

# SPORTS FOR SALE

by Seán Sheehan

An esteemed U.S. judge was once asked which section of the morning paper he opened first. Expected to say world or national news, he shocked everyone by answering “sports.” “I prefer to read of man’s accomplishments,” the judge explained, “before I read of his failures.”

Sports have long held a special place in our hearts.

Besides occupying the dreams and aspirations of millions of kids and grown-ups alike, our history books are full of tales of the underdog overcoming insurmountable odds to achieve success—the classic American dream.

From Kirk Gibson’s game-winning home-run in the injured slugger’s only 1988 World

Series appearance, to

Michael Jordan’s rise (after being cut from his high school team) to become the greatest basketball player of all time, sports legend represents the ideal that any dream is achievable.

At least it did. Like the American dream itself, our precious sports lore is at risk of being swallowed by the ever-growing shadow of hyperconsumerism.

## Turning Stadiums into Shopping Malls

Madison Avenue is now the dominant influence on American sports. The primary focus of professional sports has shifted from showcasing skill and competition to creating a forum to sell more stuff. Athletes hire agents to cut deals with fashion vendors; team owners employ lawyers to cut deals for taxpayer-subsidized stadiums; advertisers cut deals to plaster every arena with sales pitches. Amidst all the hype, the true joy of the game is disappearing.

Have you been to a game lately? Was the action lost behind the eight-foot walking Pepsi bottle, dozens of concession stands, and hundreds of ads hanging from every nook and cranny (and soon to be on players’ uniforms)? “The modern ballpark is much like today’s airports and the Internet,” says Indiana University Professor Mark Rosentraub. “They are filled with glitzy shops, first class seating, exclusive clubs, and the opportunity to capitalize on the disposable wealth of a captive population.”

## Pitching Balls or Products?

We frequently hear about record salaries and profits in pro sports. Just as CEOs’ salaries have skyrocketed compared to their workers, elite athletes and owners are acquiring wealth much faster than the flat wages of concessions and maintenance staff. My grandfather reacted to the news of Jim Rice becoming baseball’s first \$2 million man by shouting “not even the President of the United States makes that kind of money!” That was in the mid-1980s. Now, top players receive seven or eight times as much for a season’s work.

But those mammoth salaries pale beside the sums athletes pocket hyping products. In 1998, Michael Jordan collected \$35 million from the Bulls and \$45 million from plugging shoes, drinks, cars, cologne, phone service, batteries, clothes, and food. If money talks, those dollars say His Airness is first and foremost an ad skill, and only secondarily, a professional athlete.

The “spend more now!” hype is not limited to the Big Four sports, either. Six of the 10 most profitable athlete-endorsers are golfers or tennis players. Auto racing (if your loose definition of “sport” includes fossil fuel burning contests) has long since corrupted its participants into becoming speeding billboards. Even soccer’s 1999 World Cup’s historic moment of euphoria, when Brandi Chastain drilled the game-winning penalty kick and ripped off her jersey to



ANNA WHITE

## MORE IS BETTER, EXCESS IS BEST

The marketing of fashion, footwear and endless paraphernalia through the lens of professional sports fuels unsustainable resource consumption. The industry’s preoccupation with the construction and demolition of massive “single-sport” stadiums is an equally harmful practice. Consider this:

- ★ While many Roman stadiums were used for centuries, we’ve already razed several facilities built in the 1970s.
- ★ 23 new stadiums have been built for National Football League use in the last decade alone. Only seven teams play in stadiums more than 10 years old.
- ★ Since the mid-1980s, state and local governments have spent \$7 billion to build stadiums for teams in the four major sports leagues.
- ★ Stadium subsidies upwards of \$200 million for the Baltimore Ravens, \$325 million for the Cincinnati Bengals, and \$400 million for the Seattle Seahawks seem particularly wasteful, when one considers that hundreds of millions of public dollars also paid for adjacent baseball parks this decade.
- ★ Football teams play an average of eight home games per year—making the case for single-sport facilities weak, to say the least.
- ★ 30 conventional stadiums emit over 430,000 metric tons of greenhouse gases each year—more than the entire nation of Sierra Leone.

—Seán Sheehan

## Readers Respond

reveal a Nike sports bra, is tainted by the lingering question of whether she had scripted the stunt to add value to her endorsement deal with Nike. Within a day of their victory, Chastain and her teammates also began appearing in our living rooms, urging us to fly to Disneyland.

### Disillusioned Dreams

Not only does the commercialistic tidal wave drown out the game's excitement, it distracts us from the fact that some athletes are model citizens working to better society. Wouldn't it be thrilling if we heard more about players like professional soccer's Eddie Pope, who forfeited a cushy contract in Europe so he could work with inner-city kids in the States? Or athletes like Eric Davis, Chris Zorich, and Mo Vaughn, who've started organizations to mentor youth and address other social issues?

Perhaps the real hope lies in the revitalization of neighborhood and community-level sports. The 1994 baseball strike sparked an interest in high school, college, and minor league ball that continued to grow after the strike, as fans found respite from the pricey, supercommercialized games. Local sports reinforce our sense of place and demonstrate that we can find inspiring role models right in our own communities. When the girl-next-door breaks into an all-boy team and pitches them to a city championship, we are energized to think: building a new American dream may be a huge challenge, but anything's possible.

—*Seán Sheehan is the Director of Network Outreach and Internet Programs for the Center for a New American Dream*

### Living Legacy

ALOHA. I'm requesting a supply of *Enough!* Summer issues for my own distribution on O'ahu. I've just now had time to sit down and read through it. [It's] great to see Betsy Taylor commenting so freely on the cover about the most obscene fragments of Western culture. And Anna White's article reminded me of the comment made by the late, great Joe Dominguez. "The purpose of our economic system," he snidely yet seriously said, "is to prevent people from being satisfied with their own lives, lest they not be interested in the bigger, better, more politically-correct lives they can have by buying the 'stuff' which the system demands they consume."

**Rich Weigel**  
Aiea, HI

### Much-Needed Redesign

I WORK WITH PATCH ADAMS, as his partner in his fundraising performances and lectures. Yesterday, he showed me the packet of informational material you sent him, and I was delighted! I live in Illinois, where myself and other members of an experimental music-theater group have organized a little school for the past eight years, called the School for Designing a Society. The school is attended by some 20 people, aged 17 and over (up to age 80), with the idea of giving themselves time and tools to design a society based on their desires. Your[s] looks like a wonderful design project—both critical and pro-active.

I know the people who pass through here would be inspired by what you're doing, and would want to help and to participate.

Thank you,  
**Susan Parenti**  
School for Designing a Society  
Urbana, IL

### Public Resistance

THE CHOICE TO LIVE SIMPLY may be based on many factors: economic prudence or necessity,

ethical or religious beliefs, environmentalism, social justice, or any combination of these, as each overlaps with the others.

Regardless of the motivation and degree of commitment, one common challenge that each of us likely faces arises not from the inconvenience of the choices themselves, but rather, from the persistent and often hostile resistance projected by those we would normally depend upon for support. It's ironic that often the largest hurdle to implementing and then maintaining some "simplifying" practice is not the act itself, but rather the opposition it is likely to induce in a neighbor, relative, co-worker or friend.

The 31 flavors of "hipness" assumed by mainstream society, be they preteens or Baby Boomers, may represent the greatest marketing triumph of the latter decades. The emblems of the alternative lifestyle have been so effectively appropriated by Madison Avenue, that advertisers have actually become quite adept at manufacturing new ones.

Hopefully, progressive movements such as CNAD will provide a hedge against such trends.

**Paul Mack**  
Warrenville, IL

### Just Getting By

THANKS FOR SENDING THE MATERIALS on the New American Dream. It looks like you are doing some terrific work. There is only one thing I would question.

While there may be quite a few who have discretionary income, it's my observation that many people don't. Just by observing friends and family, it would seem that many people are struggling to get by.

Of course, my perspective is probably skewed, living as I do in one of the most expensive parts of the country. [But] it would be interesting to see a study on what percentage of this country is "just getting by."

**Terry Crystal**  
Cambridge, MA