opinion

Violence in the stadium: the sports fan as fanatic

By Glenn Brownstein

It is an unfortunate fact of life that violence at sports events is becoming as American as apple pie. We've all heard stories about how Latin American countries fought a two-year war over the disputed outcome of an international game, or of the Brazilian soccer official who is decapitated after an unpopular call. But it is clear from the events of the past few years that the crowds at America sporting events are just as likely to behave as they do at all. That problem, magnified by national television coverage and a game that was decided by the middle of the second quarter, probably contributed most to the tragedy.

Indeed, many fans had prepared for the 9pm start and the near-freezing temperatures with a pre-game drink or two. That problem, along with local TV football fans missed the on-field and off-field action that usually takes place during pre-game festivities. The game was a nationally televised event, and fans who missed the pre-game action were likely to feel disenfranchised.

For example, a fan attacked basketball referee Rickie Powers near the end of the fifth Cellos-Phoenix playoff game when Powers decided that the Suns deserved one second of playing time at the end of the contest's second overtime (John Havlicek had apparently won the game for Boston). The Suns were favored in the final against the Lakers, and many fans felt that Los Angeles had been favored to win the championship.

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Mary a Green or Orange Line subway car has been damaged by happy or distraught high school basketball, hockey, or football fans. Met fans tossed bottles at Cincinnati's Pete Rose after the Red's star got into a fight with New York shortstop Bud Harrelson. A National Football League official was injured by a couple of years back and fans held up the contest for nearly thirty minutes by throwing bottles, cans, cups, and pennies onto the skating surface.

Not to be unfair to Boston sports fans, most of whom would not dream of some of the repulsive and dangerous displays their comrades have put on in recent years. This sort of behavior has taken place at some of those games.

One can walk miles in the stadium without seeing a campaign button or bumper sticker. Campaign literature is virtually nonexistent. Jimmy Carter spent four hours here, and President Ford has yet to make an appearance.

Apathy is rampant; there has been more interest generated by the nine references on the State ballot than by the race for the White House.

One of the reasons for the lack of interest in Massachusetts is that the Ford-Carter race here is really a foregone conclusion. The June 7 primaries, however, did provide an opportunity for the Republicans to put some new blood into the state. Indeed, many fans had prepared for the 9pm start and the near-freezing temperatures with a pre-game drink or two.

Ford is all but conceding the State to his rival, and Carter has said that he will not spend about $90,000 to be spent here.

But the apathy question is not as shallow as that. Electoral specialists, including Professor Walter Dean Barnhart of the Political Science department at Boston College, have predicted that the national turnout will be under fifteen percent. That would be an alarmingly small percentage. It is an overestimation of the possibility that, when half of the potential electorate fails to participate in government, there is a serious legitimacy crisis.

The current political malaise is not merely the result of cynicism, but rather the result of a lack of hope that the political system can provide meaningful solutions to our problems. Many people feel that the system is broken, that the politicians are not listening to their concerns, and that their votes do not matter.

The question is: what can be done to change this? One possible solution is to increase awareness of the issues and to encourage participation in the political process. Another possibility is to reform the political system itself, by eliminating some of the barriers to participation and by making elections more accessible to the average voter.

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