

## “Sports Fight”

I figured it was just a matter of time before someone took a swing at me. I’ve lost enough fights in my lifetime to know when it’s about to go down, and on this rainy Saturday night in San Diego, my guard was on high. The New York Jets were about to end the Chargers season with an overtime playoff victory, and as the game winning field split the uprights, the air that rushed out of the stadium was filled with rage – a rage was looking for anything that wore Jets green to unleash upon. As the Jets sideline exploded onto the field, my Jets hat slipped quietly into my pocket, my smile contained, my eyes locked on the ground below as I snuck out into the misty night.

On the way out, weaving gingerly through the mass of angry Charger fans, dozens of fights erupted – some between Jets and Chargers fans, others between anyone over anything. But none of it fazed me. Only when I saw the face of a ten year old child painted with terror as two men flailed drunken punches at each other did I ask myself, how did I become so desensitized to this all?

Violence at sporting events is usually reduced to the old reliables: testosterone and beer. It’s nothing new. I grew up in New York, where an integral part of going to Madison Square Garden or Giants Stadium was scanning the stands for the fights. But every year there seems to be a new, more terrifying example of the escalating violence among fans, between players, and as we all saw, even between players and fans.

The Pistons-Pacers melee in Detroit months ago was frightening. It was shocking and repulsive to see players charging into the stands, fists flying. Spectators coming down onto the court. Beer and chairs raining onto players and fans alike. Not a soul to maintain or restore order. All of this was like nothing we’ve ever seen. But it should have surprised no one.

## FANS, FIGHTS, AND FOX SPORTS NET

When you look at the arc of how sports, and fans interaction with the games, has progressed (or regressed, for that matter), what happened in Detroit arrives at a regrettable, yet logical conclusion. Fans are closer to the action than ever both, whether it's physically inside the arenas and stadiums of all major sport or their perceived intimacy with the athletes themselves. New stadiums are built each year aimed at enhancing the fan experience. Seats are nearly on top of the action, with little between spectator and athlete. The idea of the "6<sup>th</sup> Man" and the home court advantage have led fans to believe that they are more than just spectators, but actually part of the game itself.

With 24-hour sports networks and the Internet, player's actions and words are dissected over and over again. Salaries in all the major sports continue to grow astronomically high, matched only by soaring ticket prices. Athletes are held to task not only for what they make, but also for what fans are forced to pay to see them. When a player drops a pass, misses a shot, strikes out, or worse, fails to sign an autograph, the stage is set for volatile reactions – justified or not.

And it's not only professionals. Some of the most aggressive fans are at colleges, whether students or boosters. Their rah-rah passion for the home team often deteriorates into an f-you tirade for the visitors. Meanwhile, Student-athletes watch the behavior of players in the professional ranks, and can't help but mirror them. The weekend after the Pistons-Pacers incident, a Clemson-South Carolina football game was delayed 10-minutes as State Troopers, security guards, and coaches broke up brawl that had both teams streaming onto the field.

"College kids do look at the professional ranks, and humanity is in many ways – as in sport – filled with copycats," says Tony Samuel, former Head Football Coach at New Mexico University. "I've seen many pre-game incidents, but they've always been able to be broken up by coaches, and broken up quickly. There seems to be an enhanced mentality of violence that's accepted more socially."

Violence within the games is age old. There were as many bench-clearing brawls in Babe Ruth's day as there are in Barry Bond's. But some line was crossed when Toronto maple Leaf Tie Domi fought a fan that jumped into the penalty box in 2001. Or when a father and son stormed the field and attacked Kansas City first base coach Tom Gamboa in 2002. Or when a Texas Ranger reliever threw a chair at fans in Oakland last September. Or when Ron Artest took that fateful sprint into the stands in Detroit.

### RED HOOK, RIGHT HOOK?

"Alcohol is almost always at the root of fan misbehavior," Richard Lapchick, among America's leading sports sociologists, noted in an interview with USA Today. "It's consistent with other aspects of life, where the potential for conflict is exponentially ratcheted up by alcohol."

Poor, defenseless beer. There is no question that alcohol contributes to sports fan violence. But it's a dangerous over simplification. At the tender age of 30, I can still remember when Stadiums sold beer for the entire game. These days, it's tough to find one that sells beer after the third quarter. Still, beer has been a natural part of sporting events since sporting became an event. A battery being tossed at a player has not.

We live in a more violent world. Blame it on video games, music, movies, or whatever it is the red states are attacking this month if you want. Point out that the nuclear family is disintegrating, or that Daddy doesn't love you, or that your doublewide didn't have a yard. The bottom line is our boundaries for violence have become increasingly elastic.

### CELEBRITY

American heroes are harder and harder to come by. We live in an era where our Presidents are crooked, our movie stars are fly by night, and our Athletes, are simply human. Soon to be Basketball Hall-of-Famer Charles Barkley's famous "I Am Not A Role Model" commercial touched upon the trouble of athlete as hero in 1993.

“I am not a role model... parents should be role models,” he said in the Nike spot, released not long after he spat in the direction of a heckling fan in New Jersey only to have it hit a little girl. The commercial, like the spitting incident, received national headlines, and is as relevant today as it was ten years ago.

As a fan, I pay for the absurdly priced ticket. I buy the jersey. I MAKE the athlete who he is. Because of their unfathomable salaries and super human ability, fans expect athletes to be everything, to everybody, at once.

At the same time, athletes feel overburdened with unrealistic expectations. Yet, their talent has offered them privilege they otherwise never would have received, providing an often insulated pathway to the pros.

To the fan, it appears that many players feel no obligation or appreciation for those that fuel the league. To the player, it appears that many fans believe they own them, and that having a personal life or a bad game is unacceptable. This shared disillusionment, when added to an ever-growing violent society and sprinkled with beer, creates a volatile and increasingly unpredictable mix.