

## The simple and the complex

Over the years in participating, officiating and witnessing competitive sports my understanding of the what the problem is all about has fluctuated consistently between confusion and clarity. There have been times when it seemed clear that players are merely misunderstanding, in a dramatic way, why they are out there playing - the real reasons buried under an avalanche of societal pressures, ego or stress. Invariably though this way of looking at it falls short. It has fallen short when follow-up meetings I articulate this reasoning to players ejected from games. Somehow it just doesn't grab their thought process. It comes up lacking power when I think about the scope of the problem encompassing the absurd things that go in little league all the way to the professional game. The problem is not simple in any way, no matter how blatant and clear the problem may seem. The complexity of it all struck me strongly during a meeting I had with Harry Edwards, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley. Harry became known in the sports field for his part in counseling John Carlos and Tommie Smith on actions they might take on the winners stand at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. Carlos and Smith were sprinters at the time and came in . . . .in the black events. They ended up dropping their heads during the national anthem and raising their fists in black gloves symbolizing black power. Since then Harry has been involved in speaking about and working on the issues of the impact of sport on society and equality for minorities within the structure of professional sport. He has been hired by a number of professional teams as a consultant and has been a radical voice for change in sport since the 60's. I met with Harry along with a colleague of mine, John Leahy, who I had been working with in helping articulate our view of the problem for presentations to students of college age.

My initial expectation was that our view of the scope of the problem was deeper - that we questioned the basic assumptions of sport and society in a deeper way. We were working on a complete revisioning of the win/lose model at the time. Based on our readings, Harry accepted all of this, limiting himself to issues of equity within the model. Though he is known for being a bit enamored by his own thought process and ability to verbalize this, Harry listened very carefully saying nothing for quite some time. He acknowledged the work we were doing and indicated that in his view it would a difficult task requiring dealing with the issue (the win/lose paradigm) throughout the infrastructure of society. It turns out Harry

understood the problem on a level so deep that he had consciously limited himself to work where he could actually achieve some results. He took very seriously the issue of tackling sport and its meaning within the culture, and did not feel up to the demands. This was an eye opener for me still staying with me to this day. The result is I see the task as tackleable in one of two ways. One is putting into practice some principles around reinventing the spirit of competition in a very hands-on way targeted to youth leagues and youth coaches. The other is to write a book proposing a way to look at the entire picture of sport and society and an overall approach to addressing the issue throughout the infrastructure. I have begun work in both areas with no illusions about finding an answer, but after many go arounds finally understanding that the mere process of inquiry is the foundation for life and change.