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## Games People Play

Abdullah Shabazz

# Is There No Room For Compassion In Sports?

Late in the women's college basketball season in 1998, during the next to last regular season game for the University of Connecticut, against Notre Dame, Huskies guard Nykesha Sales had just scored on a lay-up to bring her within one point of breaking the all-time Huskies career scoring record. Upon scoring the lay-up, Sales landed awkwardly on her left foot, tearing the Achilles tendon and ending both her season and Lady Huskies career. It appeared that a record so easily attainable moments earlier was denied her forever because of a freak injury.

However, a few days later, at the beginning of the Lady Huskies final game of the season, against Villanova, an event mutually agreed upon by both schools and their coaches took place in which the Lady Huskies were allowed to win the opening tip-off unopposed and pass the ball to a limping and cast-laden Sales underneath the basket, where she easily scored an unchecked and unobstructed two points, thereby gaining the Connecticut career scoring record. Immediately afterwards, Sales was removed from the game and, out of fairness, Villanova was allowed to score an unopposed two-points as well, at which time the "competitive" part of the game actually began at 2-2 some eight seconds after the "tip-off".

What should have been a feel-good moment for Sales, her teammates and the University of Connecticut was subsequently derided by most of the media and a large portion of the public as besmirching the integrity of the game. The career scoring record had been cheapened, the outcry went, because it hadn't been earned honestly during true competition. Because Sales hadn't really earned it, the critics reasoned, she wasn't the real record holder. The nay Sayers said that even though the coaches and players from both schools, and even the previous record holder, had agreed to it, Sales should have had the integrity to turn it down. Injuries are a part of the game; if you get injured short of setting a milestone, you have to live with it. Athletes don't get records because they deserve them but because they earned them.

I remember at the time thinking that too much was being made of this event by "non-combatants" who had nothing to do with it. The fact was that Connecticut head coach Geno Aureimmo and Villanova head man Harry Paretta, along with their players, agreed to this beforehand, and that even the previous UCONN record holder Kerry Bascom signed off on it. Even Sales, for whatever reasons selfish or otherwise, agreed to do it. So who are we outsiders to judge? I would have had a problem with this if this could have affected the outcome of this or any other contest – which it didn't; UCONN won 74-71. So the integrity of the game was never in question.

As for the integrity of the record, it would have been a concern if Bascom hadn't been consulted, which again was not the case. How could it have been, when the record books will always show that, for a time, Bascom was the record holder, something that can never be taken away from her no matter how many times in the future this record is subsequently broken?

My biggest argument in favor of Sales' record was that this was women's athletics we were talking about here. While high-level and even world-class women's athletics is as competitive as its male counterpart, one of the idiosyncrasies we men love about women is their propensity for compassion – or at least more so than men. I can't comment on the correctness of the action, but that it was done out of compassion tells me that, even though the desire, drive and will to win may now be as strong in women as they are in men, the ability to feel compassion has not been beaten out of them. And I personally believe that the world would be a much worse place if women ever lost that propensity for compassion.

I was reminded of the Nykesha Sales incident recently when the same outcry by the media and a good portion of the public this time fell on New York Giant defensive end Michael Strahan, who needed only one quarterback sack to break the single season record in his last regular season game against the Green Bay Packers. The Packers had done an excellent job of keeping Strahan from quarterback Brett Favre all day. With only three-plus minutes left in the game and Green Bay leading comfortably, Favre was seen walking up to Strahan and saying something to him before the next play, a play in which Favre ran a naked bootleg to his right -- and slid into the waiting arms of Strahan, who got by the Packer offensive tackle virtually unopposed, thereby giving him the sack record. While both Strahan and Favre vehemently deny any collusion in this matter, many witnesses nationwide believed otherwise. Ergo, the subsequent outcry.

Many of the same things that were said about Sales over 3 ½ years earlier were once again said about Strahan: The record was cheapened; he didn't earn it; the integrity of the game was sullied. And not unlike the outcry over Sales record, any and all complaints about Strahan's new record are once again falling on deaf ears by this scribe.

Whether Favre and Strahan "colluded" in this record is inconsequential. Officially, Strahan was credited with a "sack", which gave him the necessary ½ sack he needed to pass Mike Gastineau for the single season record. Unofficially, I could care less how he got to it, but just for the sake of argument...

...With less than four minutes left in the game, the Packers were comfortably ahead of the Giants, so the whole "integrity of the game" argument goes out the window – whether Strahan got that sack or not, the Giants were going to lose the game.

Did Strahan really earn the record? I can't say, and I certainly won't get into the debate whether he "deserved" it or not. I do know this; Brett Favre and Michael Strahan are two of the most well-liked and well-respected players in the game. Which in a truly cutthroat world should not qualify anybody for attaining a milestone...

...Which begs the question. If sports, like any other institution in society, is a mirror of the society we live in, then why isn't there room in sports for one of societies ever-dwindling idiosyncrasies, compassion? Most of us watch football, of all sports, for its viciousness and violence (characterizing it as just "aggressive" is a gross understatement, but that is an argument for another time). So we don't expect to see anything that even remotely resembles empathy or kindness; hell, we clearly watch to see anything but. But is compassion so abhorrent in world-class professional sports that anybody who remotely exhibits it is considered weak? I don't think anybody is ready to confuse either Favre or Strahan as anything but the warriors they are, two athletes with competitive streaks so acute they are among the best in the game at what they do. Without this having happened Favre is a certain Hall of Famer, who hasn't missed a start in nearly eight years while taking ungodly pain and punishment weekly. Without the record Strahan is on the fringe of greatness, having been an All-Pro starter several times and regarded as the one of the best defensive ends and pass rushers in the game today.

We use sports as a means of escapism, as a diversion from our everyday lives. Is it too much to expect that even during those times when we are "recreating" that there is no room for compassion? Has the world become so soured that even during these times of fun and games we can't celebrate the niceties our modern day gladiators may so infrequently demonstrate? In a day and age when the sports page has become a police blotter, with so many of our athletes committing heinous transgressions against their fellow man for whatever reason, can we not recognize when two warriors decided in the heat of battle that there was room just this once for a little nicety? If our sports don't have any room for compassion then where in society can we expect to find it?

The answer to these questions is that clearly there is room, even in football, for compassion. And despite what I thought 3 ½ years ago, it isn't a function of being either men's or women's sports. Brett Favre and Michael Strahan proved that there is room for it. And I defy anybody to tell either one of these warriors to their faces that they showed weakness or brought into question the integrity of the game both men have sweated blood for.

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**Abdullah Shabazz** is a general family practitioner and resident physician in San Jose, as well as an avid sports fan with San Francisco Giants' season tickets. He is a frequent visitor to 3Com Park, the Oakland Coliseum and Arena, the San Jose Arena, Stanford Stadium, Memorial Stadium in Berkeley, and even Spartan Stadium for Earthquakes soccer matches. When he isn't practicing medicine or going to a sporting event, you can usually find him on the corner of 24th Street and Florin Road in Sacramento selling bean pies and copies of *The Final Call*.

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