

# Sports rage: we're all the loser

by Thomas Boswell  
The Washington Post

Why are so many of us so angry? In these boom times, why is our affluent culture turning violent and venomously antisocial at the very sports events we are presumably attending to have fun? Once, we went to games to let off steam. Now, we get steamed.

In you're playing right field for the Houston Astros in sedate middle-America Milwaukee, you better be careful. A fan may run out of the stands and punch you in the face. If you're at a Colorado-Colorado State football game, bring your gas mask; in September, tear gas was used to quell a fan disturbance. A D.C. United patron came to RFK Stadium to watch soccer; he ended up in the hospital with stab wounds.

Is it possible we've gotten so intoxicated with winning in the '90s that all other reasons for playing games, or attending them, have shrunk to insignificance? How could "fun" be sufficient? No way. Not unless there's a chance to make a quick killing in a "fun.com" IPO. In a culture that, every year, seems to define itself more in terms of raw competition, we are tempted, unconsciously, to reduce issues to, "I'm a winner. You're a loser."

In this week's installment of our sad saga, two Oakland Raiders players got in a snowball and ice-chunk throwing battle with Broncos fans in Denver. Three fans spent the night in jail. One Raider allegedly hit a female fan in the face with a snowball while another was accused of punching a fan. Oakland defensive back Charles Woodson faces a misdemeanor assault charge. Maybe he just doesn't know the rules: you can't chuck a fan more than five rows into the stands.

The Raiders' Tim Brown called the melee "the ugliest scene I have ever seen." These days, that's quite a distinction. A little less than three weeks ago, 10 fans were arrested and 20 ejected at a Vikings game on a Monday night in Minneapolis. On any given Sunday, you never know what you'll see in the NFL. Sometimes fans apparently ask the New Orleans Saints' coach, "Mike,

what's your IQ?" Obliging, Mike Ditka answers with one finger.

Football's not alone. At Fenway Park last month, fans in the bleachers in front of me began throwing anything they could get their hands on at the New York Yankees and the umpires. They weren't just mad about bad calls. Worse, they were furious about being perceived around the country as "losers" — those comic Red Sox fans, stuck for generations with their dopey Curse.

As play in the AL Championship Series game was suspended, the rain of garbage and curses increased. Many joined the mini-riot, as though it were just part of the show and came with the pricey ticket. What, you mean Yanks vs. Red Sox isn't the WWF? For the most part, the hundreds of people who acted berserk were middle-class white males ranging in age from their late teens to their 30s. In other words, typical American fans.

Throughout the postseason, you could hear that same ultimate insult: "You're a loser." Usually with an extra adjective added. In one shoulder-to-shoulder line at Turner Field in Atlanta, barbs started flying between Braves and Yankees fans. It started as bravado but quickly got crazy. Nobody would back down. The space was cramped. One huge guy, half-drunk, stood inches from me, trying to start the Civil War all over again. He didn't just want to start a fight. He wanted to be the fight. The Yankees fans retreated.

Whatever level of raw rage you think is circulating in our sports arenas, I promise you, it's higher. By contrast, the fuss at the Ryder Cup, where I walked in the galleries, doesn't even register on the fury meter.

To some, it's a paradox that in the best of economic times we exhibit the worst behavior. Maybe it's actually the opposite. Hard times, catastrophes and illness have usually brought out the most unselfish impulses in people. When we are flush with security or success, we often isolate ourselves from the needs of others. We're too big to fail or need anyone else. Greek tragedy said: "Those whom the gods would destroy, they first make great."

In sports and out, we've seldom been more obsessed

with winning than we are right now. I catch myself all the time. "Does Anybody Want To Be A Millionaire?" You bet. Even utility infielders are filthy rich. Why not me? If you're not a winner, you're a loser, right? A champ or a chump. So, why not run up the score, win by 70, to gain a spot in the college football rankings.

American sport always has been of two minds about what it values. On one hand, pro sports is pure capitalist competition. Survival of the fittest. To the victor go the spoils.

On the other, there's usually an awkward recognition, even by famous athletes, that much of life is a mystery to them. They've deliberately narrowed themselves to become great. It's their choice. We now seem to have people who choose a comparable narrowness for the sake of being more fanatical fans.

Of all our words to live by, few have proved shallower, or less sustaining in hard times, than, "Just win, baby." Every religious leader or philosopher for 2,000 years has managed to get past "I win, therefore I am." Yet that's where some of us are stuck now. If you climb the



MELISSA THORNLEY-THE ITHACAN  
Sgt. Scott O'Dell of the Tompkins County Sheriff's Department restrains an unidentified fan after Cortland's victory in the Cortaca Jug game on November 19. Numerous fights erupted among students from both schools.

Himalayas to reach the guru at the top, he's not going to say, "Mets rule, dude." Or "give my regards to Regis."

How do we live a life that satisfies us, not in the eyes of others, but in the privacy of our own hearts? That question hasn't gotten any easier over the centuries. Rooting for the pennant winner, or even finding a way to get that million, isn't going to help.

Why are so many in our stadiums so angry? Perhaps we feel entertained, yet undernourished. We've gotten in the habit of asking the simplest, most childish question — who won? — and then asking nothing more. When you lose, and you haven't thought beyond winning, you can get mighty mad.

## Majority of ump's vote to dump Richie Phillips for new union

by Sam Donnellon  
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NEW YORK — It should have ended with more flair, more fire, more fight.

Richie Phillips's 21-year tenure as the umpires union boss should have ended like that final scene in "A Few Good Men," with Richie screaming, "You're messing with the wrong litigator!" as he tried to break all restraints and rip the throats out of the umpires that led the revolt against him.

Instead, it ended quietly and dully in a conference room on the 36th floor of the Jacob Javits Federal Building in lower Manhattan, without Phillips even present. Phillips was in New York, but was tied up in other business, his associate, Pat Campbell, said wryly.

"Richie's focus is all about getting 22 umpires their jobs back," Campbell said. So it ended, with Campbell and Major League Umpires Association president Jerry Crawford on one side of a table and John Hirschbeck and his attorney, Joel Smith, representing the new union on the other. It ended with Crawford's hand-propped head dropping, inch by inch, as Steve Appell, an attorney with the National Labor Relations Board, and an assistant tediously and tortuously opened each envelope, deposited them in a cardboard box, then tediously and tortuously counted each one.

When he was done, 57 of 93 umpires casting votes chose a new union, with this working title: the Major League Umpires Independent Organizing Committee. That was the same number of votes cast in favor of resignation last July, a Phillips-advised strategy that triggered the series of events that culminated with Tuesday's vote. Thirty-five umpires voted to retain the existing union, the Major League Umpires Association, headed by Phillips and his law firm.

"I'm shocked," Campbell said. "I figured it would be close. But I figured in the end, people would realize the gains they made through the Major League Umpires Association and that they would be very reluctant, in a fair election, to give that up."

When Phillips took over in 1978, rookie umpires earned \$17,500 and the most senior veterans made \$40,000. This year, salaries ranged from \$95,000 to \$282,500, including postseason bonuses they all received.

But along the way, dissidents charged, Phillips became a dictator, forcing his strategy upon them. There was also distrust about the union treasury.

"The major thing we wanted was an organization that was really run like a democracy," said Hirschbeck, who spearheaded the effort to force this vote. "An organization where we had a true accountability of funds, where every member had the same voice in the union, where every member was as important as the next. Truly a union that was run by umpires, with lawyers as advisers and consultants."

Asked if accountability of funds was a problem within the old union, Hirschbeck responded, "It was very difficult to obtain that information."

One ballot was voided because it was signed, which Campbell later objected to. Campbell also indicated an appeal of the process was likely.

The MLUA has seven days to do so, according to NLRB Director Dan Silverman. If the appeal has merit, Silverman will schedule a hearing. Otherwise, it will be dismissed.

Campbell declined to specify the basis of the appeal. "I just don't think the whole process was fair," Crawford said.

The process began July 14 when 57 of the 68 union members at a meeting in Philadelphia's Airport Marriott agreed to tender resignations as a ploy to get major league owners to negotiate a new contract. Instead, owners took steps to replace them, and many umpires rescinded their resignations. Phillips was critical of those umpires and many umpires were critical of Phillips's disastrous strategy. Ultimately the leagues hired 25 new umpires, and allowed only some resignations to be rescinded.

Twenty-two umpires who had resigned were let go. A summer's worth of accusations and acrimony ensued, which ripped apart a union once renowned for its solidarity.

Those let go also filed a grievance that essentially argued that their resignations should not have been taken seriously. Late last week, arbitrator Alan Symonette ruled such a grievance merited a hearing, which he scheduled for Dec. 13 in Philadelphia.

Phillips's firm will still handle that grievance. Ron Shapiro, an adviser to the new union, said Tuesday, Shapiro also said he would not head the new union, and would serve as its adviser for only a little while longer.

"Ron has from the beginning has never accepted pay, and he will be with us as long as we need to get on our feet," Hirschbeck said. "I think that time is close." Shapiro said: "The union is going to have tremendous lawyers... They are going to have a crackerjack legal staff. It's just that the legal staff is not going to tell them what to do. They are going to carry out their wishes."

One wish will be to forge a better working relationship with Major League Baseball, Hirschbeck said. "We'd like to try to operate through negotiation not litigation," he said.

"Umpires are portrayed as being confrontational and antagonistic. Sometimes on the field, it's part of the job, you have to take charge of things. But as far as our relationship with baseball, we want to try and negotiate. We want to try and build bridges with baseball. "Baseball has changed a lot in the last 10 years and we as major league umpires want to be part of that change."

At least 57 do. But as much as this was a referendum on Phillips, it was a clear barometer the umpires have never been more disharmonious. Also, Crawford and five other umpires are suing Hirschbeck and three other umpires for defamation of character.

"We hope that now this process is over," said veteran umpire Joe Brinkman, who will serve on the new union's 14-member board. "We were all brothers before as umpires and like family. And we hope we can all come back together and like family work together as one."

One avenue toward that, said Brinkman, is to work in unison with the outgoing union to get the 22 umpires their jobs back.

"As time goes by and the other umpires see our concern for the 22 umpires, I think it's very realistic to think we can mend this," he said. "We have said to people all along. We genuinely care about those 22 people and we are going to do everything in our power to help them."

Hirschbeck, standing nearby, was then asked what he would say to Phillips had he been there. "I would just say it's time for us to move on," he said. "Thank you for what you have done for us

## With that BCS computer, winning margin makes all the difference

by Andrew Bagnato  
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CHICAGO — Sorry, Vince Lombardi. It turns out that winning isn't everything. Winning big is everything.

At least that's what Virginia Tech and Nebraska are thinking as they chase a Sugar Bowl date with Florida State. Because seven of the eight computer rankings employed by the Bowl Championship Series take victory margin into consideration, the Hokies and Huskers have to make sure they win by the right score.

Forget about sportsmanship. Forget about ethics. Gentlemen, start your inodems.

"When it's gotten to how much you can beat a team, we're getting away from what college football should be about," Virginia Tech coach Frank Beamer said. "We talk about taunting and respecting an opponent, then everybody is talking about how bad can you beat somebody?"

Beamer made that comment after whacking Temple 62-7 a week ago.

Temple coach Bobby Wallace had no complaint with the rough treatment. "They've got to worry about these computer formulas," he said. "I do know that beating somebody bad is better than just barely getting by."

Who says so? The computers say so.

In the final college football season of the 1990s, printouts have become more important than pitchouts.

Oh, the irony. Five years ago when Nebraska and Penn State

dueled for No. 1, many observers decried the human bias of the coaches and media polls after both named Nebraska No. 1. Computers were supposed to be the answer.

But now that they've been added to the mix, they've only become a question.

While it's true that the coaches and media who voted in the old system were influenced by scoring margins, many were wise enough to discount routs over weaklings. The trouble with computers is that no one knows how much the scores count. Is it better to beat a good team by a point or to sock Temple 62-7?

In Nebraska's case, it was better not to play at all. The idle Cornhuskers edged closer to the victorious Hokies in the BCS standings.

BCS boss Roy Kramer insisted that "scoring differential becomes so minimal that when you pass 17 to 19 points, it becomes infinitesimal. There was so much fuss made over Virginia Tech beating Syracuse 62-0. But it would have been the same if they won 21-0."

Kramer conceded that there is a "slight bounce" for a large victory. "But that's also true in the subjective polls," he said. "I think all of you (voters) are influenced by scoring differentials. I think it's difficult not to be. But in the final numbers, when the computer is finished grinding out the numbers, scoring differential is less of a factor than most people think it is."

Only one problem: The people who think it matters are the coaches. And that's why they're rushing to pile on the points.

Kramer asks that we take his word on this one. But it comes down to accountability. The computer programs have none. For personal or business reasons, many won't divulge the secret sauce, not even to Kramer and the BCS honchos.

Without accountability there can be no credibility. This is why the ESPN/USA Today coaches poll is widely considered a joke. Votes are secret, sometimes even to the voters themselves.

I've voted in the AP media poll for the last six seasons. The AP releases lists of voters at the beginning and end of the season, and it will release each pollster's ballot in the event of a close race for No. 1. Many of the voters, including me, regularly publish their ballots.

In 1994, when I voted Nebraska No. 1 ahead of fellow unbeaten Penn State, I explained in print. Nittany Lions fans respond, some of them in English. Three years later, when I voted Nebraska No. 2 behind fellow unbeaten Michigan, the crayon-scribbled letters came from Lincoln.

This isn't to say that the AP poll should be the sole determining factor, as it was for so many years. The more input, the better. No one wants the national title to be decided by a sportswriter in a crumb-covered plaid sportcoat. (Myself, I prefer coffee-stained sweaters.) But is it preferable to have it decided by a geek who has spent his life hitting the "page down" key?

I'm not saying Kenneth Massey is a geek. But before this fall, when the BCS picked up his rating system, Massey was an obscure graduate student in math at Virginia Tech. The moment he referred to the Hokies as "we" in an interview, he lost any shred of credibility. I'm guessing Massey's screen saver is a Gobler — just like his rating system.

The idea that computers are somehow more reliable than people is ludicrous. Ever try logging on to America Online?

Grant Teaff, executive director of the American Football Coaches Association, has backed the BCS from the start. Teaff favored computer input, but he's uncomfortable with the notion that computers are encouraging coaches to run up the score. Teaff isn't alone. Last winter the AFCA ethics committee met with BCS officials to express their concerns on the same issue.

"People don't trust the computers," Teaff said the other day from Waco, Texas. "Last year you had people talking about biased computers. Shouldn't computers say pretty much the same thing?"

When BCS officials added five computers to the three employed a year ago, they admitted that any single rating system could have "undue influence."

Unfortunately, the computers still have "undue influence." Just take a look at the scoreboard.

