

Corruption in Sport

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The end of another soccer season. I used to be a fanatical supporter of Manchester United. During my youth, soccer was my first love. Manchester United was the altar at which I worshipped. Perhaps that's an exaggeration, but not much. When the phenomenal, youthful, talented team, the Busby Boys, were all but wiped out in the Munich air crash in 1958, I wore a black armband every time I played for my school team! Manu took talented kids from the Celtic fringes, and built them into a perfect example of how the "beautiful game" should be played. No violence, no aggression, no pulling shirts, "professional fouls", faking injury, or falling in the box. Just pure talent and discipline, with exemplary, gentlemanly behavior. Not a Saturday night went by when I didn't dash to watch Match of the Day to see them play.

Eventually things changed. Alex Ferguson, the last great manager kept the flame alive for as long as he could. But in the end market forces won. They brought in stars from European countries. They even employed foreign managers. Nowadays their players are as tattooed, as temperamental, and as boring as almost every other club in the land. Where is the ideal? The honor? The purity? Gone, all gone. The same bunch of crude mercenaries as everyone else. The "beautiful game" is now just another place where greedy humans have taken a sport and turned it into a corrupt spectacle.

We have long known how corrupt the world body FIFA has been. Sepp Blatter was an obvious crook 20 years ago. The disease spread through the whole of the organization, from top to bottom. Allegations even go back as far as 1991. Now there are 20 total indictments and 47 counts. Wire fraud, racketeering, and money laundering to name a few. Reaching well over \$150,000,000. You can read more about it here: <http://www.sportsmanagementdegreehub.com/fifa/>.

Cricket has been brought low by dishonest players and managers and betting scandals, mainly on the Indian subcontinent. Lance Armstrong was stripped of his Tour de France cycling victories for breaking the law on banned substances.

It came as no surprise when last year the World Anti-Doping Agency said that Russia should be banned from athletics competition. But equally, no one expected the IAAF to ban Russia from the upcoming Olympic Games. After all, they were implicated by WADA's report. It would be like Mafia Dons excluding other lesser gangsters from casinos on the grounds that they were crooks. Besides, even in Greek times the Olympic games were riddled with bribery and cheating. And the horrific results of how East Germany, until it fell in 1989, used to destroy human lives through their state-run drug programs showed how widespread cheating always was on a national and international level.

Top Russian officials resigned in December, after the World Anti-Doping Agency released a report detailing the state-backed system in Russia of

cheating in the Olympics and other international sports competitions. Last February a former director of the disgraced Russian Anti-Doping Agency died unexpectedly, mysteriously. He was the second former top official of the agency to die within a month.

The director of the Russia's anti-doping laboratory at the time of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi revealed that Russia had a carefully planned state-run doping program designed to ensure their dominance at the Olympics. Dozens of Russian athletes at Sochi were involved, including at least 15 medal winners, he said. Will anything be done? Don't bet on it. Similar charges are being made against Chinese athletes. As the saying goes, "Sport is just warfare using other means."

The fact is that sport is a metaphor. Something that seems harmless enough, even beneficial, but is ruined by human corruption, specifically money and power. Every single great ideology, including every religion that has ever appeared on the human scene, has ended up distorting its original vision, no matter how caring, loving and touchy feely it may have started out. People like to blame religion, politics, or whatever, but in reality it is human greed that ruins everything. This is precisely why the Ten Commandments, for all its great principles, end improbably with the law against envy, against wanting to have something that someone else has.

As it goes with sport, so it goes with religion. As much as I am disillusioned with sport, so I am with religion (but I still play them both, regardless). Wherever I look I see outwardly religious Jews (and every other religion) putting money and power before ethics and humane behavior, and turning a blind eye to financial, sexual, and political corruption. Not a day goes by without another outwardly very religious person found guilty of financial corruption, using politics to gain material ends, deceiving, and taking advantage of the naïve, the credulous, and the desperate. And of course politics is even worse because there is more at stake.

Yet for all that, probably the majority are still good, religious, spiritual, charitable, caring rabbis, politicians, and lay people. They do not make the news. Let us remember that headlines are made of sinners, rarely saints. We humans can both elevate and desecrate.

So thank goodness for the amateurs, the nonprofessionals, who play sport for the fun, not to win at all costs, but simply to enjoy playing the "beautiful game". And let us admire, not the big noisy shots in religion who practice it as "a spade to dig with", but those modest and private good people who keep this world from tearing itself apart. Another season, another good deed, you have got to be an optimist!