

League of Fans'
SPORTS MANIFESTO

Calling All Sports Reformers

Report XII in a Series of XII

*League of Fans is a Sports Reform Project Founded by Ralph Nader to Encourage
Civic Responsibility in Sports Industry & Culture*

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The Challenge: Overcoming Sports Syndrome

“Sport is the most dynamic activity in the world today, with the potential to contribute powerfully to a better world. ... The power and influence of sport is only just being understood.”

--Robert Davies

Sports Syndrome.

That’s what Howard Cosell called it.

It’s a condition that describes people who are diehard sports fans at heart and prefer the blind sanctification of sports to a comprehensive analysis of sports’ impact – pro and con -- on our culture. They tend to resist virtually all sports reform efforts.

Those beset with this affliction too often look at sports through the starry eyes of their youth, when, from their perspective, all was well with the world of sports. Unfortunately, there are too many Americans afflicted with Sports Syndrome today.

Those of us involved in sports, interested in sports, impacted by sports (that’s basically all of us, isn’t it?), and yes, those of us who love sports, need to stop looking at sports with such a romantic eye. We need to get rid of the taboo against being systematically critical of SportsWorld.

Too often, sports activists and reformers are seen as being too harsh. The thinking goes something like this, “Chill out, it’s just sports, a harmless, fun and entertaining respite from life matters that are more serious.”

The fact is, sport is a huge industry and a major cultural practice. It impacts our society in numerous, significant ways, across all demographic categories. As such, we must look at sports seriously, and conscientiously examine today’s sports system and infrastructure so that we can work to enhance the positives and mitigate the negatives of sports.

Robert Davies, the founder and former chief executive of the International Business Leaders Forum, an organization dedicated to promoting global social responsibility, believed deeply in the power of sports to make a positive difference. He felt sport could help facilitate changes beyond the playing fields and locker rooms.

Before his death in 2007, Davies would regularly tell corporate leaders around the world that the visibility and popularity of sports, at both the local and global level, provided opportunities to improve health, develop communities, boost education and literacy, empower girls and women, and boost physical activity levels for disabled and low-income athletes.

Davies felt we all had a responsibility to make that vision a reality. He was particularly tough on journalists. Davies once told an international conference of journalists and

media representatives that “high profile global sporting events are seen as a frontier for raising issues of injustice and social responsibility” and that the media have a responsibility to explore that frontier.

Unfortunately, a majority of today’s sportswriters, broadcasters, and sports media executives continue to suffer from Sports Syndrome, and thus, have heeded Davies’ call.

It is the Sports Syndrome approach toward sports that is responsible for the sports department at newspapers and television networks traditionally being referred to as the “toy department.” Interestingly, a lot of sportswriters describe their department this way as well. And as a result, they produce a lot of “journalistic pabulum,” as sports sociologist George Sage describes it.

But not all of them.

Red Smith, perhaps the most famous sports columnist in American history, spent most of his career writing from a “toy department” mindset. However, he completely changed his approach to his job in the final years of his career. In the last interview he gave before his death in 1982, Smith had this to say about the responsibility of sports journalists:

My early feelings were that people went to sports events to have fun and that they picked up the sports section for the same reason. I thought it was my job to entertain. Often I just tried to do my soft-shoe dance and stay within the bounds of truth and propriety. For years I never spoke out against such controversial topics as the reserve system in baseball. I speak out more readily today and approach these topics with much more conviction than I ever did before. Listen, I believe that any sportswriter who thinks the world is no bigger than the outfield fence is not only a bad citizen of the world but also a lousy sportswriter, because he has no sense of proportion. He should be involved in the world in which he lives.

Evan Weiner is one of today’s best sports journalists. He consistently produces high quality interpretive and analytical journalism. He had this to say about the role of the sports media.

“It’s great to watch a game and report on it, but democracy deserves more than a box score when it comes to scrutinizing the business of sports,” according to Weiner.

While undoubtedly we have some quality sports journalists who moved well beyond the “toy department” mentality, we still need a lot more muckraking sports journalists who are free of the Sports Syndrome affliction.

The world of academia also deserves its share of criticism for the proliferation of Sports Syndrome. Our country’s academics have, as a whole, chosen to view sports as frivolous and not worthy of in-depth scholarly inquiry. This is highly irresponsible given the huge impact sports have on our culture -- socially, culturally and economically. One of the

missions of our institutions of higher education is to provide leadership on important issues impacting society.

One good example of a university taking a leadership role in this regard is Cal-Berkeley's course, "Priorities Under Pressure: A Critical Assessment of How the University's Core Mission is Affected by Intercollegiate Athletics." Generally, however, our institutions of higher education are dropping the ball when it comes to a serious examination of sports in society.

Too many politicians are also afflicted with Sports Syndrome. As a result, they give professional sports teams sweetheart stadium deals while allowing physical education and intramural sports programs to be slashed, as just one example of misplaced priorities. They also continue to allow professional sports leagues to operate as self-regulated monopolies. Politicians need to move away from hero-worshipping spectator sports fans to pushing for more opportunities in participatory sports for their constituents – at all ages.

Those in the fields of economics, law, and sociology must also take a portion of the blame for the lack of a sophisticated approach to sport policy analysis and development in this country.

There is nothing comparable in the United States that impacts our way of life as much as sport does, yet receives such a lack of serious analysis and inquiry. We have hundreds of public policy "think tanks" in the areas of politics, health care, economics, the military, energy, foreign policy, education, etc., yet only a few small entities that would be considered sport policy "think tanks" in any meaningful way. That needs to change.

As a society, it is thinking that sports are nothing more than fun and games, and thus, not worthy of serious analysis -- that has continued to haunt the development of an honest, in-depth exploration of modern sport and its social, cultural, economic, health, and legal ramifications.

Together, we need to overcome Sports Syndrome and the apathy that abounds when it comes to sports and sports issues. As demonstrated throughout this Manifesto, the world of sports is certainly much more than the toy department of life. It deserves the best of what journalism, academia, Congress, and the rest of us have to offer.

"There are so many people in this country who love sports but hate what sports have become," says Dave Zirin, one of our country's most passionate sports activists. "That's an opening for us to actually have an honest discussion about reclaiming sports from those who would use it to pump messages of militarism, racism, sexism, corporate greed. We can go out there with a strong message that says we want to take our sports back, and we would be surprised at the audience we would find."

The Need: Citizenship Through Sports Activism

While League of Fans will continue calling on the sports media, academia, Congress, parent associations, and other groups to seriously look at the issues and problems in sports today, we can't count on these institutions and organizations to do this important work for us.

Thus, a big burden falls to the rest of us who have a stake in sports. America needs more sports activists and reformers. Change agents, if you will. All significant social change begins not with government, or corporations, but with citizens – we the people.

The tremendous civil rights changes in this country weren't handed down by political or business leaders. Rather people pushed them up – citizens stepped up, driven by courage and an intrinsic drive to act, to fight for what they passionately believed in, for what they saw as the right thing. The same goes for the sports activists and reformers throughout history that have made the world of sports better for us today.

These sports activists and reformers declared that the way things had been in the past, and were in the present, was not going to be how things were going to be in the future.

You can be sure that many of the sports activists from the past, people like Jackie Robinson, Curt Flood, and Billie Jean King, were told by friends and relatives, “Don't bother, it's just the way things are.” Thankfully, those fighters for justice from the past ignored those types of comments. They courageously moved forward and made a difference. Our country is a better place today because of them.

You don't have to have a lot of power, status, or money to make a difference in your community, or even nationally.

Rosa Parks' role as an activist is a well-worn example from the civil rights uprisings in the '50's. But her actions and impact are still instructive: Do what you can, with what you have, and where you're at; no matter your status in life. Parks, a seamstress at the time, was quoted as saying she was “tired of giving in” when asked what her motivations were for refusing to give up her seat on the bus to make room for a white passenger. Later, Congress called her “the first lady of civil rights” and “the mother of the freedom movement.”

It must be fully understood that those with the power and money in sports aren't looking to change the sports models in place today. They're not interested in spending any time or money on the multitude of socio-cultural issues and problems in sports. So, if we wish to take our sports back from the forces of “win-at-all-costs” (WAAC) and “profit-at-all-costs” (PAAC) thinking, we must first understand the historical and sociological context in which sports have evolved to play the role they do in our culture today. Who developed the sport policies that shape our experience of sports and who maintains them?

That is why I strongly recommended the two books I did in the introduction to this Manifesto: *A People's History of Sports in the United States* by Dave Zirin, and *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies* by Jay Coakley. They provide a great foundation for moving forward with your sports activism and reform efforts.

As a nation we need to have a serious conversation about the State of Sports. And it needs to be a soul-based conversation, not one grounded in ego and greed. What's best for the sport? The athlete? The fan? We need to take action – collectively and individually – to make the world of sports more ethical and just for all sports stakeholders.

To succeed, we need to move potential sports reformers along the change continuum – from awareness of the issues and their seriousness, to understanding, acceptance, attitude change, and finally behavior change. We need sports reformers that are well-informed, passionate and active. We need to create a sense of urgency regarding the importance of taking back our sports from the WAAC-and-PAAC-driven power brokers in sports.

As fans and participants, we have a passion for what sports can be at their best. We need to convince our fellow sports stakeholders that sports can be a great arena for challenging unjust practices in our society and creating social change that positively impacts our entire culture. Pushing for more fair and ethical sports policies will make sports more enjoyable as well.

As Zirin says in *What's My Name, Fool? Sports and Resistance in the United States*. “We also have to realize that while these ‘games’ often provide a place where the dominant ideas of our society are reinforced, they can also be sites where those ideas are challenged or downright rejected.”

Fortunately, today's technology makes it easier to communicate with people than at any other time in our history. The Internet and the vast array of social media tools that are now widely available allow people to connect, unify, and organize much more effectively and efficiently than even ten years ago. The uprising in Egypt, and the role the Internet, television (Al Jazeera), and social media tools like Facebook played in organizing protests in that country, are powerful examples of that.

This movement to change what sports can be will ultimately bubble up from the people – and then mainstream sports media will be forced take notice and play a bigger role.

But first, as Zirin says, “Let's get the ideas out there in the oxygen.”

An effective democracy requires active citizenship. That citizenship can take place in many areas. For sports lovers, what better way to make a difference than through sports? That's what we're calling for in this Sports Manifesto: Citizenship through sports activism.

It won't be easy. But it can be an immensely fulfilling undertaking.

For much of his career, newspaper sports editor Lester Rodney was vilified for his columns attacking Major League Baseball for its color line. In fact, his efforts went underappreciated for decades. Finally, toward the end of his life, he started to receive praise and recognition for his fight for social justice in baseball.

During an interview that took place when he was 94, Rodney was asked what he thought about all the late-coming recognition.

“It’s nice, but I don’t make too much of it,” said Rodney. “It just seemed like the right thing to do. We wanted to end the damn ban ... And when you changed baseball at the time, you changed the country.”

In effect, with those comments, Rodney gave all of us our marching orders.

Summon a little courage. Get involved. Pick an issue. Do the right thing.

And help change the country by improving the world of sports.

Unless we step up, the win-at-all-costs (WAAC) and profit-at-all-costs (PAAC) mentalities will prevail, our sports will continue to be hijacked by those with commercial motives, and the beauty of sports will be lost.

Everything we’ve proposed in this Manifesto – and more -- is possible. Throughout the years, there have been some dramatic socio-cultural changes in sports that have positively impacted the country as a whole. How did that happen? By individuals speaking out and taking action – individually and together – with persistence.

As sports lovers – and potentially budding sports activists and reformers -- we can be the creators of our sports destiny. Since all social organization and patterns are socially constructed, social change of almost any kind is possible. We don’t have to be passive actors who accept society’s arrangements as inevitable.

One of the best things about sports is the camaraderie that results from being part of a team, chasing a common goal. Let’s form a powerful team around the vision highlighted in this *Manifesto*, and work together toward the overarching goal of a more democratic, humanistic, healthy, safe – and yes, fun -- world of sports.

One last thing: Let us know how the quest to enhance the positives and mitigate the negatives in sports is going. We at the League of Fans will do the same. As teammates we can help each other.

Okay. It’s time to get moving. And let’s be courageous in our quest. As civil rights activist Rosa Parks said, “You must never be fearful about what you are doing when it is right.”

It's Action Time

"Idealism detached from action is just a dream. But idealism allied with pragmatism, with rolling up your sleeves and making the world bend a bit, is very exciting. It's very real. It's very strong."

Bono, U2 lead singer and philanthropist

"The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal safety, is a miserable creature."

--John Stuart Mill

When it comes to sports, we need to start thinking and acting as citizens, not just fans and sports participants. Consider the last sentence from Red Smith's quote above and replace sportswriter with "fan" or "participant."

"Listen, I believe that any sportswriter who thinks the world is no bigger than the outfield fence is not only a bad citizen of the world but also a lousy sportswriter, because he has no sense of proportion," said Smith in his last interview. "He should be involved in the world in which he lives."

We must think and act locally as well as nationally. We must stand for justice at the local, state and national levels. Any national reform measures will need the fuel of pressures from the grassroots level.

To be an effective sports activist, reformer, or change agent (you pick the term you prefer) at the grassroots level, it's important to open your mind about everything you've learned and currently believe about sports. It's time to relook at sports from a justice and fairness perspective. What's best for all sports stakeholders, not just the wealthy and powerful in SportsWorld? Those in power, more often than not, look at sports – a cherished cultural practice of millions in this country -- from a WAAC (win-at-all-costs) and/or PAAC (profit-at-all-costs) perspective.

Sure, we can still take time to be sports fans and active sports participants. But if we truly care about sport and what it might become for the next generation, we also need to take the time to be sports citizens.

Our choice is simple: Work to change things in sports in order to make them more fair, just and ethical, or accept the weaknesses and serious problems in sports that have preponderantly come about due to WAAC and PAAC thinking and actions.

Reform efforts can be undertaken at any level that interests you and to whatever degree you are capable of devoting time and energy. Not everyone can become a Jackie Robinson or Billie Jean King. But everyone can become an effective sports citizen in their own corner of sports

The powers that be in sports will not push for change in a sports system that gives them every advantage.

Ultimately, however, moral power can overwhelm political and business power.

It's up to us.

A. Action Items

*“A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it a superficial appearance of right.”
--Thomas Paine*

When it comes to sports citizenship, you can get involved as a generalist or specialist. Some sports activists and reformers pick one sport, or a single issue, to give their time, energy, and sometimes money, to. That's fine. They are sports issue specialists. Others work for change on multiple sports issues that they have a passion for. They are sports issue generalists.

While we all have certain sports issues that are most meaningful to us individually, it's important to remember that we are part of a larger movement for a more fair, just and equitable world of sports, and that WAAC and PAAC mindsets in sports threaten that overarching goal. The myopic pursuit of winning and economic self-interest is damaging the spirit and culture of sports at all levels.

Thus, the need for citizenship through sports activism.

What follows is a collection of ideas and potential action items to help start you on your path.

B. General Considerations

*“In the final analysis, changes in sport will be dictated by changes in our society, our needs, values, and perhaps outside influences. Perhaps you will be a catalyst for change in your community.”
--Ronald B. Woods*

- As a budding sports change agent there is one key question to consider when examining the policies, decisions and actions of sports power brokers –whether those power brokers are running the NFL or the local Little League board: “Are they playing fair with -- and considering the interests of -- all stakeholders?” If the answer is “No,” then it's time to get to work.
- Always look for the win-at-all-costs (WAAC) and profit-at-all-costs (PAAC) mentalities that distort the true essence of sports – at all levels, and that are at the root of virtually all contemporary sports problems.

- Determine where you stand on important sports issues as a foundation for your change efforts. Then send your views to the media, legislators and relevant power brokers in sports. Start a letter-to-the-editor campaign on a sports issue you're passionate about. Post your views on websites that are appropriate for your issue.
- In considering your positions on the sports issues important to you, do you see any civic engagement opportunities?
- Take a few minutes to Google "tools for activists" and "tools for reformers." You'll find a wealth of good information for budding sports change agents. There is a plethora of ways to communicate and potentially unify people around good sports reform ideas.
- Turn to social media to find people who are like-minded on today's sports issues and problems. Social media is also a tool to help communicate, organize and gather momentum at the grassroots level.
- Join an established organization that's doing the work your interested in on a particular sports issue. If there isn't an organized effort in your local area consider starting one.
- Push your legislators to call for the creation of a national sports commission that can raise the profile of populist issues at a national level and serve as an outlet and clearinghouse for concerns about contemporary sports issues.
- Organize sports activists in your community through a local town hall meeting.

C. Pursue One or More of the Recommendations Outlined in This Manifesto

As part of this *Sports Manifesto*, we've released 10 special reports; each one focused on an important sports issue that we believe deserves our full attention as a nation. Those issues include: community ownership of professional sports teams; tyrannical coaches, especially at the high school and youth levels; cutbacks in physical education and intramural sports in public schools during a childhood obesity epidemic; the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) cartel in college football; overzealous adults in youth sports; equal opportunity in sports for all Americans, concussions in sports, the increasing commercialization and professionalization in college sports, sports and the media, and the need for a National Sports Commission.

Each of these reports include a list of proposed recommendations for dealing with the issue at hand. Some of the recommendations don't lend themselves to the work of individuals or small groups but others certainly do. If one of the recommendations strikes a chord with you, go for it. League of Fans would love to help. In addition, we will be developing initiatives around some of these recommendations. There's a good chance these initiatives will be able to utilize your involvement. Moreover, if we are not currently pursuing an issue, or potential remedy, that you have a passion for let us know, we'd still be glad to help in any way we can.

In addition to the recommended actions steps outlined within this *Manifesto*, we've listed a handful of potential action steps below – some of them are associated with our

recommendations, but others are additional possibilities for those looking to make the world of sports better.

1. Professional and Big-Time College Sports

*“As sports are not entertainment, neither are they business. Naturally, they are **in part** entertainment and **in part** business. When their essential spirit is corrupted by either the one or the other, the pain of loss is accompanied by disgust.*

--Michael Novak

- Create a “fans’ council” and organize “accountability sessions” with a local professional sports organization, and/or big-time college athletic department in your area. Make the media aware of your efforts. These accountability sessions can be used to make sure the power brokers are fully aware of and understand the concerns of fans and taxpayers.
- Push for legislation in your state that ensures athletes injured while playing for universities and colleges have their medical expenses resulting from those injuries fully covered.
- Consider potential legal options against pro sports franchises and big-time college sports programs that are subsidized by taxpayer dollars yet come up with obscene schemes like requiring personal seat licenses just to earn the right to purchase season tickets.
- Work to end the practice of building taxpayer-financed stadiums and arenas for wealthy owners, at a local or national level.
- Push your Congressional legislators to remove anti-trust protections for professional sports leagues in order to help limit the power of our pro sports cartels.

2. High School and Youth Sports

“Those of us who really love sports are concerned that it be destroyed from being the experience it could be We want to save sports for what it can be.”

--Jack Scott

- Resist the increasing commercialization, professionalization and corporatization of sports at the high school and youth sports levels. Corporations are gradually taking over our high school sports programs through sponsorships. At the youth level, many club sports organizations – with their strong economic interests – have increasingly usurped community youth sports programs. Sport at its core – youth and high school – should be as free from commercial interests as possible. Fight back against creeping commercialization!
 - Fight for “commercial-free zones” in our public schools’ athletic programs.

- Push for “fairness in sports” legislation at the high school and youth levels, e.g., by calling for increased budgets for **physical education** and more sports opportunities for all students, not just elite athletes.
- Work for more safety measures in high school and youth sports, in particular in the areas of performance-enhancing drugs and concussions.
- Demand coaching education programs for all high school and youths sports organizations. These programs would address multiple issues, including eliminating the dehumanizing coaching tactics and behaviors too often prevalent in youth and high school sports.

3. State and Community Level

- Create a state-wide sports reform network comprised of like-minded sports stakeholders. This network could be designed to publicize advance various sports policies, and promote legislation in areas such as concussion prevention and safety, physical education in public schools, etc.
- Develop initiatives to increase **participatory** sports opportunities – at all age levels – in your communtiy. **Spectator** sports are increasingly dominating our experience of sports. This has been detrimental in many areas, including negatively impacting our physical, mental, psychological and spiritual health.

Please contact us with your thoughts, concerns and ideas regarding any current sports issue or problem. One of the objectives of League of Fans is to serve as a clearinghouse for all sports stakeholders on contemporary sports issues.

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About the Author

Dr. Ken Reed is Sports Policy Director for the League of Fans. He is a long-time sports industry consultant, sports studies instructor, sports issues analyst, columnist and author.

Reed is a distance faculty member for the United States Sports Academy and occasionally teaches sports studies courses, including Contemporary Sports Issues, History of Sports, and Sports Sociology.

Reed has long been a strong advocate for quality physical education and sports programs for all students, not just elite athletes. He created the Center for the Advancement of Physical Education (CAPE) for PE4life, a non-profit organization dedicated to making quality daily physical education available to all students, K-12. As director and senior policy analyst for CAPE, he developed numerous position papers, white papers, issue backgrounders, and op-ed columns. He is the author of PE4life's "Blueprint for Change," an overview of the benefits of physical education as well as an action plan for getting our children moving in order to improve wellness, learning and behavior.

A "recovering sports marketer," Reed once was a sports marketing consultant before switching career directions and utilizing his marketing and communications skills in a social marketing role for a variety of sports, fitness and education causes. He has delivered numerous professional development seminars to educators on how physical education, sports, and other forms of physical activity can improve academic performance, decrease behavioral problems and enhance student wellness.

Reed also has served as an executive board member and faculty fellow for the National Institute for Sports Reform, as well as on the board of directors for Positive Coaching, a non-profit whose mission is to promote positive attitudes and behaviors in youth sports. In addition, Reed has served as an advisory board member for Metropolitan State College of Denver's Sports Industry Operations program.

He has published a sports novel targeting young readers, 10-14, called *Sara's Big Challenge*. The book's overarching theme is the importance of being true to yourself. He recently completed *Game Changer*, the inspiring story of Phil Lawler, the "father of the new physical education." Human Kinetics published the book in August 2011. In addition, he has been a sports columnist for several sports magazines. He currently writes a sports issues column for *Mile High Sports* magazine. He won first place in the 2005 Denver Newspaper Guild Awards competition for his sports commentary and was the recipient of the 2011 COAHPERD Sportsmanship Award for his work on fairness and ethics in sports.

Reed holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Denver, a master's degree from Colorado State University (concentration in athletic administration), and a doctorate in sport administration (emphasis sport policy) from the University of Northern Colorado. His doctoral dissertation was a sports policy case study and dealt with the unsavory

aspects of the Major League Baseball expansion process. Reed lettered in baseball and basketball at the University of Denver and has worn many hats in the world of sports, including coach, sports official, scout, manager, and sports talk show host.