

Keeping the Game Close: “Fair Play” Among Men’s College Basketball Referees

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As a cross-cultural universal, sports are frequently examined by anthropologists in terms of how sporting behavior embodies and expresses the cultural logic of societal norms and expectations. In contemporary Western society, sports are often premised on cultural precepts of “fair play” expressed through gaming rules that ostensibly control factors that allow for the expression and comparison of competing skills. We examine the behavior of men’s college basketball referees as choreographers of staged fair play and suspense versus objective enforcers of rules. To this end, we test the hypothesis that when games are televised on national television, referees in men’s Division I college basketball call a disproportionate number of fouls against teams that are ahead in the score of their respective games, resulting in more competitive games which maintain an edge of suspense for viewers. We suspect this to be true even though trailing teams typically exhibit more aggressive play to remain competitive or get back in the game. We observed the behavior of referees involved in a total of 2,441 foul call events in 67 randomly selected Division I college basketball games during the 2000 basketball season. Results demonstrate that college basketball referees call a significantly higher number of fouls against a team that is leading a game when the game is televised on national television. This pattern does not hold when games are televised regionally. We suspect that “fair play” behavior on the part of referees helps promote dramatic suspense to attract and maintain television viewers.

Key words: sports, social performance, commercialization, United States

On March 11, 2000, the University of Connecticut men’s basketball team played St. John’s University for the Big East Tournament Championship before a nationally televised ESPN audience at Madison Square Garden in New York City. The second half of the game begins with 20th ranked St. John’s leading 22nd ranked Connecticut by nine points. The first six fouls of the second half include two offensive charges, two defensive fouls, and two loose ball fouls, all of which are charged to St. John’s, who starts the half with a nine-point lead. In fact, no fouls are called against Connecticut until a full seven and a half minutes into the second half, despite the fact that they are the aggressors seeking to get back in the game. Moreover, St. John’s is clearly outplaying Connecticut.

On January 11, 2000, an early season Atlantic 10 Conference match-up sees Xavier visit Dayton before another nationally televised ESPN audience. In a four-minute stretch in the middle of the first half, Dayton goes on an 11-4

scoring run that clearly tips the competitive balance in its favor. However, in less than a minute of play following this 11-4 run the referees call three straight defensive fouls against Dayton, muting their advantage and allowing Xavier to remain in the game.

Are officials keeping these games close by calling a disproportionate number of calls against the leading team? If so, how might it relate to the social and economic circumstances within which college basketball is played in the United States? In addition to considering these questions, we discuss the cultural logic associated with refereeing, college basketball, and its socioeconomic character that reflects a more general American cultural notion of “fair play.” Rules and circumstances that encourage fair play allow Americans ostensibly to interpret achievements in career success, economic prosperity, fame, and sports stardom as a byproduct of individual achievement based on skill and hard work. Americans are somewhat aware that class and other factors, such as ethnicity, gender, and age, create or impede economic opportunities. Consequently, they prize arenas where rules of fair play are assumed to be empirically present to objectively discern, observe, and admire true individual mental and physical achievement.

In this paper, we discuss the cultural notion of fair play and its relationship to the reality of the American sport of college basketball. Specifically, we examine the behavior of

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men's college basketball referees as choreographers of fair play versus objective enforcers of officiating rules. To this end, we test the hypothesis that when games are nationally televised, referees in men's Division I college basketball call a disproportionate number of fouls against teams that are ahead in the score to keep games "fair" and maintain an edge of suspense for viewers. We suggest that the commercialization of college basketball into a multibillion dollar industry could be creating an atmosphere in which "fair play" means encouraging closely competitive games that are suspenseful for television viewers rather than creating objectively equitable conditions where individual and team skills are comparatively displayed.

"Fair Play," Anthropology, and Sports Research

In "The Common Denominator of Cultures," George Peter Murdock (1945) provided a list of universal traits found in every culture. Athletic sports were among the 70 or so cultural traits he found in all known cultures. Sports continue to be a subject of sporadic anthropological attention, perhaps tempered by the view that sports are of lesser value when compared with pressing social, economic, and political issues, particularly in applied anthropology (see Dyck 2000). Nonetheless, anthropologists have contributed to a range of sports inquiry along with historians, scholars of popular culture and American studies, sports sociologists, journalists, communication studies scholars, not to mention a constant stream of popular books by former athletes or sports industry professionals. The cultural importance of sports in the United States is evident from daily conversations on buses and street corners, the millions of weekend spectators of multibillion dollar sporting spectacles, and the constantly fomenting debate about the place of sports in institutions of higher learning.

In his examination of sport in anthropology, Blanchard (1995) points to the 1959 publication of "Games in Culture" by Roberts, Arth, and Bush as a watershed in classifying games to understand their cultural role. From its beginning, anthropological treatment of sport frequently attends to isomorphisms between forms of sporting practice and cultural logic. For example, when Roberts and Chick (1984) published one of a handful of sports articles in *American Anthropologist*, they examined a pocket billiard league in western Pennsylvania within a cross-cultural framework of voluntary associations. Their work examines individual skill and anxiety, conflict, and child rearing in sports participation within the anthropological tradition of culture and personality (Roberts, Golder, and Chick 1980; Roberts, Arth, and Bush 1959; Roberts and Sutton-Smith 1962). A notable component of this work entails assessments of cross-cultural patterns of game playing associated with certain social and economic characteristics, such as level of political integration associated with games of strategy and the use of games as mechanisms for conflict resolution (Roberts and Sutton-Smith 1966). In

fact, Blanchard's introductory volume on sport and anthropology discusses the cultural evolution of sporting forms in familiar terms of political and social evolutionary complexity.

Much of the early anthropological mention of sport is attributable to its inclusion as part of a fieldwork tradition of general ethnographic description versus contemporary problem-oriented ethnography. For example, a fair amount of attention is devoted to sporting behavior among anthropological treatments of Native Americans, particularly its interconnection to religious ceremony and practice (e.g., Opler 1944). However, the converse is occasionally true. The important role of sport in Native American cultures has led to treatises such as Vennum's (1994) volume on lacrosse.

Occasionally sport reaches wider theoretical and topical visibility in anthropology. Clifford Geertz's (1973) widely read account of the "deep play" in the Balinese cockfight is another example of anthropological attention to sport as a reflection of a more general cultural logic. Specifically, Geertz discusses the parallel between the need for a competitive match and the financial stakes involved. He points out the emphasis on fair and even match-ups between competitors for the outcome to be unpredictably suspenseful for those gambling. And the relationship between public spectacle, social ritual, and the embodied cultural logic of sport is familiar to those who have seen the popular film on Trobriand cricket (Kildea and Leach 1976). Here the rules of cricket exported during British colonialism were shaped by Trobriand Islanders to fit their cultural expectations concerning village alliances and teams, social position, and gift exchange. In "Baseball Magic" (2000), George Gmelch provides a piece reminiscent of Robin Fox's article on Pueblo baseball (1961), as he examines player behavior as ritualized acts of magic in the Malinowskian tradition. He discusses stereotypical behaviors among players as attempts to influence positive outcomes in hitting, fielding, and pitching, particularly where success is relatively difficult to control.

Recent volumes on *Games, Sports and Cultures* (Dyck 2000) and *Anthropology, Sport, and Culture* (Sands 1999) demonstrate that anthropological attention to sports remains. Through a series of case studies, these books examine various forms of sporting behavior as universal phenomena shaped and expressed through various cultural settings. A notable theme from anthropological attention to sport is its role as social performance and drama. Sporting behavior and events seem to typically include acts of public performance involving some combination of physical and mental skill and stamina. However, public spectators are more than mere observers, they provide social approval or disapproval that can influence athletic performance and the shape of the sporting event. Consequently, sports involve more than individual or group acts following agreed upon gaming rules. They also involve public spectacle and social ritual that reflect and, to some extent, shape their social, economic, and political environment.

Recent attention to sport by anthropologists reveals a discernible slant toward examining the relationship between sport, ethnicity, and national identity (e.g., Cronin and Mayall

1998; Jonsson 2001; Klein 1991). Jonsson provides an intriguing example of how local ethnicity and national integration are contested through sports competition and games among the Mien of northern Thailand. While it is useful to examine sport within a larger cultural terrain, Jonsson reminds us not to neglect the sheer fun involved and how social processes orient themselves around enjoyment. A more politically nationalistic example is provided by Alan Klein, who describes baseball in the Dominican Republic as a form of nationalist resistance to American cultural hegemony. Klein points to the role of baseball in both reflecting and obscuring social realities. We suggest something similar for U.S. men's college basketball.

Not surprisingly, most of the attention to sport comes from outside anthropology. Historians, journalists, and scholarly entrepreneurs of American culture are among the ever-growing contingent of academic sporting enthusiasts. Particularly relevant for our work is the considerable attention given the role of the media, notably television, in the cultural evolution of sporting phenomena in the United States and Europe.

The Problem of Intercollegiate Sports in the U.S.

Intercollegiate sports encapsulate a broad arena of applied problems facing higher education, commercialism, and athletics in the United States. Intercollegiate sports began in the U.S. in the mid-19th century with organized competition in rowing between Brown, Harvard, Yale, and Trinity Universities. It resembled the emergence of amateur athletics in late 19th-century Victorian England, which reflected the leisure sporting activities of the upper class (Guttman 1986; Schwartz 1994). In England college-based sports were largely under the control of students, while collegiate athletics in the U.S. quickly came under the scrutiny and control of institutional administrators whose early impulses to ban it soon gave way to accommodation and interinstitutional bureaucratic oversight via the formation of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1905 (Guttman 1988). While conflicting sentiments concerning the corroding influence of sports on institutions of higher learning were prominent early on, the formation of the NCAA was in large part a response to the rampant violence in early football.

Almost from its infancy, the NCAA had to grapple with the thorny problem of the relationship between athletics, academia, and the growth of sports as a business. The commercialization of amateur athletics in the U.S. engenders enormous problems as the distinction between amateur and professional sports blur (Wetzel and Yaeger 2000). Today, amateur athletics are a pervasive part of academic institutions across the United States. In his treatise on commercialism and college athletics, Zimbalist (1999:4) makes two important distinctions between amateur college athletics and professional sports. First, amateur athletes are not paid for their performances. Second, colleges and universities that are members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association

(NCAA) do not pay taxes on revenues from athletic events. And the revenues generated from college athletics have skyrocketed in recent years, with top college basketball teams bringing in over \$5 million per year from television contracts, merchandise licensing and sales, sponsorship, and ticket revenues. Zimbalist (*ibid*:9) cites one study showing that top athletes are estimated to individually bring in \$1 million per year for their institution. The single largest source of revenue for college athletics is television.

Critical debates concerning the corrupting influences of high-profile sports on academic institutions have been echoed by comparable critiques of television's involvement in athletics. Just as athletic programs are chastised for changing the rules of academic fair play at universities and colleges, television is criticized for changing the relationship between spectators and amateur athletics by commoditizing the system of amateur athletics, including academic institutions, without professionalizing the athletes. The resulting structure means the insertion of a new set of relationships between spectators and sporting events that gives rise to what Guttman (1986:127) calls "mediated spectatorship." The mediated relationship deals with the televised representation of sporting events to a vast audience of spectators. A cottage research industry has emerged within communication studies and journalism to understand sports television phenomena (Baker and Boyd 1997; Klatell and Marcus 1996). Much of this work involves examining how televised sports are presented and represented to viewers by creative camera angles, instant replays, expert commentators, up-close personal interviews with sport heroes, and similar media innovations. The commercialization of sports via television advertising plays a central role in how sports are packaged for viewers. The emergence of evening football and baseball, television time-outs and shot clocks in basketball, and the increasing number of playoff events in a number of sports, are but a few of the rule changes made to accommodate television. The single most important driving factor behind it all is money.

The eight-year, \$1.7 billion contract between the NCAA and CBS to televise the NCAA men's basketball tournament reveals how big a business "amateur" athletics really is. If CBS is willing to pay that amount of money, enough people must be watching men's college basketball events to reward the sponsors who foot the bill.

While much has been written about the commercialization of college sports and its consequences for academics, athletics, institutions of higher learning, and formal rule changes, our effort is directed toward understanding how such changes may be related to the role of on-the-scene arbitrators of "fair play," namely referees.

Methods

In-person observations of several men's college basketball games suggested to us that referees may be influenced by a social and economic environment disposing them to keep the game competitive ("fair") by their foul calls. Initially, we

observed a handful of games (10) that seemed to reveal a favorable disposition to the trailing team. To understand whether our limited behavioral observations were accurate and representative, we sought to collect data on referee behavior from a larger sample of games across a broader spectrum of conferences around the country. Inquiries revealed that longitudinal data on foul calls are not maintained either by NCAA headquarters or by major basketball divisions. This problem is compounded by the insurmountable challenge of attending games in-person across the country. Consequently, we turned to a more practical approach for observing referee behavior.

In the fall of 1999, we identified a nearly complete listing of all Men's Division I college conferences, teams, and playing schedules for the 1999-2000 season on the USA Today/GIST TV Web site. In addition, a complete schedule of televised games accessible in our viewing area was available at the same site. While attending and observing even a small sample of games is untenable, it is possible to view a large number of games on television. However, televised men's basketball games available in our viewing area are only a small sample of the total universe of games being played on any one day in the United States. Moreover, televised games are not a random or representative slice of all college basketball. For our purposes, however, televised games are particularly relevant. Pressure to keep these games competitive may be most acute, since television ratings and related revenues rise and fall with audience interest in game drama.

Five graduate and undergraduate students at Northern Illinois University agreed to assist in the time-consuming task of observing well over 130 hours of college basketball games through the 1999-2000 season. A standardized form was developed to coordinate a consistent method of data collection. Based on preliminary data from in-person game observations, we decided to collect background game information to include: teams playing, date and game time, television network broadcasting the game, game location, and final score. Game data collected included fouls categorized according to whether they are offensive, defensive, or loose ball; fouls categorized according to whether they are against the leading or trailing team, or when the game is tied (leading, trailing, or tied at the time of the infraction); and fouls categorized by whether they are called in the last two minutes of the first or second half. Preliminary observations revealed that intentional fouls typically occur in the waning moments of each half, particularly the second half. We further monitored and recorded fouls called in the final two minutes of each half, since such events reveal intentional and often blatant fouls on the part of the trailing team. As such, they are much more frequent and virtually impossible for the referee to ignore. Following a few practice sessions in which we collectively observed the same preseason games and shared results to ensure consistency, we began actual data collection with the advent of nationwide conference play in January 2000.

Sixty-seven games were observed between January 5 and April 3, 2000. Each week during that period the full itinerary of televised games available in our viewing area was put into

a common pool and randomly selected for viewing and data collection (even with six data collectors, it was impossible to view all games in our viewing area). In some cases, data collectors were forced to make a second random choice from the available televised game pool because student researchers could not afford specialized cable television channels. To ensure accuracy and replicability, each game was recorded. The total number of games selected for viewing was simply a byproduct of time available and access to channels broadcasting men's college basketball.

Results

There are 319 teams in 31 Division I NCAA college men's basketball conferences listed on the USA Today men's basketball team Web page. As expected, televised games are not a random sample of games among all teams across all college conferences. Certain conferences, such as the Atlantic Coast Conference, receive more television attention than most, while still others of local interest are more likely available for viewing in local geographical areas. Nonetheless, the 67 games we viewed included games from 17 of the 31 conferences, plus postseason nonconference tournament play. As detailed in Table 1, the Big 10 and the ACC represent a little over a third of the games viewed. Aside from these two, the games are reasonably well distributed across a range of conferences and eight postseason tournament games.

Table 1. Men's College Basketball Conferences Represented in the Study

Conference	Number of Games Observed
Big 10	12
Atlantic Coast Conference	11
Atlantic 10	6
Big East	5
Conference USA	5
Big 12	3
Missouri Valley	3
PAC 10	3
Midwestern	2
Sunbelt	2
America East	1
Big West	1
Mid-American	1
Mid-Continent	1
Mountain West	1
Southeastern	1
Southern	1
Nonconference	
Postseason Tournament	8
Total	67

In these 67 games, we recorded a total of 2,441 foul calls for an average of 36 foul calls per game. As revealed in Table 2, the vast majority of calls were defensive fouls, followed by offensive and then loose ball fouls. Perhaps counter to fan perception, referees did not call more fouls on the visitors (51.8% of total fouls) than the home team (48.2% of total fouls). The slightly higher percentage of fouls against the visiting team is not a statistically significant departure from the assumption that fouls should be evenly divided between the two. This may appear to contradict our suggestion that social and economic conditions influence referee behavior since hometown fans attempt to pressure referees in their favor during the public performance of a basketball game. The fact that referees do not succumb to this pressure may be better explained by the fact that even home court fans will lose interest when their team is too far ahead and the game is devoid of dramatic performance. Hence, the combination of a clear home court competitive advantage combined with a referee bias toward the home team may tilt the balance too far toward one side, resulting in the loss of suspense and a decline in fan interest from all sides.

Table 3 presents an overview of total fouls categorized by leading team, trailing team, or calls when the game is tied. On the surface there appears to be little difference between the proportions of foul calls on the leading versus the trailing team. However, the last two minutes of either of the two 20-minute halves of a basketball game are special circumstances. In such situations, the trailing team steps up its attack on the leading team with blatantly aggressive or intentional fouls in an intensive effort to come from behind by stopping the game clock and hoping the leading teams stumbles from the free-throw line. This behavior is evident in Table 4, which summarizes fouls against the leading and trailing teams during the final two minutes of each half. Of the 2,441 total foul calls, 352 were called during either the final two minutes of the first half or during the final two minutes of the game. Fully two-thirds of those fouls go against the aggressive trailing team. The last two minutes of each half, particularly the last two minutes of the game, reflect a distinct period in which aggressive foul behavior on the part of the trailing team is overt and not easy for referees to ignore in a public arena. Consequently, we separated these four minutes from the other 36 minutes of play.

Table 2. Number and Percentage of Fouls by Type

Foul Type	Number	% of Total
Defensive	2,049	84%
Offensive	212	9%
Loose Ball	180	7%
Total	2,441	100%

Table 3. Total Fouls when Teams are Leading, Trailing, or Tied

Fouls Against	Number of Fouls	% of Total Fouls
Leading Team	1,194	48.9%
Trailing Team	1,122	46.0%
Game Tied	125	5.1%
Total	2,441	100.0%

Table 4. Fouls by Last Two Minutes of Both Halves

Fouls Against	Total Fouls Last Two Minutes of Both Halves	
Leading Team	114	(32%)
Trailing Team	233	(66%)
Game Tied	5	(2%)
Total	352	(100%)

The average number of foul calls per game on the leading team is 16.1 versus 13.3 for the trailing team, when we control for the final two minutes of each half (see Table 5). We then need to determine whether this represents a significant departure from the assumption that both teams should average approximately the same number of fouls per game. We employed a t-test to assess whether the mean number of fouls called on the leading and trailing teams significantly depart from a mean test value. A comparative test value was calculated based on the assumption that fouls should be equally distributed between the trailing and the leading teams. To this end, a comparative test value of 14.7 was calculated, based on the total number of fouls called (1,969, excluding those in the last two minutes of each half and fouls called when the game is tied), divided by the total number of observed games (67), and finally divided by two for each team.

Table 5. Average Fouls Per Game, Controlling for Last Two Minutes of Both Halves

Fouls Against	Mean Number of Fouls Per Game	Standard Deviation
Leading Team	16.1	3.84
Trailing Team	13.3	4.30

Table 6. Difference Between Expected (14.7) and Actual (16.1) Mean Values

Fouls Against	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Conf. Interval
Leading Team	3.03	.004	1.40	.48 – 2.36

Table 7. Foul Calls by Television Coverage

I. Foul Calls in Games Broadcast by Three Primary TV Networks

Referees **DO** call a significantly higher number of fouls on leading teams.

	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Conf. Interval
Leading Team	3.57	.003	2.73	1.09 - 4.37

Note: A comparative test value of 15.9 was calculated based on the total number of fouls called (478: excluding those in the last two minutes of each half), divided by the total number of observed games on three primary TV networks (n = 15), and finally divided by two for each team.

II. Foul Calls in Games Broadcast by Primary ESPN Channel

Referees **DO** call a significantly higher number of fouls on leading teams.

	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Conf. Interval
Leading Team	2.32	.029	1.44	.16 - 2.72

Note: A comparative test value of 14.2 was calculated based on the total number of fouls called (709: excluding those in the last two minutes of each half), divided by the total number of observed games on the Primary ESPN network (n = 25), and finally divided by two for each team.

III. Foul Calls in Games Broadcast by Secondary TV Networks

Referees **DO NOT** call a significantly higher number of fouls on leading teams.

	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Conf. Interval
Leading Team	1.05	.303	.76	-.73 - 2.25

Note: A comparative test value of 14.5 was calculated based on the total number of fouls called (782: excluding those in the last two minutes of each half), divided by the total number of observed games on secondary TV networks (n = 27), and finally divided by two for each team.

A two-tailed t-test was used to determine whether the actual average number of foul calls for the leading team is a significant departure from the expected value of 14.7.

As shown in Table 6, the higher proportion of fouls on the leading team is significant at the .004 level. It is highly unlikely that the inordinate number of fouls called on the leading team occurs by chance. And by default, the inverse of this must also be true, that the trailing team receives a significantly lower average number of fouls per game.

Our next step was to figure out whether television is a factor in the distribution of foul calls. In the best of all possible worlds, we should compare referee behavior in a random sample of televised games with a control universe of randomly sampled untelevised games—logistically, this is not possible. A less attractive, though still useful, analytic alternative is to group games by type of television coverage. If our hypothesis is correct, we might expect to see a pattern of “fair play” more evident in those games receiving more prominent national television coverage than games with lesser television coverage. In other words, we suspect that the pattern of referees calling more fouls on leading teams might be more pronounced in nationally televised events and less evident in games receiving lesser commercial television attention.

We divided all games and fouls into three categories of television coverage: 1) games covered by one of the three national networks (478 foul calls in 15 games); 2) games covered by the primary ESPN channel (709 foul calls in 25 games); and 3) games receiving secondary (local or regional) network coverage (782 foul calls in 27 games). We then repeated the analysis presented in Table 6 for each group of games in each of the three categories.

The results, presented in Table 7, reveal that the pattern of “fair play” refereeing only holds for games televised on national networks. In games televised by regional or local television, there is no disproportionate rate of fouls called on the leading team. This suggests the possibility that the rules of “fair play,” namely calling significantly more fouls on leading teams, are associated with nationally prominent television coverage.

Discussion

Our study demonstrates that referees in men’s college basketball games call a disproportionate number of fouls on teams that are leading their games. It further reveals a link between national television coverage and the significantly higher number of foul calls on leading teams. When games are viewed as public spectacles with viewer and commercial demands for drama, we suspect such patterns may reflect sporting events whose cultural rules of “fair play” are at least partially oriented around maintaining suspense by keeping games competitive. While our data are highly suggestive of this possibility, we must emphasize that we do not know the mechanisms by which pressures for this type of “fair play” may be linked between highly commercialized sporting events

and the behavior of referees. We hasten to point out that we are not suggesting that referees are being paid off. Rather, the links may be much more subtle and endemic to the social and economic environment within which they work. Ethnographic inquiry would help piece together this portion of the puzzle.

Alternative explanations for the detected patterns include the possibility that referees are simply calling them as they see them—the leading team is the aggressor and therefore subject to more infractions. This explanation appears less compelling for three fundamental reasons. First, the pattern of calling a significantly higher number of fouls on the leading team only holds for games that receive nationally prominent television coverage. If leading teams are simply the aggressors and referees are objectively detecting their aggressive play, then we expect such patterns to hold for all games, not just those receiving national television exposure. Second, the waning moments of the first and second halves of a game magnify the general tendency of trailing teams to exhibit unusually aggressive behavior and take risks to remain competitive. It is the blatant expression of a general tendency that is responded to by referees in the waning moments of each half. Consequently, we believe it is more frequently the case that the trailing team is actually the aggressor and risk taker through much of the game. And third, teams that are leading are commonly coached to avoid “silly fouls” to prevent the trailing team from climbing back in the game by stopping the game clock and shooting free throws. In such situations it is counterproductive for the leading team to be overly aggressive.

The pressure to create sports drama has notable consequences for the formal rules of fair play invoked by referees, umpires, and other officials in a number of sporting events. Major league baseball’s umpires have whittled down the strike zone to favor hitters over pitchers and, thereby, increase scoring. College football instituted sudden death overtime to respond to spectators’ distaste for the lack of competitive resolution. The return of the slam-dunk in college basketball is another clear example of a rule change specifically enacted to create high drama and ensnare viewers in a public performance. Commercialized television plays a fundamental role in shaping sports drama by increasing pressure to generate spectator interest. As Schwartz (1994:46) points out:

TV is not about to spend \$1 billion to put something on the air that will only appeal to a handful of fanatics.... TV wants to appeal to as many people as possible.... TV wants spectacle; it wants action and excitement. It wants games that move fast.... The demands of TV have an enormous impact on the character of the sports it televises. TV dictates rule changes that make a more attractive product.

Spectators and athletes are willing to accept rule changes, even if they are media motivated, so long as everyone has to abide by them. Whether schoolyard races among the Mien of Thailand (Jonsson 2001), Balinese cockfights (Geertz

1973), or multibillion-dollar “amateur” college basketball in the U.S., all are predicated on an assumption that rules of fair play are in force. When these rules are violated, as in the case of the infamous black-sox gambling scandal in major league baseball, the event loses the trust of participants and spectators. In such cases, like the staged drama in professional wrestling or roller derby, the performance continues minus spectator faith that the outcome allows for the unfettered expression of actual physical or mental achievement.

Rules of fair play in men’s college basketball may not be what they appear on the surface. The fact that referees may be enforcing rules in a way that differs from cultural assumptions about fair play does not therefore mean there are no rules. Rather it may well mean that, similar to the myriad of anthropological cases cross-culturally, the conceptual logic of fair play in U.S. sports both reflects and obscures societal structure and its attendant cultural logic (Klein 1991). According to the cultural aphorism, America is a “land of opportunity,” where the limitless bounds of individual achievement and success are possible with hard work and dedication. Such success is ostensibly made possible because of democratically anointed rules of fair play that create opportunities for the expression of talent, creativity, and labor. This kind of cultural logic is acutely pronounced in U.S. sporting events, as rules of fair play are developed, refined, and enforced to create equitable competitive conditions within which individual or team achievements can clearly be discerned. In both cases, however, the overt cultural logic may obscure an underlying structural reality in which individual talent and hard work are subject to rules of fair play that serve certain interests by being more fair for some than others.

The commercialization of athletics and the growth of big business sports have dramatically altered sporting performance, the social and economic environment surrounding sports, the rules of the game, and, as we suggest, the way rules may be enforced. Amidst these changes, the need to create and maintain suspense and drama are amplified where performance becomes a commoditized product for spectators. Television pays large sums of money to cover men’s college basketball games because sponsors will pay for commercial space in conjunction with the game. Sponsors in turn are willing to pay for commercial airtime because they hope an audience will watch the game and the messages that sell their product. One way, though by no means the only way, to encourage spectator interest is through a competitive game whose resolution is encouraged to remain a mystery because of the rules of “fair play.”

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