

In The Name Of Sport

Do you know George Orwell? Well, you wouldn't personally know him, considering he was a writer and George was his pen name. But you might remember reading "Animal Farm" or "1984" in high school English. George wasn't exactly a cheerful guy, but he once said something that I read that stuck with me. "Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence. In other words, it is war minus the shooting."

Maybe George had attended an NHL game, if not in his lifetime then he must have looked ahead to see where the sport of hockey ended up. He's been dead since 1950. When I read that quote again, it got me wondering about this sport thing that has fans so wrapped up in the outcome, they lose all sense of reason and perspective.

We are distracted from the "meat" of life by sport. We listen to the verbal spewing of Don Cherry, whom we hold in higher regard, according to a 2004 CBC poll, than the likes of Stephen Lewis who has worked with UNICEF and later United Nations work with Aids in Africa, and we place Cherry on equal footing with David Suzuki and Frederick Banting; Cherry who assures us that hockey isn't the great Canadian sport we admire without a few well placed slams and a good tussle. Fans expect it and want it, according to Cherry and his loyal following. But it makes me scratch my head and wince.

I recently watched a documentary about the curse of losing in sport, specifically for the World Series famine experienced by the Boston Red Sox for 89 years and the continuing starvation for the Chicago Cubs since 1908. In 2003, fans and media were able to heap the failings of the Cubs on to the shoulders of Steve Bartman, a 26-year-old fan who reached for a foul ball along with at least seven other fans and unintentionally deflected the ball from a Cubs fielder in Game 6 of the National League Championship. The Cubs went on to lose to the Mariners and Steve Bartman's life was forever changed. His safety was in serious question as security guards escorted him from the stadium, to keep fans from physically harming him. Still fans hurled debris, flung beer, anything they could get their hands on. Steve was hounded, abused verbally with death threats. He went

into hiding from which he has not resurfaced. I watched the video of him sitting quietly in his seat with his Little League sweatshirt on of the team he coached, his Cubs hat pulled snug on his head, peering tentatively out from behind his glasses, while fans around him screamed obscenities and made Steve responsible for the failure of his beloved Cubs. All in the name of sport.

Consider the likes of Boston Red Sox first basemen Bill Buckner, who despite a long and successful career is best remembered for his fielding error in Game 6 of the 1986 World Series that saw the Mets go on to victory. Buckner was publicly ridiculed and shamed until he retired from the game and withdrew from the public eye.

I think of the life diminishing injuries that plague hockey today, yet we celebrate and cheer as though this is all quite unobjectionable, an acceptable by-product of sport. We hear of athletes taking their own lives in suffering from the trauma and side effects of brain injury and they are seemingly forgotten in a heartbeat as we jump from our seats when a game erupts into fisticuffs on the ice.

Have we come very far from the events that went on in the Coliseum, when we were throwing Christians to the lions, where we fought to the death for entertainment? I suppose there is no comparison in reality, but I wonder about the sentiments behind our worship of sport and our conduct when our team loses. I think of the shameful outcome in Vancouver after the Canucks fell to Boston and the incredible damage to private and public property. I examine my own ethics and am thankful that my parents encouraged a heart that registers dishonour by all of this. And my hope is that I have passed it on.

wendistewart@live.ca