They are followed passionately by billions of people around the world, and can even be the subject of an Ivy League institution's Public Affairs Conference. The question is almost a trivial one on some levels.

But then again, is it? In concluding his remarks, Halberstam said that he most appreciated the "beauty and purity of sports, and athletes reaching for something special and trying to excel where they never have before." Even in this age of megabucks, huge egos and television, people still take time to ponder the subtleties of sport, as Halberstam questioned, "What does Dennis [Rodman's] hair represent today?" This beauty and purity are what Halberstam sees above all else. In a talk about how much more than a game sport has become, Halberstam had to come back to the game itself.

Bringing out the child in all of us

Can sport be more than a game as well as just a game at the same time?

Perhaps.

At the professional level, where athletes are paid to play a game, this double vision is bound to occur. As Brown women's ice hockey captain Jill Graat B'00 reminded us when she reminisced about her youth hockey teams, "I didn't play to get the glory, I played because I love the kids and I love the game." Things are much simpler at the youth level. It can be just a game.

But when we move to the professional realm, in a celebrity based, affluent culture, the game becomes something bigger. The outcomes become more important. "Winning," said Maraniss, "is deeply engrained in American culture, in capitalism." This is true of sports on all levels. At the professional level it is greatly magnified. If you lose you may never play or coach again. If you succeed you become larger than life, an American hero. As Frank Deford said in his speech Tuesday night, "We need heroes in America. We need them in our culture." Adding, "Sports is the last part of our world that may be heroic, or more important, we want to be heroic."

And yet, why do we worship heroes? Because, Deford said, "Our heroes are ours; they are what we dream of at this moment in time and they are who we want to be." Not just because they succeed, but because of the pure joy they bring in playing the game. Magic Johnson smiling as he threads a no-look pass between two defenders; Sammy Sosa sprinting out to right field like a jet in *Top Gun*; Ken Griffey, Jr. taking batting practice with his hat backwards. These are images of grown men having fun playing a game. Pure, pristine, simply a game.

For that deep down body thirst

But then I think back to my days of AYSO soccer and Boys Club basketball, when I dreamed of being a superstar, and I wonder: is sport something else? A pure joy, combined with the obsession to keep playing and to watch others play, to do anything and everything involved with sport? Look at me now, writing a sports column, being a radio play-by-play sportscaster, playing pick-up basketball everyday—sport for me has become more than a game. It's a way of life. It is what I know and love.

The final session of the conference is entitled "After the Cheers Have Faded: Retired and Restless." The panel, moderated by renowned sports journalist and ESPN personality Dick Schaap, answers the question of what athletes do after retirement. I think I have answered that question. For those who truly love the game they never retire. For sport truly is more than a game. It is not a metaphor for life, nor Halberstam's mirror on society.

Sport is life.

That sounds like a Gatorade commercial.

Drink it up.

CASEY SHEARER B'00 has been a sports fanatic since conception.