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**SPORTS: A BIG-TIME PLAYER IN THE POLITICAL ARENA***Michael Zink\**

## INTRODUCTION

An overlap between the worlds of sports and politics has always been at least subtly apparent in American society. Both involve public figures whose fates often depend upon the financial contributions of their spectators. Indeed, both are spectator activities in which there is a great deal of money to be made by all involved in the process. In the athletic realm, the most talented players are those who fans may be willing to spend a week's paycheck to watch perform for several hours. The paying guest sets off a chain reaction of revenue generation, as vendors, parking lot attendants, and nearby restaurants all benefit from business peripheral to the game itself. In politics the most influential leaders have the clout to raise money from party donors for both themselves and for many of the party's other candidates as well, simply by attending a two-hour function, saying a few words, and posing for photographs with guests. The connections made between people at such gatherings lead to future log-rolling, horse-trading, and other "perks" reserved for those in the loop.

Participants in sports and in politics, supplementary to the natural gifts with which they are born, must invest a substantial amount of time and money in their development in order to become one to whom others in the field aspire to be. A professional athlete typically spends endless hours and, possibly, thousands of dollars in his or her youth practicing until peers are clearly inferior. They apply the same work ethic in high school and college, as the skill requirements of each level gradually weed out those who cannot maintain the level of skill, efficiency, or health to be the best. Similarly, the vast majority of politicians become involved in leadership activities early in their lives. Some are born into families who have already built a history that they expect future generations of their children to continue. Others begin early by participating in high school or college elections and leadership posts. Still others become involved later in life, not even expecting to enter politics until they are drawn in after graduating from law school or business school. Those who struggle to achieve their first election victory may become disappointed and disillusioned, and they may withdraw from the political world. However, those who prove their ability to win an election have a greater likelihood of receiving their party's support in future elections. These are the leaders who will remain in the public eye for the majority of their lives.

The primary parallel between sports and politics can be summarized in one word: power. As an athlete grows in stature among his or her peers, an investment in that athlete becomes all the more likely to be profitable. The road to fame and fortune is then only shortly ahead, and the most popular athletes become names recognized throughout the world. Likewise, when a politician defeats a multiple-term incumbent in an election, his or her story becomes familiar with voters throughout the country. Similar public knowledge may result from a candidate who wins every election that he or she enters. Both of these scenarios most likely result in a party's support for the candidate, which increases the likelihood of him or her being recognizable to voters throughout the country.

It is only fitting, therefore, that two worlds of power, similar in so many ways, would become involved in a symbiotic relationship. Over the past century, the popularity of sports has

grown exponentially in America. The media has surely promoted this growth largely through increased advertising and broadcasting of men and women's sports of all kinds. When sports is publicized, whether through early days of the newspaper media or through modern internet simulcasts, children emulate the athletes, adults at least recognize the famous names, and media outlets are likely to report on stories involving the most popular athletes.

This article will examine two central ways that sports interacts with and affects politics in America today. The most common situation is that in which an ex-athlete, usually one who was extraordinarily skilled and popular as a player, becomes a candidate in the world of politics. Nearly everyone, regardless of their political ardency, can name at least one former athlete who has run for and won elected office. It is important to understand the power-derived reasons why retired athletes decide to run for office. It is also crucial to understand why voters tend to elect them.

The other way that this article will explore how the world of sports affects the political sphere is in politicians' use of sports in order to get a message to voters. One typical way that this occurs is through an appearance of a political leader during a sporting event. This method gives politicians the ability to reach viewers or listeners, and to present their views on issues that matter to all voters. However, this tactic is a double-edged sword that can brew retaliation from fans and voters. This article will analyze one example in which a politician utilized the reaching power of sports to his advantage, while avoiding the potentially harsh backlash that politicians face in such settings.

## II. EX-ATHLETES & POLITICAL AMBITION

The modern political world regularly sees former professional athletes cross over into public service. A multitude of factors contribute to this phenomenon—the impression of being a winner, the immediate name recognition, and the personality that induces large numbers of people to follow, to name a few.<sup>1</sup> But why do ex-athletes decide to reenter the public spectrum? This is a question that has become increasingly relevant in modern politics. Empirical examples on the local and the national levels prove that power is the driving force behind the presence of a former athlete's name on the ballot. However, this simple answer raises several more important questions. Can the candidate lead constituents as effectively as the champion could lead fans? Does the atmosphere of authority in the political world parallel that enjoyed by star athletes in their prime? Is the amalgamation of sports and politics a positive evolution? The answers to these questions lie in an analysis of the function of the media, the common characteristics shared by sports and politics, and the instant name-recognition enjoyed by former sports stars that run for office.

These institutions have not always been a successful merger. In fact, until recent years, attempts to blend the two in any manner have led to unrest both on a local and on a worldwide scale. States and their subdivisions commonly maintained laws, for instance, that forbade the holding of sporting events on Sundays.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the greatest and most visible controversy arose

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<sup>1</sup> Mark C. Alexander, *Part II: Electoral/Judicial Reform: Don't Blame the Butterfly Ballot: Voter Confusion in Presidential Politics*, 13 STAN. L. & POL'Y REV. 121, 122 (2002). Alexander classifies the reasons why voters elect athletes as "The candidate's attractiveness, charisma, and likeability."

<sup>2</sup> *Young v. Fetterolf*, 21 Pa. D. & C. 171 (1934). The Common Pleas Court of Huntington County declared a local law "prohibiting baseball and football on Sunday during certain hours" to be constitutional.

during the 1968 Mexico City Olympics when Tommie Smith and John Carlos, after winning silver and bronze medals in the 200-meter race, respectively, conducted what was known as the “black-gloved protest” against racism in America.<sup>3</sup> Although a vast majority of the world praised the act, the American public retaliated against the men, leading to the suicide of Carlos’ wife and resulting in the longtime unemployment of both men.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, Americans gradually interpreted the men’s action for its profound meaning in the same way that the country eventually relented in its refusal to commingle sports and politics.

Indeed in the last 15 years, America has witnessed an explosion of ex-athletes at center-stage in the political arena. Some, such as former wrestler Jesse Ventura (former governor of Minnesota) and Hall-of-Fame basketball player Bill Bradley (former U.S. Senator and Presidential candidate), have become familiar names nationwide. Others, including former University of Nebraska football coach Tom Osborne (current U.S. Congressman) and former Chicago Bulls star Bob Love (aldermanic candidate for the 15<sup>th</sup> Ward of Chicago), maintain local prominence within their respective communities. In fact, the State of Texas alone had six former athletes running for statewide office in the 2002 elections.<sup>5</sup>

Several factors clearly account for the transition of sports and politics from being a combination of fire and water to a coexistence of thunder and lightning. One reason is the vastly expanded role of the media, especially television. Athletes, previously admired as one-dimensional figures that seldom appeared publicly outside of their respective sporting events, now frequently materialize in commercials and in cameos on sitcoms. Former Atlanta Hawk basketball player Tom McMillen, who became a Maryland congressman after his athletic career ended, stated, “[P]olitics now is more telegenic, more television-driven. Notable athletes certainly have the door open for them...”<sup>6</sup> Television is the most important medium through which politicians send messages to potential voters. Likewise, it is the method utilized by athletes that enables them to pierce the dividing line between the status as an athlete, who is recognized primarily by fans of the sport, and the status as a celebrity known to all.

Another reason for the recently successful marriage of sports and politics is the simple parallels between the institutions. To be sure, political leadership does not mandate candidates to bench-press three times his or her weight or to obtain an Ivy League degree. The similarity instead lies in the overall strategy and in the tactics implemented in achieving victory. No less than a law professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Lani Guinier, similarly argued, “Democracy and baseball have a lot in common.”<sup>7</sup> Professor Guinier mentioned several underlying comparisons between democracy, which is fundamentally exercised through political activity, and baseball:

Baseball is a highly structured and open-ended game of strategy, skill, and luck. It is often reduced to a confrontation between a pitcher and a batter, but it takes an entire team to execute. Many people say that baseball is fun to play but boring to watch. The same can be said of democracy. Both baseball and, unfortunately,

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<sup>3</sup> Jay Weiner & Rachel Blount, *Countdown to Sydney: A Weekly Olympic Notebook; Today’s Stars Amuse Ex-Athlete, Activist*, STAR TRIBUNE (Minneapolis, MN), July 30, 2000 at Sports, Page 13C.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Christy Hoppe, *From Field House to Statehouse, they’re...Still Running; Candidates Hope Athletic Backgrounds Will Score With Voters*, DALLAS MORNING NEWS, February 10, 2002 at 43A.

<sup>6</sup> Jeff Schultz, *Athletes Taking the Stump*, ATLANTA JOURNAL AND CONSTITUTION, December 21, 1997 at Sports, Page 15E.

<sup>7</sup> Lani Guinier, *More Democracy*, 1995 U. CHI. LEGAL F. 1 (1995), at \*2.

democracy as we now practice it have become spectator sports. They are games in which the emphasis is on watching others play to win.<sup>8</sup>

This rather pessimistic, albeit realistic, outlook also implicitly vindicates the role of television in the merging worlds of sports and politics. As citizens habitually watch their favorite sports stars in action on television, they may see the same athletes running political advertisements in coming years. However, just as viewers at home passively observe the game instead of attending it, constituents inertly laud their favorite athletes running for office but do not vote.

Many other facets of sports are equally relevant in the political sphere. Kevin Lampe, Executive Vice-President of leading Chicago public relations firm Kurth-Lampe, recognizes a plethora of common ground between sports and politics.<sup>9</sup> One shared factor that he regularly encounters in attempting to lead his clients' campaigns to victory is the consistent "watching of the scoreboard," evident in the age-old political question, "Are we winning today?"<sup>10</sup> Rather than "keeping score," political campaigns track candidates' leads and deficits through polls of likely voters. Lampe also draws marked similarities between the playoffs of a sporting event and the political primaries held before a general election in November.<sup>11</sup> Just as athletic teams must achieve victory in preliminary rounds prior to competing for the championship, politicians and their teams must defeat opponents of the same party before running for the position in November. Lampe also reiterates Professor Guinier's assertion that, while individuals receive the majority of acknowledgement in elections and in sports, only a team effort makes success possible.<sup>12</sup>

The grind of athletic preparation is also comparable to the groundwork required of good politicians. Interestingly, Lampe equates the process of winning an election to the training that boxers endure before a fight.<sup>13</sup> He contends that the common threads of this analogy include the announcement of the fight (candidacy), the determination of a fight plan (strategy), and the strict adherence to the established plan (platform).<sup>14</sup> The parallelism extends to the common practice of athletic teams watching film footage of upcoming opponents, a practice that is likewise effectuated by political teams researching and examining an opposing candidate's weaknesses either in person or on tape.<sup>15</sup> Some intangible factors in a political campaign include what Geoff Chepiga of the Yale Herald called "an athlete's physical endurance, [an] athlete's ability to shut off his better judgment, and an athlete's assurance that all the sweat and hard-work [sic] will pay off when he reaches his goal."<sup>16</sup>

Many former sports stars surely enter the political realm for many of these reasons, as the environment described above—competitive, challenging, and visible to the public—is analogous to that which they experienced during their playing days. However, not all seek to enter public life merely to extend the glory and the power that they felt in playing sports their entire lives. Bill Bradley is perhaps the most appropriate and the rarest example of a sports star who amassed

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<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>9</sup> Telephone Interview with Kevin Lampe, Executive Vice-President, Kurth-Lampe (Jan. 27, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> Telephone Interview with Kevin Lampe, Executive Vice-President, Kurth-Lampe (Jan. 27, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Geoff Chepiga, *And the Politicians Take the Field*, YALE HERALD, November 10, 2000, available at <http://www.yaleherald.com/archive/xxx/2000.11.10/sports/p27eli.html> (last visited September 20, 2002).

his credentials with the ultimate goal of building a successful political career.<sup>17</sup> A standout basketball player at Stanford, Bradley won a gold medal at the Olympics and, upon graduation, bypassed immediate entry into the National Basketball Association and spent two years as a Rhodes Scholar in Oxford, England.<sup>18</sup> He played in the NBA, upon his return to America, leading the New York Knicks to two championships and eventually being inducted into the Hall of Fame.<sup>19</sup> He then used his record as an academic leader and an athletic champion to win a seat in the U.S. Senate from New Jersey.<sup>20</sup>

Bradley then attempted to utilize his skills and his extraordinary background to achieve one victorious culmination—the White House. He masterfully touted his renowned athletic career in an unprecedented manner, by uniting some of the world’s most famous and wealthy former and current athletes for his cause. Sports figures held numerous fundraisers for the Bradley campaign and several stars who had never before endorsed Presidential candidates, including Michael Jordan, lent their monetary and public support.<sup>21</sup> Bradley traveled across the country participating in these events, with the campaign raking in up to \$1 million per fundraiser.<sup>22</sup> During these trips, however, he was also careful to maintain at least a peripheral focus on his academic achievements as “a key part of the scholar-athlete-politician’s legend.”<sup>23</sup> However, despite his exceptional ability to raise money and to rouse support among the athletic community, Bradley lost the Democratic primary election to Vice-President Al Gore. Although it was the first time in his life that he had been defeated in a major competition, Bradley stayed true to his athletic nature and used every available method to achieve victory. More significantly, his athletic career was only a portion of his political appeal.

In addition to the ever-present possibility of losing, ex-athletes who run for or win a political position may experience significant negative feedback from the public. One common criticism is that they lack any significant political experience. Is the candidacy of so many potentially uninformed entrants a positive trend for democracy? “[Ex-athletes] certainly should be [allowed to run for office],” according to United States Senator Richard Durbin.<sup>24</sup> Durbin emphasized the similar doubts cast upon and ultimately dispelled by Hall-of-Fame wide receiver Steve Largent and Hall-of-Fame pitcher Jim Bunning in their Senatorial candidacies and victories.<sup>25</sup> Both have gone on to productive tenures in the U.S. Senate.

However, skepticism of ex-athletes in politics is not unreasonable. Indeed, most ex-athletes may owe their candidacies and their elections to their names more than to their records of public service.<sup>26</sup> The importance of name recognition in politics has increased as heuristic

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<sup>17</sup> Bill Gallo, *Ex-Athletes Have Shown Capitol Skill*, DAILY NEWS (New York, NY), September 5, 1999 at Sports, Page 100.

<sup>18</sup> Ben Macintyre, *Bradley Flaunts Sporting Record to Swing Voters*, THE TIMES (London), November 15, 1999 at Overseas News Section.

<sup>19</sup> Gallo, *supra* note 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> Macintyre, *supra* note 18.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Hiestand, *Entering the Political Arena Ex-Athletes, Sports People Get in the Game for Bradley*, USA TODAY, November 10, 1999 at Sports, Page 1C.

<sup>23</sup> Macintyre, *supra* note 18.

<sup>24</sup> Telephone Interview with Richard J. Durbin, United States Senator (Sept. 22, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> R.W. Apple, Jr., *On Washington: Hollywood, D.C.*, NEW YORK TIMES, November 15, 1998 at Section 6, Page 40. Apple considers the candidacies of former athletes to be as unmerited and nepotistic as “[e]x-actors...and relatives of ex-politicians” who “occupy more and more seats in Congress.”

voting behavior has become more common in America.<sup>27</sup> Chepiga asks a fair question: “If [Largent and Ventura] hadn’t been famous names in sports, where would they be today?”<sup>28</sup> Both candidates entered politics almost immediately upon retirement from their prolific sports careers. Notwithstanding the potential fruitfulness of their work in office, former athletes who have minimal prior political leadership rightfully face an outpouring of criticism as to their motives for running.

That is not to say that every ex-jock is successful in a political career. Former race-car champion Richard Petty is living proof of the rare failure of retired athletes in modern elections. In fact, Petty ran one of the most forgettable campaigns of a former sports star to date. Jeff Schultz of the Atlanta Journal and Constitution described Petty’s 1996 bid for the secretary of state of North Carolina as being seriously marred by an incident in which he “tailgated one of his would-be constituents on the highway, bumped the car as if I-85 were a NASCAR venue and sped off, later to be charged with hit-and-run.”<sup>29</sup> Previously, he had openly refused to debate his opponent and had referred to her as “some lady from Lillington.”<sup>30</sup> These glaring weaknesses cost Petty the election despite being recognized by 95% of the North Carolina population.<sup>31</sup> In his concession speech, Petty simply stated, “If I knew I was going to lose, I wouldn’ta run.”<sup>32</sup>

However, not all former athletes merely attempt to ride their names or their athletic prowess into office either. An example to the opposite extreme of Petty’s debacle provides a glimmer of hope in maintaining faith in former athletes’ political intentions. Oliver Luck was a record-breaking quarterback at West Virginia University, where he also graduated magna cum laude as a Rhodes Scholar finalist.<sup>33</sup> He played six seasons for the Houston Oilers and, upon retirement, attended and graduated from the University of Texas Law School.<sup>34</sup> He eventually ran an unsuccessful campaign for the U.S. House of Representatives, likely due to the fact that “he’s most likely to be known for what he’s done out of a uniform—rather than by what he did on a field.”<sup>35</sup> The current Houston business executive stated, “Unfortunately, a lot of guys I played sports with let that be the one thing that defined them.”<sup>36</sup> It is also unfortunate that such “guys” are far more likely to be elected to public office.

### III. POLITICIANS REACHING OUT

The best way to reach the people is to be among them. This longstanding assertion summarizes the way that political leaders connect with potential voters through the medium of sports. There are numerous ways in which politicians use a sports event to communicate a goal, to increase name recognition, and to win an election. Some methods are clever while others are

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<sup>27</sup> Chepiga, *supra* note 16.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> Schultz, *supra* note 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*

<sup>31</sup> Michael Mayo, *Several Ex-Athletes Have Traded the Athletic Field for the Public Arena*, SUN-SENTINEL (Fort Lauderdale, FL), March 7, 2000 at Sports, Page 1C.

<sup>32</sup> Schultz, *supra* note 6.

<sup>33</sup> Roger Brown, *The Good Life After Sports? It’s Simply Luck*, PLAIN DEALER (Cleveland, OH), February 26, 2002 at Sports, Page D2.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

contrived, but all focus on the goal of winning an election by reaching the many spectators who watch through a diverse media.

The most familiar technique used by politicians in connecting with voters through sporting events is a live appearance. The events in which a political leader may be present include inaugural games, playoff games, and final games in a particular venue. This strategy, on its face, seems to be sensible in attempting to achieve the important name recognition that leads to votes in future elections. Being at an event so important to the community may lead a politician to believe that constituents will see him or her as one of them and as a leader with whom they have something in common. Indeed, young voters who perceive a politician to have interests common to theirs are more likely to respond in kind at the polls.<sup>37</sup>

However, empirical evidence proves this rationale to be somewhat of a risk for the politicians who dare to mix personal appearances with sports. In fact, some politicians go out of their way *not* to make their presence known to the spectator crowd. This is because fans, for a wide variety of reasons, generally greet them with a hostile reception.<sup>38</sup> This has been true for every leader from Presidents to Senators. In fact, Jesse Ventura may owe his historic election as Minnesota's governor to minimizing his appearances at sporting events and, alternatively, maximizing his use of the internet to activate voters.<sup>39</sup> Such a bizarre anomaly of innate common sense is not exclusive to American politics, however, as politicians in Australia have acknowledged the potential electoral hazards of attending sporting events.<sup>40</sup>

An anecdote about California's former governor, Pete Wilson, exemplifies how using sports as a personal advertisement opportunity can cut both ways. Although his decades of political experience dictated to him that "politicians and sporting events rarely mix well," Wilson was called upon to attend the opening ceremonies of the World Cup soccer tournament in Pasadena in 1994.<sup>41</sup> As he walked toward the center of the field to make some remarks before the game between Colombia and Romania began, a deafening chorus of boos rained upon him. The jeers increased in volume as the crowd, predominantly men and women of Hispanic heritage rooting for the Colombian team, drowned him out during his brief remarks.<sup>42</sup> Wilson had recently released controversial campaign advertisements and full page ads in the New York Times caustically opposing illegal immigration, and he dismissed the unfriendly welcome by stating that "maybe 10 people in the vast audience were registered to vote."<sup>43</sup> As a political

<sup>37</sup> Trinity Hartman, *Politicians Seek Way to Win Over Nonvoting Americans Under 30*, HOUSTON CHRONICLE, April 18, 1999 at A6.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Russell, Interview With Firezine.net, at [http://www.firezine.net/issue1/fz\\_09.htm](http://www.firezine.net/issue1/fz_09.htm) (last visited April 6, 2003). Mr. Russell states, "People are not in a good mood when any politician's face appears on television. Why do you think they always boo? You know that a given in life in human nature, is that at a sporting event, a baseball game, a football game, you never introduce a politician, [sic] is because he'll be booed. I don't care if he's the most beloved person in the world, it's part of the game." He goes on to say, "[W]ithout even listening to the person's name, no matter, you could introduce one of the apostles [at a ball game], they're gonna boo."

<sup>39</sup> Rebecca Fairley Raney, *Former Wrestler's Campaign Got a Boost From the Internet*, Politics Online, November 6, 1998, at <http://www.politicsonline.com/coverage/nytimes2/06campaign.html> (last visited April 6, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Source MATP, *On the Buses—Election 2001*, THE DAILY TELEGRAPH (Sydney), October 8, 2001 at Local, Page 6. One Kim Beazley, an Australian politician, stated, "You support the home team wherever you are, if you've got any brains."

<sup>41</sup> Daniel M. Weintraub, *No More Mr. Moderate; One Part of Wilson is a Consensus-Building Preppy From Yale. The Other is a Tough-Talking Ex-Marine. California Voters Chose the Yalie for Governor in 1990. Now the Marine is Seeking a Second Term*, LOS ANGELES TIMES, September 25, 1994 at Magazine, Page 12.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

leader, there could have been no more hostile a sporting event audience to encounter than the one received by Wilson. There also was no better example of why personal appearances by politicians at sporting events are rare.

However, one need not look further than the 1996 United States Senate election in the State of Illinois for one of the most original ways that a politician has successfully reached voters through sports. Democratic candidate and then-Congressman Durbin ran against Republican Al Salvi for the position that would seat the successor of popular retiring Democrat Paul Simon. Durbin held a moderate lead entering the weekend before the November 5 election, which indicated that the strength of voter turnout would be the deciding factor in the election.<sup>44</sup> Durbin had just days to determine a way in which to increase voter turnout in his favor.

He accomplished this remarkable feat with the help of Lampe's firm, which had directed Durbin's publicity throughout the campaign.<sup>45</sup> Lampe wanted to tell a "Man Bites Dog story" that would capture the attention and the votes of sports fans in the few remaining days before the election.<sup>46</sup> As a matter of happenstance, a forum to tell such a story opened up on a Chicago sports talk radio show on the Friday before the election. In an even greater stroke of luck, the available time slot to tell the story fell during the time in which many people would be in their cars during the traffic jam drive home from work, listening to the radio. All that was missing was the story. Lampe only had to look back a few years to find one.

Seven years earlier, on July 26, 1989, Durbin stepped to the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives to deliver a customary one-minute speech. In the depths of summer, there was no more appropriate topic of which to speak than baseball. And there were few who could discuss it so eloquently. As he stepped to the floor, Durbin began:

Mr. Speaker, I rise to condemn the desecration of a great American symbol. No, I am not referring to flag burning; I am referring to the baseball bat. Several experts tell us that the wooden baseball bat is doomed to extinction, that major league baseball players will soon be standing at home plate with aluminum bats in their hands. Baseball fans have been forced to endure countless indignities by those who just cannot leave well enough alone. Designated hitters, plastic grass, uniforms that look like pajamas, chicken clowns dancing on the baselines, and of course, the most heinous sacrilege, lights in Wrigley Field. Are we willing to hear the crack of a bat replaced by the dinky ping? Are we ready to see the Louisville Slugger replaced by the aluminum ping dinger? Is nothing sacred? Please, do not tell me that wooden bats are too expensive when players who cannot hit their weight are being paid more money than the President of the United States. Please, do not try to sell me on the notion that these metal clubs will make better hitters. What is next? Teflon baseballs? Radar-enhanced gloves? I ask you. I do not want to hear about saving trees. Any tree in America would gladly give its life for the glory of a day at home plate. I do not know if it will take a constitutional amendment to keep the baseball traditions alive, but if

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<sup>44</sup> CNN/Time All Politics Report, *Durbin Has Edge Over Salvi in Illinois*, at <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/news/9611/04/senate/IL/index.shtml> (last visited March 31, 2003). The report stated that Durbin had an eleven-point lead over Salvi in the days before the election.

<sup>45</sup> Lampe, *supra* note 9.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

we forsake the great Americana of broken-bat singles and pine tar, we will have certainly lost our way as a nation.<sup>47</sup>

It was a speech that was far from typical of those heard in Congress but, thinking that it was exactly what the rush hour listeners on the expressways of Chicago wanted to hear, Kurth-Lampe arranged to have the speech played on the local sports radio show that Friday.<sup>48</sup> Following the speech, Durbin gave an interview with the station's on-air hosts about it and about his goals if he were elected. "It was a natural thing for him to talk about it," Lampe said.<sup>49</sup> The hosts even stated on the air that they would vote for Durbin upon hearing the speech.<sup>50</sup>

The following Tuesday saw Durbin win the Senate seat with 56% of the vote, a double-digit victory over Salvi's 40%.<sup>51</sup> The question loomed—did the playing of the Senator's infamous wooden baseball bat speech the previous Friday have a significant impact upon the election? According to Lampe, it certainly "reached voters who wouldn't have been reached," and who may not have voted if they had not heard the broadcast speech.<sup>52</sup> Lampe added, "It was a forum where [Salvi] wouldn't appear."<sup>53</sup> He likened the situation to the contrasting separate appearances of George W. Bush and Al Gore on the Late Show With David Letterman during the 2000 Presidential campaign, in which Bush appeared uncomfortable and Gore cracked jokes.<sup>54</sup> Although those interviews arguably did not have a significant effect on the national election, Durbin's broadcast speech and interview may have influenced the statewide election, in which Chicago voters far outnumber those in other areas of Illinois.

Durbin echoed this sentiment, but spoke of it in a more general context. He stated that, in politics, any time that one can obtain a "good sports angle," the likelihood of reaching a greater audience of voters increases significantly.<sup>55</sup> However, he also acknowledges that there is a limit to such leverage. Spectators at sports events often look upon politicians with great disdain for many reasons, as is evidenced by Pete Wilson's attendance at the World Cup against his better judgment. Durbin states that he typically turns down offers to speak on the air during sporting events that he attends.<sup>56</sup> Situations such as Wilson's, as well as the possible audience perception of self-aggrandizing, are the likely reasons behind such reluctance. Nonetheless, the imaginative way in which Lampe and Durbin utilized the circumstances surrounding the 1996 Senate election illustrates the undeniable potential strength of speaking to voters through sports.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The criss-crossing of the institutions of sports and politics can be divided into two areas of analysis. The first and most visible way that this is apparent is through the modern surge of retired athletes who run for political office. The other way in which sports and politics

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<sup>47</sup> Congressman Richard J. Durbin, One-Minute Address of the Chamber of the House of Representatives (July 26, 1989).

<sup>48</sup> Lampe, *supra* note 9.

<sup>49</sup> *Id.*

<sup>50</sup> Kevin Lampe, Speech to Summer Interns of the Office of Senator Richard J. Durbin (June 19, 2002).

<sup>51</sup> Federal Election Commission, *1996 U.S. Senate Results*, available at <http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/senate.htm> (last visited April 6, 2003).

<sup>52</sup> Lampe, *supra* note 9.

<sup>53</sup> *Id.*

<sup>54</sup> *Id.*

<sup>55</sup> Durbin, *supra* note 24.

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

intermingle can be witnessed, alternatively, through a politician's attempt to dabble in the fan base of sports in order to win support. Each of these analyses explains something of a societal norm in this novice era of the successful gelling of the sports and political realms.

The recent wave of ex-athletes running for public office, as an exercise in achieving and maintaining power, teaches several lessons about combining sports and politics. For one thing, the merging of the two does not always guarantee victory. Certain situations are more likely to result in a clash of cultures rather than a harmony of hegemony. However, methods of maximizing the potential strength of the teaming of the sports and political worlds do exist, and they must be applied in clever and flexible ways. Mere name recognition may open the political door for many former athletes. However, the daily life of an athlete and the rigors of a politician's campaign life contain many of the aforementioned overlapping features, and the ability of an ex-athlete to achieve success in the political arena depends on a work ethic that parallels a star athlete's. Summarizing all of these common characteristics could be as simple as asserting that, in order to obtain power, both sports and politics "prize survival over principles, and body over mind."<sup>57</sup> Thus, as a former actor once became the most powerful person in the world, the election of a former athlete may be inevitable despite such a volatile frame of mind.

Politicians who seek to coalesce support from sports fans may charter similarly treacherous waters. The examples of Wilson and Durbin prove that political leaders may garner more support and less criticism by minimizing appearances among fans. More aptly put, when interacting with fans, politicians "[require] an athlete's ability to shut up."<sup>58</sup> The fragility in targeting an audience comprised of sports fans increases the difficulty in communicating a coherent message to them. However, the inventive manner in which Lampe and Durbin won the vote of the sports fan, by speaking to a sports radio audience with the free will to change the station, diminished the connotation of self-importance and held listeners' interest. This example demonstrates the distinct possibility of future political endeavors to interact successfully with sports fans in creative ways.

The future of sports and politics as one unit is uncertain, as it is a relatively recent trend. Nevertheless, one may safely assume that many retired jocks will undoubtedly try to continue to ride this American wave into elected office, and politicians will surely persist in creating a perception that they have significant common ground with their sports fan constituents. As with the individual spheres of sports and politics, their union and its effects continue to develop.

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<sup>57</sup> Chepiga, *supra* note 16.

<sup>58</sup> *Id.*