

# northeastern Sports

by DAVE GRIFFITHS

## CONFORMITY BREEDS MEDIOCRITY

"Conformity is certainly desirable but when it is used to stifle individuality it is dead wrong."

That excerpt from the guest editorial in last week's Abington Journal forms the basis for today's column.

The mere mention of the word conformity shocks those who participate in the wonderful world of sports. For if conformity were the key to success many of the great teams and the so-called super stars would never have been developed.

Conformity tends to breed mediocrity. And to prove the point all you've got to do is check the performances of those who have made it big in all branches of sport.

You can start anywhere you want but inasmuch as the World Series madness is upon us there's no more appropriate starting point than the baseball diamond.

Everyone remembers the great Ty Cobb. Even today's youngster has heard about the batting prowess and base-stealing skill of "The Georgia Peach." But few know that Cobb violated all the rules of batting by gripping the bat handle in his own inimitable style.

Yes, Ty Cobb separated his hands by three or four inches which according to those who teach hitting is against every batting concept. Fortunately for Cobb and for baseball no one tried to make one of the greatest players in the history of the game conform to the prevailing standards.

There are many other baseball greats who do everything wrong when compared to the accepted rules but are there any managers who would have changed Stan Musial's corkscrew batting form or forbid Willie Mays from making his famed "basket catches?" If there were they've been forgotten while Musial and Mays will long be remembered.

Rocky Marciano who retired undefeated as heavyweight boxing champion of the world did everything wrong. Boxing experts contended he couldn't punch, he couldn't box and his style was so unorthodox he wouldn't have a chance. But his record speaks for itself.

Basketball has its heroes but the many styles of shooting would baffle a Houdini. Some shoot with one hand, others still use two. Foul attempts are for the most part shot overhand but there are still those who use the underhand toss. And Hal Greer of the Philadelphia 76ers uses the jump shot from the 15-foot line. Would these nonconformists have been better players if they followed the rules? Certainly not!

Now let's look in on the football picture. Johnny Unitas of the Baltimore Colts is recognized as one of the greatest quarterbacks in the history of the game. Yet Unitas does not conform to the accepted pattern. He even wears high shoes which is a "no-no" in today's world of gridiron fashions.

And you don't have to stop with Unitas while "Broadway Joe" Namath is around. The Jets quarterback handles his assignment in his own fashion. Many of Joe's moves are not in keeping with the signal-caller's handbook but his coach, Weeb Ewbank, isn't about to make Namath conform either on or off the field.

If you're interested in track and field you're well aware that conformity has no place in that area. High jump records have been posted because some athletes had the audacity to try a different approach. They broke every rule in the book but they succeeded, and that's what life's all about.

The examples of athletes who have violated the accepted rules of "how to do it" are legion. Ironically enough the great stars are the non-conformists. You'll hear the phrase again and again "he went against the book."

The world of sports has learned that accomplishment is not based on conformity but on individuality. Or, if you prefer, on the boldness of those who have their own way of doing things. This is not to say that everyone who has broken with precedent has been outstanding. But it does prove that any attempt to mold people into the same pattern is foolhardy.

Dr. Peter Mensky, superintendent of public schools for Lackawanna County, speaking at an in-service seminar at North Pocono High School last week, pointed out that progress in the field of education is noticeable everywhere except in teaching techniques.

"Instructors" he said "are still using the methods they did in the long ago. With all our progress in other fields of endeavor the school teacher hasn't changed. This is the crying need. Not necessarily to abandon all the old ideas but to seek out the new. There must be better ways of teaching today's youth."

Certainly the good doctor spoke the truth. But ironically enough there's no place where conformity is more rigidly enforced than in our schools. Individuality is shackled at almost every turn.

Perhaps the educators (and I'm one of them) can take a lesson from the world of sports. Competition is the key that drives today's youth onward. Give them a challenge and they'll go all out to meet it. Offer them the time-scarred methods or yesterday and they'll tell you to "get with it."

What they're really saying is "we want to do our thing the best way we can." To insist they conform to a set of outdated rules is to court failure.

Let's give them the same chance the super stars of the athletic world have. Let's not judge them by their willingness to conform but by their desire to achieve.

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