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Sports don't matter, not one iota

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Mike Rice, the now-disgraced basketball coach at Rutgers, fired for physically assaulting and verbally abusing his players, could be the poster boy for more than one issue.

He is a bully, at a time when anti-bullying campaigns are looking for case studies of children and adults who misuse power and prey upon others.

He is viciously insensitive to sexual orientation issues, at times when institutions are striving to stamp out prejudice.

But he may be even better used as a poster boy for this issue: how sports, including college sports, have displaced far more meaningful activities and passions in American culture and led to the excusing of horrible behavior on the part of its participants.

If Mike Rice pushed, kicked and yelled slurs at students in a classroom studying international relations, he might well be jailed, or at least sued civilly for millions of dollars (which could still occur, of course, if Rutgers’ athletes decide to take such action). If Mike Rice pushed, kicked and yelled slurs at employees at a computer firm developing next generation software to analyze DNA or help defeat paralysis, he might be thrown in prison or bankrupted by civil suits, too. But because sports—including college sports—have risen to such prominence (financially and culturally), his outrageous behavior was tolerated for years, then initially met with a fine, suspension and counseling by Rutgers. The university has since, rightfully, fired him.

Here’s the truth about sports of all kinds: They are fun, entertaining, money-making activities that showcase the human spirit of competition at an exquisite level and that don’t matter to the world, in the long run, when it comes down to it, at all. Not one bit. Not an iota.

It’s time the world of sports and sports fans got over themselves. They are a glaring symbol of how little passion of their own people have now, how much they need to be ceaselessly entertained and how willing they are to settle for being fans, instead of fanning

the flames of their own passions. Mike Rice is a creation of whatever psychological forces turned him into a bully—probably from boyhood. But he is also a product of a culture that wrongfully deifies sports figures, including coaches, and is lost in pretending that who wins the Final Four matters to the future of our existence—which it does not, at all. Not one bit. Not one iota.

Our empty-headed hysteria for anything that gets us pumped up (in an age when we are spiritually deflated) is what leads us to look the other way when men like Mike Rice rant and rave. It is what leads us to half-believe that college football phenom Manti Tao could be making sense when he says he fell deeply in love with a woman he never met. It is what leads us to cheer on Michael

Vick as a quarterback when he participated in staging dog fights where spectacular animals were ripped to shreds.

The truth is that if every college sports contest in the world took place with no publicity, in arenas without cameras, covered not even by school newspapers, nothing much would change. It wouldn’t affect anything that matters to anyone, really.

Sick people would still need to find doctors who can really cure them. Poor people would still need to find opportunities to grow economically. And our armed forces would still need to be at the ready to defend our borders and our way of life.

We’d be far better off, in fact, if all sports coverage was relegated to specialty publications and stripped out of daily newspapers and daily news broadcasts. Because games are games are games. They don’t matter. Not really. Not at all. Not one bit. Not an iota.

Mike Rice got a big head because he thought he was a big deal. He wasn’t. He was in a position to inspire and lead a team. That’s a nice opportunity, probably a little less important than teaching math, but nice. It certainly isn’t like leading an army opposing communism. And he even blew that small job.

1. Do you think sports are meaningful? Why or why not?
2. Do you think sports have displaced more meaningful activities or passions in American culture? How or why not?
3. Do you think sports players and coaches get away with more on their jobs than people in other jobs because their sports are very popular and bring in big money?
4. Do fans take sports too seriously?
5. Are we as a culture taking games, rather than other things, too seriously? Is there a balance?
6. Because of the high profile of sports, are coaches and players losing perspective on what playing sports is all about?
7. What should playing and coaching sports be all about?
8. What do you think of Mike Rice?
9. What has your experience with sports been? Any great stories? Mentors? Life-changing moments?

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