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Essay #1

Sport and Modernity

On a Tuesday night just over nine years ago, an event took place in the midst of the Major League Baseball Playoffs that precisely demonstrated how sport has evolved, depicting the way in which modern sports can significantly impact our everyday lives. In the top of the eighth inning in game 6 of the National League Championship Series between the Cubs and Marlins, a Cubs fan by the name of Steve Bartman made contact with a foul ball that Cubs outfielder Moisés Alou was close to catching. The play sparked outrage in Alou as well as fans. The events that ensued later that inning allowed the Marlins to score eight runs and defeat the Cubs by a score of eight to three. The Cubs ultimately lost the following game and the series, leading fans to blame Steve Bartman for the Cubs demise. Upon receiving harsh criticism and even death threats, Steve Bartman has remained silent and nearly undetected since the event, with the exception of a brief conversation he had with ESPN reporter Wayne Drehs who actively searched for him. Bartman's case begs the question: what modern aspects of sport and baseball create a situation in which a 26-year-old male is practically forced to live a life in the shadows? Through the modernization and bureaucratization of sport, the idea that winning is everything has arisen, along with deification in sports. Even though baseball is typically viewed as a pre-modern sport, the combination of these two ideas, along with increased publicity due to modern technology, created an atmosphere in which Steve Bartman became a villain who will live on in infamy. Furthermore, with record keeping and quantification in sports, Bartman's mistake will likely never disappear from the public eye.

The 2003 MLB playoffs represented a bureaucratic sports event that was shown primarily through the television production of the games, with new high-definition cameras and numerous camera angles. While it was not nearly the magnitude of the NFL playoffs, the modernization of baseball in particular has still led to playoff games that are not only viewed by approximately 40,000 fans in person, but also a couple million fans who are able to tune in to the nationally televised games. Unfortunately for Steve Bartman, this meant that his untimely action would not go unnoticed. If it was not already bad enough for him, the increased use of technology in baseball and other sports also led television stations to implement numerous cameras to provide fans with an experience closer to the action, which is exactly what they want. Everyone at home who was watching the game got to see the play unfold in real-time, but they also got to see it numerous other times throughout the game from a variety of different angles. The vast presence of technology through the lights and millions of replays is partially what makes sports such an amazing attraction (Markovits 23 Jan). At the same time, this extra attention on the game, especially in baseball, which is typically viewed as a pre-modern sport, assisted in creating hostility towards Bartman. While sport has become modernized, the popularity of sports has grown with it. Additionally, sports have become such a large part of our daily lives that they are not just a bureaucratic entity, but also a form of desecularization.

In the present day, modern sports tend to possess a religious quality, even though sports are not an established religion. So much so that sports have actually developed a quasi-religious meaning through superstitions and having faith in a team (Markovits 16 Jan). This deification in sports leads people to develop a relationship with a team in a way that even causes people to use the term “we” when referring to the team they root for. This is very comparable to the general nationalism in our country that is expressed by Maarten van Bottenburg when he writes, “By the

latter half of the nineteenth century a new phenomenon had arisen—the ‘world champion’” (van Bottenburg 7)¹. The idea of declaring a team a “world champion” when they don’t play teams from other countries is very similar to referring a team using “we” because there is no connection other than fandom. This demonstrates the undeniable passion that fans have for their teams and is ultimately part of the cause of winning becoming everything for most fans. Allen Guttman further illustrates this phenomenon of secularism by writing, “Churmen now eagerly seek to establish the harmony of modern sports and Christian doctrine. The Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York has a stained-glass window depicting baseball and other modern sports” (Guttman 24-5).² This shift towards practically worshipping sports is why Steve Bartman was viewed as being so evil in the eyes of Chicago Cubs fans. While Bartman was a Cubs fan himself, he made a mistake that is viewed by some as a curse that not only prevented the Cubs from going to the World Series that season, but also in subsequent years. This idea was taken so far that the ball that was present during the play was purchased for \$113,824.16 so that it could be blown up in an attempt to eliminate the curse (Isaacson)³. In addition, hegemonic sports today are loud and full of taunting. Many fans have the goal of making their opponents ill at ease because they care so much about winning (Markovits 28 Jan). In the case of Bartman, fans around him made similar efforts upon his mistake because they did not want him around after the play took place. Their hostility towards him led to a team of security guards escorting him out of Wrigley Field, exhibiting the intensity that sports fans tend to possess today. While fans have

¹ Bottenburg, Maarten Van. *Global Games*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2001. Print.

² Guttman, Allen. *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*. New York: Columbia UP, 1978. Print.

³ Isaacson, Melissa. "May It Rest in Pieces." *Chicago Tribune*. N.p., 23 Feb. 2004. Web. 05 Feb. 2013.

developed a quasi-religion with sports and the teams they are fans of, they also develop this with athletes in some cases, leading them to view some athletes as heroes or villains.

In our now highly modern and bureaucratic world of sports, athletes have fulfilled roles as heroes similar to the way Max Weber describes charismatic authority when he states, “The term ‘charisma’ will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (358)⁴. In meeting the criteria that Weber gives for charismatic authority because of their immense talent and skill, it becomes easy to see why athletes are so frequently idolized in our world today. In the case of Steve Bartman, he is far from a hero in the eyes of Cub fans, in fact, from the moment he touched the ball he was no longer a 26-year-old consultant who coached youth baseball in his spare time. He instantly became a villain, and a man who would be permanently defined for being in the wrong place at the wrong time during a baseball game. However, on the other side of things, Florida Marlins fans viewed him as a hero, so much so that in his apology and final comments he stated that he “would donate to the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation all the “generous gift offers” he received “from individuals and businesses across the country” (Hirsley)⁵. In sports today there are icons and markers that become essentialized and define the language of sport (Markovits 23 Jan). In many ways, Steve Bartman has become an icon, not to the extent of most athletes, but his trademark look of a green turtleneck, glasses and walkman are easily recognized by Cubs fans today. While he wasn’t bemoaned in his departure in the way that Michael Jordan was, and does not have anywhere near the charisma, he is still arguably a form of a Chicago icon

⁴ Weber, Max. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Max Weber, A. M. Henderson, Talcott Parsons: The Falcon Wing's Press, n.d..

⁵ Hirsley, Michael. “Bartman Donates ‘gift Offers’” *Chicago Tribune*. N.p., 25 Oct. 2003. Web. 05 Feb. 2013.

(Markovits 17)⁶. Unfortunately for Bartman, the modernity of sports also makes it less likely that he will be forgotten, because of how quantified sports have become.

One of the most crucial impacts of the modernization of sport is the record keeping. Today it is possible to find nearly every statistic that you could ever desire. Records are a valuable piece of history, especially in the sense that they permanently document events and statistics. In nearly all cases this proves to be a beneficial tool, however, specific plays and moments are even documented today, including the play that Bartman was involved in, which is precisely what makes it so hard for someone to escape the spotlight that comes with sports. Sports fans today have a love for statistics and records, which Guttman describes saying, “The record is a number in the ‘record book’ and in the upper-right-hand corner of the television screen, it is a stimulus to unimagined heights of achievement and a psychic barrier which thwarts our efforts, it is an occasion for frenzy, a form of rationalized madness, a symbol of our civilization” (Guttman 52)⁷. The importance of records and record breaking in our society gave the Bartman incident even more attention because the Cubs possessed the longest championship drought of any professional team in the United States. Had there been no records kept through the history of baseball that indicated that the Cubs had not won a World Series in ninety-five years when the Bartman incident occurred, the hype over the Cubs being in the playoffs may have slightly been diminished. Unfortunately the ridicule comes with the territory of being on the losing end of sports, but it can also cause someone like Bartman to be forced to live on in infamy forever. In the same way that clips of Bill Buckner are shown year after year, Steve Bartman will likely have his own place in baseball history.

⁶ Markovits, Andrei. *Offsides: Soccer and American Exceptionalism*. N.p.: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.

⁷ Guttman, Allen. *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*. New York: Columbia UP, 1978. Print.

Even though Bartman was not the one responsible for the Cubs shortstop Alex Gonzalez letting a potential inning ending ground ball roll through his legs, or any of the other subsequent errors made by Cubs players, he still received the blame. As the scapegoat for another unsuccessful season for the Chicago Cubs, Bartman was part of an event that demonstrates the importance that modern sports have on our lives, as well as the drastic consequences that are possible as a result of the modern sports environment, even in a sport like baseball. Pre-modern baseball, in which the game was secondary to the dinner that took place afterwards and where the batter and pitcher did not have an antagonistic relationship, is long gone in favor of the highly competitive professional baseball world that we see today (Markovits 4 Feb). Because of deification and a win at all costs attitude that was created through modernization, Steve Bartman will likely be a name that is mentioned with baseball and the Cubs forever. Whether he chooses to continue to live reclusively for the rest of his life or not, that thirty-second play in 2003 will live on in infamy, but with what sports have become, it might not be long before someone else fills his shoes.

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