

AN INTERVIEW WITH BOB RYAN

**Public Perspective:** How healthy, as you see it, is the enterprise of college and professional sports, where big money and big audiences are at issue?

**Bob Ryan:** I think that overall, sport is still very healthy. People have long wondered if there will be a saturation point—at which the consumer simply finds himself unable to pay, whether it's at the box office directly, for cable television, or for pay-per-view, which is the new frontier. There have been doomsayers for at least twenty years warning that we're reaching a point where ticket prices have become so high as to lose audience. Of course you do lose people at every increment—but so far not enough to have the thing fall apart. The money is still there. Maybe someday it'll come down like the most monumental house of cards, but clearly we haven't reached that point.

**PP:** Attendance at major league sports has been steadily rising. For example, baseball attendance, 20 million in 1960, was up to 56 million in 1990.

**BR:** And correspondingly, the minor leagues have skyrocketed in the last several years. So baseball, in that sense, is healthy. In the case of football, I have a personal feeling—maybe it's a secret wish—that its decline has begun. The fact is, however, that the NFL's numbers do not support that. Pro football still is the #1 preferred sport. There are any number of NFL cities where you cannot get a ticket, where the tickets are passed on in the wills, and so forth. The betting aspect is the reason; there's no question that that's the extra layer which puts football ahead of baseball. The NBA is enjoying unprecedented popularity and financial success, and the NHL, which is a very close-knit, insular society lacking major television money, fills at least 90% of the capacity of its arenas. While it cannot get the television exposure, it has learned to live with this fact. Those are your four major American team sports, and the four leagues have to be considered healthy.

**PP:** CBS News and The New York Times did a survey this Spring in which they asked a number of questions on sports. At that time, the focus was on baseball. "Do you think the typical major league baseball player generally makes too much money, too little money, or do you think their incomes are about right?," the survey asked. Seventy-one percent of the public said too much, only 19% about right. Then it asked if the owners made too much money, and only 56% said they did. That's an unusual pair of findings. Typically, if you mention moguls or owners, the public is especially inclined to say they

make too much, but here more faulted the players than the owners.

**BR:** I think there's clearly something in the air. I'll give you my home turf as exhibit A. The inability of the Boston Red Sox to live up on the field to their status at the pay window has caused a great deal of resentment and bitterness in the Boston sports fan. In the 26 years I've lived in Boston, I've never seen people take it so personally. They're angry that the players are making this money because they aren't producing, and they're focusing the anger on the General Manager, Lou Gorman, whom they see as an uninformed buffoon who gave away the store. Yet, the problem is not so much the money per se, as that it's going to people who aren't producing. Besides this, while there's a lot of anger, it doesn't translate into poor box office results. The Red Sox had tremendous advance sales and people are still coming out; the team is going to draw 2.6 million+ in

the smallest ballpark in major league baseball. If the Red Sox had paid the huge salaries but were winning, I don't think there'd be any resentment at all among the fans. Lou Gorman would be hailed as a visionary who had recognized a need, addressed the problem, and spent the money.

The worst crime a team can commit in the eyes of the fans is not the Red Sox's crime of paying over-

sized salaries to what turns out to be the "wrong" people—it is the *refusal* to spend money to address an obvious need. In Baltimore, the fans feel that management has another agenda, other than trying to win a championship, that it puts profit above all else, including winning. That's the unpardonable crime, and the Orioles' owner, Mr. Eli S. Jacobs, is viewed as totally penurious. People cannot wait to have the team sold to someone more willing to spend money. Baltimore fans feel that their loyalty is clear and unquestioned, and that they deserve a better product. As for the Red Sox, at least their management tried. That's an important distinction. Yet even Baltimore continues to draw well....

What's the bottom line? Is it that the game itself is sufficiently compelling, that people recognize that an afternoon or evening at the ballpark has a particular charm? Despite all the grouching at the water cooler the next day in the office or in the shop, when the game comes on at night they're still watching on TV or listening on the radio. They're still following the standings. And they're still, when they have the opportunity, enjoying their evening at the ballpark.

**PP:** If I can take an example from another area, some people in political circles worry about the tremendous increase in business executive salaries. They argue that the American public isn't envious and is perfectly happy to have an executive

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## **The Popular Culture: Sports in America/Ryan continued**

who is seen as really doing something, make a bundle. But when very ordinary executives make multi-million dollar salaries, even when their firms aren't doing well—that causes real resentment. But I take it that you don't see much of this with regard to the big paychecks that now go to middle-of-the-pack professional athletes?

**BR:** People have just gotten used to the idea that there's a great deal of money available for athletes now. People recognize now that the scale is higher and therefore that a guy who hits .250 can make a million dollars a year. It wasn't all that long ago, you may recall, that Pete Rose's quest in life was to become the first \$100,000 singles hitter. The numbers have all changed. I think the pressure really comes more on the big-name guys, who are getting the attention for being paid a lot and who have to produce. It's the Darryl Strawberrys, the Roger Clemens, the Jose Cansecos of the world who consume the public's interest, not the utility infielder who is making what is still an awful lot of money.

People say "the average fan can't relate to these players anymore." Well, I don't know. In 1950 the three biggest names in baseball were Ted Williams (Boston), Joe DiMaggio (New York), and Stan Musial (St. Louis). All three were each making in the vicinity of \$100,000. Well, what was an average American worker making in a year, \$6,000 or \$7,000, and they were still able to buy cars and houses, and take little vacations. Gas was 25 cents a gallon. Could these workers relate to a man making \$100,000? I remember growing up in the fifties: \$100,000 was just unimaginable then, but of course it's hardly that for most people today. When Babe Ruth made his \$80,000 in 1931, he uttered his famous line about having a better year than President Hoover had. His \$80,000 salary put him in an extraordinarily small company of the truly wealthy. I don't know that intimate contact with the big stars was ever there at all, socially or spiritually. Probably not much has changed.

You cited the CBS survey finding that 71% feel the players are getting paid too much. But the follow-up question is: Does this mean they're not following what the players are doing? Does it mean they're not watching the games if there's an opportunity; and if there's a choice between watching a summer rerun or three innings of their local team's game, they're not going to watch those innings, because they are outraged by the ridiculousness of the salaries? Not at all. Fans' interest hasn't been affected. The guy will watch the game just as he did in the past. In fact, in some cases, the data show attention is up. The American Way of Life is to complain, complain, complain—and then indulge in the same things which produced the original complaint.

When you go to a ballgame, you find a lot of verbal heat focused on certain individuals; sometimes this is because of the money they're getting, but much more often it's not their salary that's at issue. For example, Jose Canseco of the Oakland A's, either stupidly or willingly, has chosen to live a highly public life, and he's done things guaranteed to bring him attention—whether it's his transgressions behind the wheel or things he has said and done as a player. He lives a larger than life existence, and with that comes all kinds of baggage which he brings to the plate in every city he goes. This is why he's such a draw. People spend money just to yell at Jose Canseco. There have always been players like that. He is the lightning rod ballplayer; other teams' fans love to razz him, sometimes good-naturedly, sometimes viciously, but they're always interested in what he's up to. He can silence them with one swing of the bat, and as he walks out he either holds up the celebrated one-finger salute, or waves to them and takes a bow. The "social contract" between players and fans is here, I think, being honored by both parties. Jose is an affable villain, if you will; fans enjoy giving it to him, and he enjoys giving it back.

**PP:** Turning to a different part of this question of sports and public reactions to them, in a Gallup poll way back in 1937 people were asked what sport they like most to watch: baseball was clearly in front, football and basketball way back. The same question asked in 1948 and 1960 got the same answer. But after 1960, there was a big change: Now football is way ahead, baseball well back. What has caused this?

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**BR:** Standard answer #1 for the rise of football is the perfect marriage of television and football in the Sixties. The first glamour team of that era was the Green Bay Packers. Their head coach, Vince Lombardi, was marketed as a general.

The Packers tapped into that mindset of the American people who have always worshipped the great generals, going back to Washington and right up through MacArthur. Lombardi was successfully portrayed as heir to that military tradition—something made easier by the fact that football and the military are completely linked in lingo and in mentality. Lines such as, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing," were attributed to Lombardi. He seemed to represent to Americans how they liked to have themselves viewed: as tough, resourceful, and unyielding. Lombardi is the one who contributed this thought to football: if you can lie down you can sit, if you can sit you can walk, if you can walk you can run, and if you can run you can *play*. Another quote attributed to one of his players was, "He treats all of his players the same. . . like dogs."

Another thing which really helped football was the NFL Films—the wonderful way they portrayed each game as a dramatic showpiece. They attached romance to this violent game, and a whole generation grew up viewing football in a

positive light. Also, Pete Rozell's election as NFL commissioner turned out to be a brilliant stroke. He was a public relations-oriented person, and he constructed a tremendous public relations machine. The league office hired quality people who knew how to get their message out.

At the same time, the rise and transformation of basketball was hurting baseball. Basketball has been responsible for a lot of baseball's image problems, not to mention how it has siphoned off talent in every major urban market—not only the best black athletes, but the best white athletes as well. Today the rarest thing in baseball is to find a good player from a major urban market other than Los Angeles. If you check baseball rosters from 30, 40, or 50 years ago, guys came from Detroit, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Chicago—from the city itself. They do not come from those locales anymore. They play basketball, or even football, but they play basketball first.

At the same time, baseball was hurting itself. It ignored things that bothered many fans. The game was allowed to become much too stationary. It permitted itself to become seen as an old-timers slowed-down sport. Defense became just too predominant. The latter bottomed out in 1968, when the Cardinals' Bob Gibson had an earned run average of 1.12, and 13 shutouts in his 22 victories. Carl Yastrzemski won the batting title in the American League with the lowest average in the century—.301. He was the only .300 hitter in baseball. By the time baseball responded, it had lost a lot of ground.

**PP:** Earlier you cited betting as playing a big part of football's popularity.

**BR:** If you speak with any expert in Las Vegas he will explain the enormity and intensity of betting on football among the millions of really dedicated gamblers. There's no question that betting and football go hand in hand. The mechanics of football betting are a very simple thing: the point spread is very easy to understand. With the point spread, field goals and missed extra points have people hanging on the plays. Since games are only once a week, every one becomes an event. Yes, gambling has had a tremendous effect. Baseball's a bad betting game, you really bet on pitchers instead of teams. If betting were not such a big part of football interest, I think baseball would still be comfortably ahead.

**PP:** You don't see something else happening out there in the society? Are we changing our minds about the kind of sport we're looking for?

**BR:** I would have predicted 15 years ago that we'd be seeing a clear decline in football interest, as people began recognizing the brutality of this game. The injuries, that are so inevitable, are really unsettling. If you analyze the sport on an intellectual basis, it has just too many negatives, compared to baseball and basketball. I thought we were heading, to borrow a phrase, to a kinder, gentler era in sports. I'm surprised that football's holding up so well, especially since baseball interest is resurgent since the Sixties.

**PP:** The public has more information about the private lives of public figures—politicians, entertainers, and athletes—today than in the past. Is this something the public—in the case of sports, your readers—are demanding, or is it driven by the media? And, what do you think the impact is of so much attention to athletes' "private" lives?

**BR:** Competition, in television especially, accounts for this phenomenon. I don't think the public, really, is all that interested. Of course, in the case of a person such as Jose Canseco, when it can be accurately reported that he was seen leaving the hotel where Madonna was staying, people are amused and interested. That level of harmless gossip is one thing. At the same time, I think that people ought to know if a player is into drugs, or doing other things really harmful to himself or others.

There's been an inevitable rise in the inherent friction between athletes and those who cover them, as a result of the increased attention to players' personal lives. It seems to have taught the athletes to distrust and fear the press, because they don't ever really know when *they're* going to be the ones reported in a manner that goes beyond how they play the game. It's inevitable that they're going to approach the press with an attitude that's a lot different from the good old chummy days when Babe Ruth could run through a train with a guy chasing him with a knife—and this never be reported. Now every little tiff on a plane, in an airport terminal, or in a dugout gets a headline. In the old days, that just wasn't done, let alone stories on who is stepping out with whose wife. The sports media have clearly become more intrusive, and this has led to a more adversarial relationship between them and athletes.

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