

Baseball: An American Game of Intimate Play and Deceit

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Baseball hinges on the metaphoric concept of home. The object of baseball is to 'get home' as frequently as possible. The team that touches 'home' plate more than the other team wins the game. The most significant and explosive form of offense in baseball is a 'home' run. We are always trying to get the runner home or to arrive at home ourselves in baseball. So much of baseball involves what goes on at home-plate.

Conflict and struggle over home, coveting home, and returning home form a central plot in baseball. There are many elements of intimate struggle and intimate collaboration that play out in baseball. I elaborate some of these. -

I hope to illustrate how much of the playing in baseball involves a constant tension between the unmitigated, determined athleticism of a player along with the deceit and seduction of play. Baseball is a game of making intentions hard to read and thus requires close reading. Pitchers, hitters and fielders are all partly playing the role of the Pied Piper who seduces his target to follow him to a tragic outcome for he who falls for the trap. Each player is trying to intimately interpret the intentions of the other. Multiple levels of guessing and second guessing are involved.

For those of us who were brought up on baseball, it is also often linked to moments of intimacy with loved objects or at least objects who were at their best during moments of watching or conversing about baseball. In one sense, baseball is an object of our affection as well as the relational surround linked to that form of play. Winnicott's (1971), "Playing and Reality" was created with these permeable borders in mind regarding play and psychoanalysis.

Pitching, hitting, and intimacy: the art of deception, illusion, and exploiting vulnerability

Like all sports, baseball play is framed by the lines of reality including foul lines; the borders of home plate; the structure of the field; and the rules of play. You will recall Freud's brilliant statement in 1908: "The opposite of what is play is not what is serious. It is what is real."

In baseball, reality is determined by the umpire who calls balls and strikes; he determines who is safe or out at home plate. He is the judge and jury about what is occurring at home plate and all other subsidiary bases. Hitters, pitchers and catchers plead, argue, and decry the umpire's determinations. This intimate squabbling is more a point of emotional release for players since the umpire's perspective and determination is bedrock. It is true, however, that one manifestation of an epistemic shift about reality in physics and the authority with which we determine reality is that some calls in baseball may now be reversed after appeal accompanied by video checking.

At the center of baseball is the drama of the conflict between pitcher, hitter, and catcher over who owns, as it were, home plate. The pitcher and catcher want to own 'home' plate. So does the hitter. The more of home plate that the pitcher can control, the less opportunity that a hitter will have to get good pitches to hit. If the pitcher is to dominate 'home' plate, he needs to ensure that he throws the ball over home plate enough to get a called strike. Pitchers and catchers refer to this kind of pitch location as nibbling at home plate. If the pitcher throws the ball over too large a part of the plate, the

hitter is more likely to “get a good pitch to hit.” So the pitcher and catcher have to have a deep and intimate knowledge of the hitter’s strengths and weaknesses. If the ball is located in the hitter’s “wheelhouse” (another reference to home), he is more likely to get a hit.

The intimacy of intimidation is key. Pitchers “send a message” to hitters if the hitter wants to stand too close to the plate. The pitcher will attempt to brush back a hitter if the hitter wants to control the plate too much and in some instances, hitting the batter with the pitch is necessary to send a message.

So pitchers and catchers, through close observing and reading of the hitter, want to use elements of seduction, illusion, frustration, deceit and dominance to prevent the hitter from making contact with the bat and ultimately reaching home. They study the hitting tendencies of the hitter. What kinds of pitches is the hitter seduced by? What are his tendencies and predilections? For example, is he likely to take a first pitch? If so, it’s a time when the pitcher might be more likely to sneak a pitch by the hitter for a strike.

Pitchers use deception through changing the location and speed of pitches. Pitchers have to foster a culture of unpredictability so that hitters are left guessing. The only exception to this is that knuckleball pitchers generally throw one pitch. Yet that one pitch, the knuckleball is often a mystery with regard to how it will move, including to the pitcher who throws it.

Many great pitchers base their repertoire of pitches off their fastball. Fastballs are the most basic pitch, almost like the background against which all other pitches are set – they travel with movement but not as much movement as off speed pitches and curve balls. Most successful pitchers have to be able to locate their fastball with great accuracy. For example, a pitcher wants to show a fastball to a hitter a few times so that he can deceive him later in the at bat through off speed pitches such as curveballs and changeups. For most pitchers, the fastball is foundational.

Hitters also study pitchers. They want to know the pitcher’s tendencies. What kind of pitch will the pitcher throw at the beginning of a count? What will he throw when he is behind in the count. These are intimate pieces of information because they involve studying vulnerability. Hitters often want to stand at home plate in such a way that they can dominate the plate. They want to punish the pitcher if he throws the ball too much over the plate. He wants to minimize the pitcher’s artful deceit and location of pitches as much as possible.

Hitters also deceive fielders and pitchers by faking a bunt in order to get fielders to move into positions on the field that are advantageous to the hitter. Faking a bunt might also throw the pitcher’s equanimity off. A quite frequent form of deception involves hitters who take a pitch to create a false sense of safety in the pitcher that he can throw that pitch with impunity. Then if the pitcher falls for that deceit, the hitter is waiting to pounce on the pitch. The intimate relationship between hitters and first and third base coaches occurs in developing fakery schemes to make pitchers and fielders worried about particular scenarios that may be opposite to what the hitter and coaches have in mind.

The relatively slow pace of baseball relative to other sports makes this close watching more intimate. There is time to read and to investigate intentionality that is not available in European and American football or in basketball. In those sports close reads occur in a nanosecond. In baseball we can look and internally reflect. While it would be silly to liken it to the self-reflective intermediate space of psychoanalysis, it is in some sense a contemplative sport.

Outfielders work together intimately to study the tendencies of hitters to hit balls to particular parts of

the stadium. Infielders also collaborate to ensure that they are covering as much as the infield as possible. Infielders are no strangers to treachery. They may try to convince a hitter that they are leaning in one direction or the other, enticing the batter to try to hit the ball to another part of the infield.

Baseball then involves a constant tension between earnest intentionality, pure athletic achievement and the deceit and seduction of play. Each player is trying to intimately interpret the intentions of the other.

Some intimate elements of watching and the metawatching of baseball and sports

Sports-watching partly functions as a repository for both idealized and degraded parts of self-experience. Sports as action and fantasy catalyze a variety of nostalgic longings, including wishes to resurrect positive experiences from childhood as well as to create false, idealized fantasies about who we wish we were then and now. Many adults retain longings for a time when play was our job and the suspension of disbelief in sports was a shorter jump from everyday life than the responsibilities and stresses of adult life allow.

Baseball watching then provide collective psychic spaces for regression. For adults who grew up watching baseball they are thrown back to their own idealizing and heroic fantasies about themselves (e.g. "I could have been a contender). There are also regressive fantasies associated with the heroes of their childhood – athletes and of course parents from whom some idealizations are displaced.

Adults take enormous pride in the athletic achievements of their children for reasons intrinsic to the joys of their children's use of their bodies in new and extraordinary ways. Adults also vicariously revisit the play of their childhood through their children's athletic participation. Plato felt that the play of childhood was best captured in the verb, "to leap." While many associate baseball with plodding activity and waiting for action to occur (in contrast to basketball, soccer, football, and hockey), there is gorgeous leaping involved in baseball and it is a deceptively athletically challenging sport. Hitters standing ninety feet away from an often very large human throwing 90-100 miles an hour are in some danger of being hurt.

Athletes become the representatives of our childhood. Baseball players are 'playing' for a living which we not only vicariously identify with but also envy. Of course it has become more difficult to suspend our disbelief about the illusory elements of playing since the mercantilism of sports invades our lives all the time. To understand sports over the fifty years, one really has to understand elements of contract law and most avid sports fans are quite knowledgeable about the nuance of athletes' contracts.

Sports also contain degraded elements of self that result from attempted reconciliation between playful fantasy and realistic disappointment. Athletes, as the containers of these idealized fantasies, are ambivalently but intimately held objects, adored but also hated because they can never live up to the longed-for idealization. Baseball offers an intimate setting for fans yelling at players, applauding them with adulation and of course more restrained ambivalence between the poles admiration/appreciation and massive disappointment/deflation.

Americans are watchers. The average American is said to watch six hours of television a day. The objects of our watching are becoming more and more distant from us despite the so-called hotness and immediacy of television. This watching can lead to something that David Foster Wallace (1990) refers to as "metawatching". We aren't only watching sports now but we are commenting on our

watching and commenting on our commenting. The concept of viewing the spectacle and watching is expansive. This has gone on with fiction writing and criticism of fiction in what Wallace refers to as metafiction – writing about observing ourselves as we write. It is as if we are developing a new sport related to intimate watching and tearing down our athletes, something that in an earlier paper, I referred to the negative side of our ambivalence toward athletes as “specthating” (Cooper, 2015). In this new way of being intimately involved with sports we have much more access to our devaluation and envy of athletes, through sports talk shows which run for twenty-four hours a day on the radio, television, and on line. In these activities we are getting more and more removed from the actual observing and vicarious identification with athletes. In a sense, the transitional space of sports is changing. The capacity for illusion is breaking down. I wonder whether children’s idealization of athletes is also harder to sustain.

Given our predilections for idealization, it is not surprising that athletes are often in for a long fall, from being loved to being envied to even being hated. We are in some ways to not hold on to a human connection with the athlete. Athletes are increasingly associated with the mercantilism of everyday life and come to represent products more than their remarkable athletic skills. The athlete is sometimes more a brand, than a person. Many athletes are “looked up to” (another linguistic connection to their heroic and god-like status) and our collective dissociation or disavowal of knowledge about their vulnerabilities is denied. We deny their drug addiction, alcoholism, sex addiction, and use of performance enhancing drugs. When we find out we “hate” them because they weren’t who we thought they were and who we unconsciously wished them to be. In some sense we decry that they are not the transitional objects that we created.

It is interesting to think about the kinds of intimate watching that we engage in as we perform sports and observe sports on the one hand and, on the other, the intimate metawatching that now goes on in discussion about sports and the commerce of sports. As we have learned through lessons about truth in reporting in our virtual world, it is easier to have a baseball umpire mediating reality between the lines of a baseball field and the porous, fibrous, vectors of persuasion in the interpretation sports and news. In baseball, when an umpire calls a strike, it’s a strike because he calls a strike. We can accept this innocent and fictitious construction of truth (essentially a dictatorship) much better than when the umpire feels more dangerous in real life.

References

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