Sport and American Culture: It’s Just a Game, Isn’t It?

Suggested Citation:

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Abstract:

This mini-lecture and in class activity are to be used in conjunction with the study of culture in an introduction to sociology course in order to 1) reinforce the understanding of key concepts: mainstream culture, subculture, norms, folkways, mores, values, beliefs and  2) highlight the importance of sport within American culture. Before class begins, write the following quote on the board for students to think about: “Sport is a religion for growing numbers of Americans. The yearly Super Bowl is no less a religious holiday than Easter.”- Charles Prebish, 1984

Details:

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Sport and American Culture: It’s Just a Game, Isn’t It?
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Introductory Discussion:

- Note that there are two different ways to view sport
  - Participant- e.g., little league, college team, even professionally
  - Consumer- e.g., fans or “fanatics”
    - Will focus mainly on the later

- Depending on the time of year, ask students, “Who watched X (Super Bowl, World Series, key in state rivalry, etc….)?”
  - For those who did not watch the event, ask: “If you did not watch X, did you know it was on?”

- Point out that a large number of students participated in the consumption of sport. Ask students, “Is sport a part of the mainstream culture or is it a subculture?”
  - Have students explore and discuss the place of sport in our culture (approximately 5-10 minutes)
    - Points to consider:
      - What factors determine whether something is considered “mainstream?”
        - Number of people involved?
        - Ability to create an identity among fans?
        - Impact on other institutions (e.g., economy)?
      - Who has the power to decide whether something is mainstream?

An Example of a Fan (or Fanatic):

After the discussion of sport and culture, show selected scenes from the movie Fever Pitch (2005), to visually illustrate the power of sport in our culture. Note: Fever Pitch follows a year in the life of diehard Red Sox fan, Ben, and examines the Sox’s impact on Ben’s romantic relationship with girlfriend, Lindsay. Select scenes show: a fully decorated Red Sox themed
apartment, delivery of Ben’s season tickets, a trip to Spring Training, pre-season “draft day” to distribute tickets, and various happenings at Fenway Park.

- Post-movie questions:
  - Sport plays a huge part in Ben’s life. Could we say the Red Sox are part of Ben’s identity, who he is as a person? Examples?
  - Could we say Ben worshipped the Sox?
  - Is sport a religion to Ben and to other Americans?

Group Activity:

- In groups (4-6 students, depending on class size), have the class explore the parallels between sport and religion.

- Provide handout [see handout below] with questions for the groups to consider (15-20 minutes of group discussion).
  - Helpful to visit each group and prompt discussion if there are difficulties
    - Local rivalries (e.g., Yankees/Red Sox) are a great way to get groups talking about passion, identity of fans, etc…
    - Students also respond well to “it’s just a game…”

- Once groups are finished discussing among themselves, reconvene as a class and explore the response the groups generated.
  - Helpful to have groups support or refute another’s argument

This activity is well received by students and is especially useful in an introduction course. Because the topic of culture is typically covered towards the beginning of the semester, some students are more reserved and tentative about the study of sociology and class participation in general. I found that using sports to reinforce the key concepts (mainstream vs. subculture, norms, folkways, mores, values, and beliefs) is a great way to get the entire class involved in discussion. Many students have strong opinions about sport, and it is fairly easy to start a debate about the importance of sport in our culture. Not only do students come away from this activity with a better understanding of the concepts used to describe culture, but they also are able to see the utility in studying sociology. By comparing sport and religion students are able to 1) apply sociological concepts to an area with which they are already familiar, 2) think about both sport and religion in a different context, and 3) make connections between the course material and “real life” situations.
Group members:

*Directions:* As a group, please answer the following questions to explore the parallels between sport and religion within the United States. You may draw upon your own experiences, examples from *Fever Pitch* or other types of media, and material from the text and our class discussions. You will have approximately 15-20 minutes to complete this activity. Be prepared to discuss your responses with the class.

1) What is the definition of sport (i.e., what are the defining characteristics of sport)? Religion?

2) What are some examples of the norms, folkways, mores, values, and beliefs that relate to sport? Religion?

3) Is sport a religion in the United States? What are the similarities and differences between sports and religion? Consider norms, values, and beliefs. Is sport a good metaphor for religion?