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## **BREAD AND CIRCUSES**

January 8, 2002

The fall baseball meetings have been going on all week and it has been a comedy show. ESPN commented tonight that the average American makes about \$33,000 a year. The average baseball player makes \$2,000,000 a year. What makes these meetings so ridiculous is the salary that the New York Yankees paid Jason Giambi. He got \$17,000,000. You cannot tell me that any man who hits and catches baseballs is worth that much. Is he worth more than the President of the US? Is he worth more than Billy Graham who saves people from going to hell? Is he worth more than one of the firefighters that lost their lives in the 911 incident? Is he worth more than one of our soldiers who is fighting to end the life of murderous Osama ben Laden?

When I look at the sports world and the things they are doing it appalls me. The Charlotte Hornets want to move to Louisville, but only if the city builds them a new arena to their specifications. They want the taxpayers to subsidize the building of the new arena so they can make more money. Then there is the business of decreasing the number of baseball teams because several of them are losing money. The reason they are losing money is the astronomical salaries they are paying their players. When Barry Bonds was expecting to make \$25,000,000 a year for five years when he is in his late 30's, it is no wonder teams are losing money. Also in baseball is the problem of the New York Yankees. They spend so much money to buy a world series team the other teams cannot keep up. No other team has their kind of money to spend.

Then there is professional basketball. Hiring immature kids out of high school or after one or two years of college with inadequate education is criminal. Again it is money that draws them. Because they are immature and making so much money, all kinds of predators seek them out and in time many of them get into drugs and other criminal activity and ruin their lives. The story of Lennie Bias, the star player from Maryland U who died while using cocaine, is a good example. He did not live to spend the money he was going to get. Drugs took his life. Tonight on Comcast Sports there was a round table in which the commentators were discussing the use of marijuana in the NBA. (You can be sure if they are using marijuana they will be using other drugs too.) They allowed as how it is commonplace, and the league does nothing about it.

Watch any sporting event and look at the enthusiasm that goes into cheering for a team. Commentators describe how the fans "get into the game" and spur their team on. In Europe soccer fans can get so rowdy that they riot and people get killed. My wife and I were on a train from Olomuce, Czechoslovakia to Prague. On the same train were a group of fans of one of the teams from Prague. They

were all drunk and rowdy. Since our seats were in a car close to the car they were occupying we felt uneasy. We knew what had happened in England and in other parts of Europe with soccer fans and were afraid it could happen there. We were so glad when we got to our destination and got away from them.

It seems that professional sports are usually linked to sin. Alcohol is portrayed by the media as a social lubricant. Drink and be merry is the message. The main advertisers in sporting event broadcasting are beer companies who usually link their product with sex. Scantly clad young women are shown "having fun with the boys." If I am a teenager and see their shenanigans, it is obvious that I will want to do that too. The advertisers know that sex sells. It has been said by Ogden Nash that "candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker."

Then there is the idol worship that one sees for professional sports stars. There is adulation that seems to me to be displaced. People want to get near them, to touch them, to hear them utter inanities that do nothing for the people who hear them, all the while they are dashing off madly to hell ignoring the one who really deserves adulation—the Lord Jesus. He utters truths that give eternal life. He cannot be touched, nor heard audibly, but he is heard through his servants who proclaim the Gospel.

College sports are not immune. Many college coaches make up to and over \$1,000,000 a year. Steve Spurrier at Florida makes \$2,100,000 a year. Bob Stoops at Oklahoma makes \$2,000,000 a year. The President of Oklahoma University makes only \$300,000. In contrast the average salaries for professors in all universities is \$71,290, for associate professors it is \$50,200 and for assistant professors it is \$42,500. These figures were published by the Chronicle of Higher Education. Recently one of our local universities was selected to play in a bowl. They had a 6-5 won lost record. Their alumni had to give from \$30 to 40,000 a year to the athletic fund to get the choice seats. Members of college athletic donor clubs have to give at least \$1,000 a year in support of athletics to belong. In most instances they are able to get better seats at the game if they want them. In most schools students have a tough time getting tickets. In many places they have to camp out in front of the ticket office to be in line to get a ticket days ahead. Clemson University at one time had an IPTAY club. IPTAY meant I pay ten a year. Hah! I doubt that you can even get a sticker to put on your rear window if you give \$10.00. Big time college sports are big time financial machines. They have to be or they can't exist. Only one major college league seems to have any sense of propriety about college athletics. It is the Ivy League. They play athletics primarily for sport, not money or national titles.

Then there are bowl games. The only reason that bowl games are played is for money. The Rose Bowl used to be played to pit the best in the West with the best in the East. This year no team from the West is playing there. The fans of Miami and Nebraska have to travel across the country to see their teams play. There

are so many bowls that one team who has lost more games than it won is playing in one. College bowl games are a travesty as sport.

If we look at sports in elementary and high school we find much of the same. A father in California is suing the school system and the coach for cutting his son from the high school basketball team. He wants \$1,500,000 because he believes that the boy would have earned that much money in a professional career. Isn't it ridiculous that a lawyer would take such a case, and even more ridiculous that the father could be that certain that his teenage son has professional grade talent? The coach did not think that he could compete even at the high school level! But that is not all. Parents attack umpires in little league when they object to the calls they make on their children. In a like manner many parents try to force their children with average or below average talent to play in sports where they cannot achieve, and then they reject them because they cannot make the grade. This horribly damages their self esteem.

Finally our preoccupation with sports is manifest in the number of sports channels on TV. ESPN has four, Fox has one, Comcast has one and CNN SI is the seventh. If you want, you can get 30 different games on a given day. The advertising revenue is so split that CNN SI has to repeat the advertisement for their magazine ad nauseam. The same for ESPN and their magazine. To top it all off, there are the puerile comments and promotional spots of the commentators on ESPN. That network is owned by Disney so it is no wonder that one of their top announcers is shown in a promotional spot with a women's garter belt and hose on. It was just a flash spot, but it was quite obvious even to the casual observer. I find it difficult to watch ESPN or CNN SI, even though I want to get the scores and highlights of teams in whom I have an interest.

Does the state of sports in our country say anything to us? It tells me that we have lost our sense of perspective for what is valuable. Then too it reminds me of another great country and empire who had the same thing happen to it. The Roman Empire was dedicated to war and as they grew and became more decadent, they indulged in more and more sports. When they were failing in war and the barbarians were at the gates, the citizens were screaming for bread and circuses (sports). Are we following in their footsteps? One great historian said that those who ignore the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. Think on the state of our nation and its worship of sports! What should we truly value?