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FEATURES

For the record, America, lighten up

Posted: Wed March 4, 1998 at 1:00 PM ET

Ah, how well we all remember that dramatic moment in 1995 when Cal Ripken Jr. shattered his ankle in a freak accident just hours before he was to play in the game that would break Lou Gehrig's consecutive-game streak.

Then, as Baltimore and the whole nation cried for him, Ripken hobbled out to shortstop on crutches, to remain on the field for one inning, just so that he would break the record. In a noble display of respect for the player, not a single one of the opposition's batters tried to bunt to short.

America felt so good about itself, and not a bad word was uttered.

No, of course that didn't happen. The indestructible Ripken wasn't hurt, and he played the whole game. But, in fact, had he been injured, don't you think that is the way it would have been? As it was, when the game became official in the fifth inning, play was stopped, and with the approval of the commissioner's office and the collusion of the opposing team, America cheered for Ripken for almost an hour.

Remember? And nobody said it was improper for the other team to put aside competition for an hour and salute a great athlete. Not a single soul said it was hokey or unsportsmanlike. Certainly, nobody said that stopping play for an hour was making a travesty of the game. Nobody said that Ripken had dishonored baseball or dishonored men's sports.

Why then, *why* are so many people bawling that Nykesha Sales of



Sales, in action earlier this season, netted an unfair share of criticism.
 (Patrick Murphy-Racey)

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the University of Connecticut was out of order when the game was stopped for her record last week? What's the difference, really, between her and Ripken?

The fact is, records in sport are not only made to be broken, they are often *arranged* to be broken. Gehrig himself, the vaunted Iron Horse, often played only for an inning to keep his streak alive. All sorts of great coaches—notably Bear Bryant—and great players hung on long after the music had played for their last dance just to set a personal record.

In many situations like that, where the record comes first, whole years in sport are affected by what amounts to an insult to the game. Again and again we see men do that, place a personal record before the game, before the team, before the sport. There is another college player now named Jeff Clement. Unlike Nykesha Sales, he just happens to be a male. He plays for Grinnell College, and, strictly to set a record a couple of weeks ago, he attempted 52 three-point shots. Missed 33. Never stopped heaving the whole game. Trying to set a Division III record. He succeeded, sinking 19. This hasn't bothered anyone.

Nykesha Sales made one shot; the opposing team, Villanova made one to even the score. Then UConn and Villanova played basketball, straight-up, for 39 minutes and 30 seconds. But so many people had a fit. It was Page One, New York Times; a debate on the Peter Jennings ABC News.

Why? Well, I suppose it's a lot like the Casey Martin brouhaha. We want to pretend that sport is something it's not, and when some people innocently pull back the curtain we rush to demean them so that we can observe the silly myth. Nykesha Sales and her coach, Geno Auriemma, and the Villanova coach and players all took part in a terrible conspiracy that showed that team love was more important than a couple of meaningless seconds on the scoreboard clock.

People say a sappy thing like this would certainly never happen in men's sports. Probably not. Probably that's why men's sports are so screwed up.

Frank Deford, one of Sports Illustrated's most renowned writers, returned to the magazine on March 1. These commentaries, which appear every Wednesday on National Public Radio's Morning Edition, will be posted weekly by CNN/SI.



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