

The Pistons-Pacers brawl and sports violence in America

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The violent brawl that erupted near the end of the Indiana Pacers-Detroit Pistons basketball game November 19 thoroughly discredits all the parties involved—players, spectators, the National Basketball Association (NBA) officialdom and the media. In this episode one can catch a glimpse of nearly everything wrong, and terribly wrong at that, with sports in America.

Following a confrontation with the Pistons' Ben Wallace, Pacers forward Ron Artest stretched himself out on the scorer's table, where he was hit by a cup of beer thrown by a Detroit fan. Artest, followed by a number of other Pacers, charged into the crowd, throwing punches. The melee lasted nearly 10 minutes, with various confrontations. Officials eventually called the game, and the Pacers were showered with beer, popcorn and debris as they left the court; a chair was thrown during the brawl and a number of people were treated for minor injuries. Oakland County officials have initiated legal action and numerous multimillion-dollar lawsuits—by players against fans and fans against players—are expected to result.

NBA commissioner David Stern announced Sunday the suspension of Artest for the season, as well as other heavy suspensions and fines. The penalties will cost three Pacers a combined \$12 million in salary. Stern pontificated, "What [Artest] did was unforgivable. It was a horrible scene. I have been commissioner for 21 years. This is the worst game I have ever seen, period."

Artest apologized for his actions, but called the suspension too severe. He said, "I respect David Stern, but I don't think he has been fair with me in this situation." The NBA Players' Association has appealed Stern's decision.

The immediate rights and wrongs of the situation, on which the inevitably banal and superficial sports commentaries focus, are almost entirely beside the point. It is impossible to understand how such an ugly incident could take place without some wider perspective on contemporary American life.

Sports, now a \$200 billion industry, presently occupies a place in the US far out of proportion to its intrinsic significance. In recent years it has increasingly taken on a "bread and circuses" character, a massive enterprise directed toward distracting the population.

Since the late 19th century and the rise of modern capitalism,

organized sports has been associated with nationalism and militarism. In present-day America, this has reached truly ominous forms. Flag-waving, jingoism and professional sports go hand in hand.

The disproportionate role of sports is only possible in a country in which so many people so poorly understand their own social situations, the media outlets make it their business to conceal political and economic reality—above all, the domination of every aspect of life by the very rich—and enormous but inchoate anger seethes just below the surface.

After all, on the weekend following the Pacers-Pistons outburst a pre-game scuffle between the Clemson University and University of South Carolina erupted later in the game into a bench-clearing brawl that state police found difficult to bring under control. A week earlier football players from the Pittsburgh Steelers and Cleveland Browns engaged in a pre-game fight. In September, Texas Rangers pitcher Frank Francisco threw a chair into the stands and broke a woman's nose after being heckled by fans at a baseball game.

Violence in America, of course, often takes on far more deadly forms. On Sunday a deer hunter in Wisconsin, asked to leave private land by another group of hunters, emptied his SKS semiautomatic rifle into the individual who confronted him and others who had come to his aid, killing five and wounding three.

The rise of sports to its present inappropriate place in the national limelight has been accompanied by a growing brutality. This finds its most perfected form in professional football, which borrows many of its choicest terms from warfare. According to one recent account, 21 percent of all National Football League players have been arrested for a serious offense.

Ray Lewis, the Baltimore Ravens linebacker, who stood trial for murder before ultimately pleading guilty to much lesser charges, observed succinctly, "If you don't want me hanging out with thugs, then I can't be on the football field on Sundays, either, because there are thugs in every huddle."

In professional hockey, where a management lock-out threatens the current season, fist-fighting is deemed an indispensable element of a sport whose overall caliber of play has been seriously diluted by expansion, from 6 teams in 1967

to 30 today.

Basketball too has been afflicted by the same trend. The NBA, while officially decrying Artest's outburst, trades on a quasi-gangster rap ("trash-talking, slam-dunking, in-your-face") aura to sell its product. As part of the merchandising, individualism and backwardness are exalted.

The relationship between spectators and players has become increasingly unhealthy. On the one hand, millions of Americans—politically alienated and increasingly insecure economically—are encouraged to live vicariously through celebrities, including sports heroes. As German Olympic skating champion Katarina Witt has commented, "There is in America a fascination about athletes that is greater than anywhere else in the world."

On the other hand, ideological confusion in America does not mean that class resentment disappears. It merely takes unconscious and even anti-social forms. Adulation of sports stars is mixed up, in a sometimes quite toxic manner, with envy and resentment and rage. The sports industry and media manipulate these sentiments for their own purposes.

Writing on *Sports Illustrated.com*, columnist Phil Taylor notes that "the player-fan dynamic has changed for the worse. Athletes and spectators don't like each other anymore, generally speaking." He goes on: "The money is part of the growing disconnect. Fans resent the obscene salaries that the players are making, and players resent the fans' notion that those big paychecks make them fair game for the most vicious heckling. The antagonism between the two sides is like a fuse, and the cup of beer thrown at Artest was just the latest match, causing the biggest explosion we've witnessed. So far."

Although they make exorbitant amounts of money (Reggie Miller of the Pacers will forfeit the equivalent of twice the annual income of the average US worker by losing *one game's* pay), the players are exploited in every other way. Professional athletes are often marginally educated, from impoverished backgrounds—Artest grew up in a tough housing project in Queens, New York; Lewis, in his own words, in a "drug-infested neighborhood around robberies and people getting killed." Their lives are sacrificed to a narrow and usually brief activity—the average NBA career is three to five years—and they are placed under immense pressure to "deliver the goods" during that time.

The most vulnerable will snap. Artest has a long history, extending back to high school, of explosions on the basketball court. He has been suspended 10 times since entering the NBA in 1999, and fined on numerous other occasions. His former college coach, Mike Jarvis, commented, "He can be the most gentle, wonderful person in the world. But he has another side as well."

A talented player, Artest is hardly likely to get help for his condition in the NBA. Its officialdom could care less about his mental state, as long as he stays out of too obvious trouble. Such individuals, with all their socio-psychological problems,

are dropped into the meat-grinder of professional sports, where vast sums of money are at stake, and the results are almost inevitable.

A very fine line exists, in any event, between the on-court threatening, insulting and bullying that is tolerated—as "crowd-pleasing"—by the NBA and its media hangers-on, and the criminal activity for which players will face suspension or even legal action. Someone with the difficulties of an Artest will find that line far too fine to consistently locate.

And having stumbled, he faces all the hypocrisy, moralizing and heavy-handedness of NBA "justice."

Asked if the league's disciplinary committee had been unanimous in agreeing to the heavy suspensions and fines, Stern replied arrogantly, "It was unanimous—1-0. I decided it.... It is my responsibility to decide on penalties for player conduct."

Stern reached his one-man ruling after two days of interviews with the players involved, excluding Artest and the other two Pacers receiving the strictest penalties. Stern indicated they were exempt because of the possibility they would be involved in legal actions.

Pardon us, but is there not still such a thing in the US as "due process"? Artest was fined some \$5 million without a hearing or even an interview. He has been the victim of a kind of instant or "rough justice" worthy of Judge Roy Bean.

Who is David Stern? Judge and jury, this longtime mouthpiece for the corporate interests that own the various NBA teams—he joined the league as its general counsel in 1978—is far from being a disinterested party. Above all, Stern and the rest of the NBA hierarchy would like to deflect attention away from the corrupt and diseased state of professional sports.

Instead of this rush to judgment, we would like to see a serious investigation of violence in professional basketball. Such an inquiry would inevitably make its way toward the larger questions, including the ruthless pursuit of profit by any means and the gladiatorial aspect of the current sports scene referred to above.



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