On Economic Inequality and My Inner Child

December 10, 2009 By Paul Dalton

Warning: No HIV Content Below:

A dear, dear friend of mine Carol posted this to me on Facebook recently: 'One day, Paul Dalton, we will have to have a conversation about how you reconcile your anti-capitalist tendencies with your love for Major League Baseball. I am curious about this dichotomy.' This is a common, and totally understandable question for the people I run with, who don't exactly embrace the world of sports, particularly the big money, professional ones.

I was actually thinking about this last night while trying to get to sleep. While baseball is far and away my sport of choice, I follow football, hockey and college basketball as well. Part of the answer is I simply enjoy the organic drama of sport and the physicality and athleticism.

I generally fight against disparity- economic, social, political, gender- you name it- my politics are all about leveling the playing field, sharing the wealth if you will. So, how is it I root for the Yankees, the greatest symbol of disparity in sports? The Yankees are the richest, most successful franchise in major US sports. They have the most money, they spend the most money and they win the most. They had a payroll last year topping $200 million dollars, and christened their $1.5 billion stadium with their 27th World Series title. The Saint Louis Cardinals are second with 10.

Sports for me are a way of connecting with myself as a child. The Yankees of the 1970s were among the first things outside of my immediate life (family, school) that I really cared about as a kid. As a 10 year old, the 1977 Yankees became the center of my life for the summer. Whenever possible, I would listen to games on the radio, and I never missed the rare opportunity to see them on TV.

As I grew older, I came to care about many thing outside of myself, many of them much more important than sports. The nuclear arms race, war, gender equality, homelessness, Apartheid- these things began to animate me, to drive me. Music and politics became the focus of my life. I found Punk- a milieu where music and activism sat well, if not always comfortably together. Sports and I drifted apart.

The mid 90s Yankees brought be back to sports. Following their rise from over a decade of futility to dominance was beyond compelling. These Yankees of Derek Jeter, Andy Pettitte, Jorge Posada and Joe Torre were an easy team to love- talented, successful and home grown.

Watching a Yankees game- or a Syracuse Orange basketball game, an Alabama Crimson Tide

football game or a Buffalo Sabres hockey game, helps me connect with my most child-like self, to tap in to that part of me that never grew up. I know that is pretty pop-psychology/self-help-ish, but so bit it.

The original question though was how do I reconcile my antipathy to capitalism with my love for Major League Baseball and, I would add the Yankees. Mostly it boils down to 1) I don't really care about economic inequality in sports and 2) I think baseball is economically the fairest major sport. Major League Baseball has a very strong players union- the strongest in sports. Efforts in other sports to 'level the playing field' have resulted in less competitive balance, more money for the owners and less security for the players.

I abhor inequality. I just can't bring myself to care about it in the context of professional sports. I am much more concerned that the top 10% of American families own about 70% of the wealth, than I am that the Yankees payroll was over 5 times higher than the lowest. Sure I think Alex Rodriguez is way over paid, but nothing compared to Warren Buffett or any of the folks who ran Lehman Brothers into the ground. The inequality I care about is the kind that leads to people with HIV not having access to life saving drugs, not the kind that leads the Minnesota Twins to trade or lose their best players.

I won't go in to the economics of baseball and how they do, or do not directly affect the fairness of the game. It is complex and frankly a bit beyond me. Also this post is already way too long.

So, in short how do I reconcile my love of Major League Baseball with my anti-capitalist politics? I don't try to. Baseball is my refuge from important things, the space in which I let myself simply enjoy the action- not worrying about the problems of the world. Is there a contradiction here? Probably, yes- but it is one I am comfortable with.

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