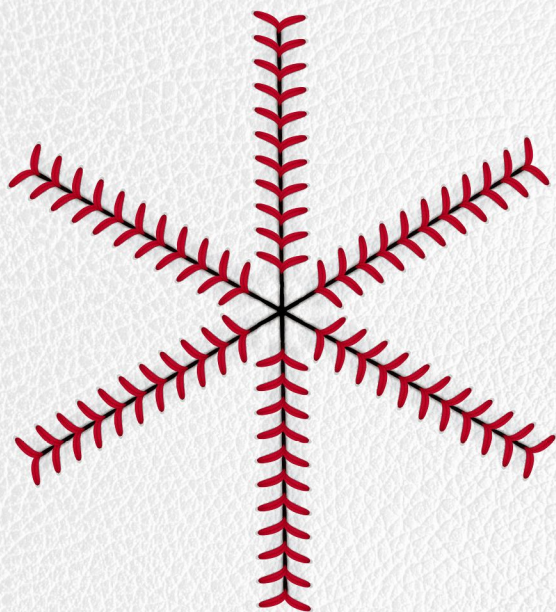


ASTROS AND ASTERISKS



Houston's Sign-Stealing
Scandal Explained

EDITED BY JONATHAN SILVERMAN

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CHAPTER 10

“To Learn Baseball”: A Transatlantic Dialogue on the Astros and the American Ways of Winning

MICHAEL HINDS AND JOSEPH RIVERA

Editor’s note: Michael Hinds is from Omagh, a small town in Northern Ireland. Joseph Rivera is from Webb City, a small town in Missouri. They both work at Dublin City University. Hinds teaches American literature; Rivera, philosophy. Their offices are about one hundred feet apart, and Rivera often has to pass Hinds’s office. There is often a pause for conversation, and it moves customarily to sports, not least because it allows them to talk about something other than work.

That said, this still means that they have to find words to work through differences in perception that arise out of their backgrounds, cultural contexts, and academic specializations. Rivera is exiled in Ireland, a country where practically nobody (apart from the odd expatriate like himself) either plays baseball or talks about it. Hinds originally learned about the game almost by accident, as a by-product of a three-year stint living in Japan at the end of the 1990s. His perception of the great American game has necessarily been altered by that experience. Never having played the game does not diminish Hinds’s appetite for knowing more about it, not least because of its lore and rich literary history. He tends to have questions, while Rivera has answers. The phenomenon of the Houston Astros scandal therefore presents them with a problem of mutual acculturation, in trying to figure out whether it is uniquely American or symptomatic of broader trends in sport and culture. To understand each other and reckon the importance of what happened, to find the right idea or reference through which to explore the ancient art of cheating, they performed the Socratic art of dialogue, exploring the relationship between European football scandals and the Astros imbroglio, the literary and language components of scandals, the connections between cultural and national identities and cheating, as well as what Robert Frost, a baseball fan and American poetic icon, might have thought about the scandal.

José Altuve

Hinds: I remember talking to you in 2018 about José Altuve, Joe. He seemed so good to me that it almost felt like cheating. Watching Chris Sale pitch for the Red Sox around the same time felt like something similar. Both of them seemed to be practically unplayable, in the sense of the word as I understand it. They seemed almost too adept at the game they were playing.

Altuve's excellence in particular seemed so singular, though, because it seemed as if he was built for resilience rather than dominance but turned out to have both. Aside from Diego Maradona or Leo Messi, he seemed to me to be the best sportsman (I think we have a language gap to negotiate, would an American say athlete?) I ever saw who was under five and a half feet (he's officially listed by Major League Baseball as five-six). So he undermined all sorts of assumptions about modern sport requiring an increasingly typical uber-physicality, ballplayers who were at least a foot taller like Sale.

Altuve was one in the eye for sports eugenicists; in fact, above all what he seemed to represent was defiance, both of the opposition and the odds. So when the news of the malfeasance of the Astros organization emerged, it was not so much that it was hard to comprehend, because I assumed that things like sign stealing are more or less a constant in the game. Rather, it seemed that a player such as Altuve did not seem to need any help. He gave off a vibe that he had never got much of that from anyone. And, as it turns out, the analysis by Tony Adams seems to show that Altuve did not avail much of the sign stealing, if at all. Yet this seems to be the kind of scandal that may well taint people by association anyway. If the organization is perceived to be dirty, then the player is seen as symptomatic of that.

Rivera: Hitting a baseball coming at you in excess of ninety miles an hour represents not just an athletic skill only some of us are lucky enough to master but perhaps the skill with the highest degree of difficulty in all of sports. The repertoire of the pitcher can overwhelm the hitter so much that even the best sit down in the dugout and take notes on each pitcher (Albert Pujols is famous for keeping a detailed notebook on pitching styles, counts, etc.): the curveball, the splitfinger, the knuckleball, the cutter, the slider, the fastball with natural movement, and not least the changeup; even the all-powerful Pedro Cerrano in the 1989 movie *Major League* could not find the patience to hit the changeup. He could hit the ball a mile when he connected, but he simply could not connect most of the time!

Even Altuve, however small in stature he may well be, cannot cheat himself into the kind of athlete who can hit for a historically high average, and

short players in baseball's lore are plentiful, from Joe Morgan and Pete Rose to Ozzie Smith and Kirby Puckett—to name a few. In 2017, the year Altuve won the MVP, he hit .346 and had just over two hundred hits. His twenty-four home runs do not even reach the widely regarded low-water mark of thirty for a slugger to be considered a power hitter.

His statistical line, too, matched what he had produced since 2014—this is not to include his base stealing prowess stretching back to 2012. Altuve is simply an excellent athlete who might have exploited some sign stealing in service of a few more base hits. If he had hit sixty home runs or hit .400, then I would like to challenge the notion that Altuve morphed into something he's not, like José Canseco or Mark McGwire after steroids. I was genuinely shocked by the revelation of the complex mechanism involved in sign stealing conducted by the Astros, but I was equally shocked to see so much outrage, as if it constituted a massive advantage of some sort. Sign stealing is not tripling one's strength (and size) through use of human growth hormone.

The Scandal in American Context

Hinds: So do you think this is a peculiarly American thing? Does the American way of winning have a particular character of its own, whether it be ugly or beautiful? How does the victory culture of European soccer, with its hegemonic big clubs that dominate despite the complexes of promotion and relegation, compare to that of the United States, where systems try to foster competitiveness while protecting the investments of owners? The phrase "financial doping" gets used in European soccer to decry the influence of big clubs over the others, and their ability to dominate transfer markets. I doubt if anyone would ever use that phrase to describe how the Yankees operate, even if their dominance would be comparable.

What seems most remarkable about American sports is its protectionism; the European way in which clubs get promoted and relegated seems too terrifying to contemplate. It has me asking whether the European model is emulating the chaos of free-market capitalism or rather allowing for social mobility. At different moments in history, it might look like either.¹ But by contrast, Major League Baseball, the National Football League, National Hockey League, and National Basketball Association look to a European like four closed loops, where the same teams follow the same course, year on year, and yet this apparently structural anticompetitiveness does actually guarantee competitiveness. The Royals, with a much lower payroll than the Yankees, won the World Series in 2015, not the Dodgers or the Yankees. What the

Astros did was perhaps offer an expression of this particular version of competitiveness; the kind of solution they offered to the problem of trying to read the opposition's intentions was particularly calculating but maybe appropriately so. In an environment where the teams are so familiar with one another and there is so much scouting and scrutiny of the opposition, getting some kind of an edge over the other team must be especially hard.

Rivera: This topic could open out into an endlessly ramified set of speculations about the nature of American sports, not least American culture and exceptionalism. My instinct, in light of the Astros scandal, is to say that American sports is tightly regulated and hemmed in by a deep sense of what is "fair" in a way (only by complexion or intensity) that remains impossible for pan-European sports to emulate. The conceptual, political, and metaphysical framework of what constitutes "fair play" or "justice as fairness" lies at the heart of American culture; certainly political philosophy attests to this.² Preoccupation with "fairness" may well simply be a uniquely American emphasis and thus constitute an American expression of what it means to lay down rules, procedures, and policy. Once a consensus is reached, it may also be American to insist that hard discipline befalls those who do not abide by them rigidly. Sports commissioners, like politicians, are visible, public figures who hold enormous cultural (and legal) power.

Hinds: I wonder if there is a more thorough American belief in fairness, or rather if there is less cynicism about it than elsewhere. There is not really a direct equivalent to the likes of Adam Silver (NBA commissioner), Roger Goodell (NFL commissioner), or Rob Manfred (MLB commissioner) in European sports. National leagues have chairs or presidents, and there is a supremo of European soccer (UEFA is the governing body), and a head of FIFA (international soccer's governing body), but the people who hold those positions nearly always seem to be embroiled themselves in financial scandal, as if the office itself tainted them by association. FIFA has become notorious for serving its own financial interests, even as it presents a veneer of promoting the game globally as a force of progress. I know that not everybody loves the American commissioners, but it does seem as though their offices are respected. By contrast, soccer administrators across the world generally are regarded with suspicion, not least because the allocation of World Cup tournaments is a notoriously grift-ridden business.

I recall that the head of the team behind the failed American bid for the 2022 tournament, Don Garber, was astonished by how Qatar succeeded and genuinely shocked by how other countries conducted themselves: "It's not

just soccer fans who took a little shot in the head today."³ Distrust of FIFA for its business ethics manifests as exasperation with it in other ways too, such as when they change the offside law or alter the game in other ways. They are regarded as entirely venal and cynical in terms of soccer as a business, then regarded as meddling and incompetent in terms of reviewing the rules of the game on the field. Either way, they never seem to be associated with fairness, for all that they preach "fair play."

It feels paradoxical in a way. The baseball commissioner is chosen by the owners of the ball clubs, so he serves their interests, not those of the sport as a whole as such. Is that right? FIFA and UEFA bosses are independent of the soccer clubs, yet they are usually regarded very skeptically. Nobody really thinks they have anything to do with "fair play." Is it that the American structures are at least transparent in that the interests of the owners are evidently paramount, and so the commissioners enjoy at least some degree of trust?

The Scandal in European Context

Rivera: And why does fairness, strictly conceived and regulated, manage to occupy such a discernible atmosphere of virtuousness and honor in the American imagination, especially in sports commentary and culture? Why did the steroids scandal of the 1990s in Major League Baseball require political intervention in the form of staged congressional hearings? I think the sheer cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity of Europe renders uniform expectations about fair play simply so unlikely as to make the American rigidity concerning "fairness" unimaginable for European football or rugby. The European mindset, by force of cultural diversity, invokes a set of rules so that the game can be played, but its application and interpretation remain dynamic and fluid (at least more so than in American sports). The media coverage, childhood habits of play, interpretations of time, and "what's important" about style of play, what constitutes an aspirational work ethic, etc., all of this differs in a discrete manner according to country, from Italy and France to Ireland and Germany, not least Romania, Russia, Sweden, and so forth.

We could enumerate other queries here (also economic in nature): what role do sports play in European unity-in-difference, especially the Champions League in football? Differences in all those categories, including sports, emerge in America too, according to area (the football-obsessed South versus the Pacific Northwest's focus on outdoors and a variety of sports, basket-

ball in the Carolinas and East Coast, and the like), but nothing to the degree they are visible in Europe.

Hinds: That is interesting. You have probably noticed that Irish people use the phrase “In fairness” a lot in conversation. What it really communicates is a passive-aggressive “no,” but such overt refusals are not really part of our vocabulary. I do not think that this is a concept of “fairness” that an American would recognize. It is also true that European sports keeps mutating, as does its culture and its language. Nearly all the refs in the Champions League use English as their mode of communication. It used to be that international soccer was the highest expression of the game, and that the World Cup and European Championships were truly exceptional events in which distinctive cultures faced off against one another. The vast majority of players belonged to clubs in their own countries of birth, and only one club from each country got to play in the European Cup, the forerunner of the Champions League.

As a fan, you hardly ever got to see a player from another country, even within Europe. The downside of this was the building of fundamentally racist assumptions about cheating. Fans and media commentators from North European cultures often liked to denigrate teams from the South and other Latin countries for their perceived skullduggery and violence, for example. You still hear vestiges of these attitudes, but reality shows them to be inherently ridiculous. Everyone dives, everyone whines to referees, nearly every club side in European soccer consists of a league of nations. Every club is internationalist, or rather globalist, and, as such, they reflect the history of the European Union, and how it has moved away from the idea of the nation. It is fascinating to see the displays of nationalism in the NFL and MLB, and the recurring deference to the military; you might get that to a degree in international games in Europe but not in matches between clubs.

This also manifests anxieties about identity that go along with that. Lots of European national teams now feature players who have acquired eligibility through being immigrants; nearly everyone has a Brazilian on their club. That is the shape of our globalized reality; at its best, unity-in-difference is realized at the local level, and even the smallest club side has an inbuilt diversity. In this context, national conceptions of fair play must become contested or negotiable. I wonder how many nations or cultures present themselves as having invented fair play. Britain certainly does it; they talk about things “not being cricket” when they are apparently unfair. Yet it was an American, Grantland Rice, who said it was “how you played the game” that counted.

The Language of Sports

Rivera: Sports, while literally a game, lies within the philosophy of language as just one more cultural product among others, wholly conditioned by cultural cues and the many implicit social norms those involve. Sports, like a cultural institution, is derivative of a form of life. Wittgenstein famously observed that if "a lion could talk, we wouldn't be able to understand it." Of course we may well apprehend some of the words, terms, and syntax, but we would not have the cultural competence of "being a lion" or hermeneutical forestructures (or assumptions already in place that facilitating understanding readily a statement) of "lionhood" that would give us the aptitude to grasp the speech of a lion, at least not without endless interpretive labor.⁴

More broadly, we can say that baseball's form of life, that its framework within which agreement about what counts as an "out," a "home run," a "double," and so forth, also invokes a broader form of life we may call sports and sporting culture. No doubt this "sporting culture" grounds our ability to communicate, to inquire, and to argue about sports at all, including the boundaries of what counts as fair play, as in the example of the Astros cheating scandal.

Here, to reinforce the function of baseball's unique form of life, we imagine the following scenario. Try to watch baseball with someone who is not from a culture that loves baseball (baseball cultures are, for example, Venezuela, Japan, the Dominican Republic, and of course the United States). It remains, for myself, impossible to convince the person, say from Ireland, about the pleasures of playing and watching a baseball game. (The same would be true in trying to get an American to understand a cricket match.) They do not have sufficient mastery of its form of life, and only once that individual enters into the form of life can the phenomenon of baseball be understood and, maybe, enjoyed. They must, in other words, share my world of baseball in order to understand, not least enjoy, the game of baseball. Michael, you had to live in Japan to experience (or suffer) its wonders. One may extrapolate: only once one enters into American sports culture can one then, after time, grasp and thereby internalize the rules of fair play, which consist so often of implicit norms that can be made explicit only when they are violated!

Hinds: So even though I do love watching baseball, I am not really at home within it, or at home within its language. So I inevitably cannot grasp the full dimensions of what the Astros did. Yet it would be misery for you to have to watch a baseball game with me, because there would be a burden on

you, the American, to be available to translate. For friendship's sake, better to leave me in my ignorance. Funnily enough, I would also venture that I enjoy feeling like an alien with regard to baseball, that is a happy enough form of self-definition for me. One mysterious thing I remember from Japan was the endless bunting; I wondered where it had gone whenever I started to watch baseball from America, which also became available on Japanese TV as the pitcher Hideo Nomo caught fire with the Dodgers. It really did seem like a different game in Japan. Then Ichiro came on the scene in Japan for the Yakult Swallows, and he seemed to blow apart the playbook of Japanese ball, which was extraordinarily boring and cautious at times (which does not mean it was uninteresting). Other teams could not cope. I think they were relieved to see him go to the United States.

More curiously, my wife told me how she was teaching an English class to some undergraduates at one of Tokyo's many private universities, an elite school for women with three specializations: international relations, Christianity, and horticulture. In class one day, she gave baseball as an example of a word that had come into Japanese from elsewhere, and the usually polite students objected in unusually stringent terms. They argued that Japanese had its own word and kanji for baseball, 野球 (pronounced *yakyu*, literally meaning fieldball); therefore, baseball was as Japanese as samurai and sushi. If baseball was an imported thing, they would have used katakana to phonetically re-create the word "baseball."⁵ I wonder to what degree this is a positive matter of using a sport to assert Japaneseness, or rather a way of saying that baseball is not American (or not exclusively so). This was not a controversial idea to Japanese sports fans of my acquaintance, but it was to me, an ignorant Irishman who did not know any better about either the Japanese or the American conceptualizations of the game.

I grew up going to football matches in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, where away fans would sometimes come to your stadium and tear out seats and chuck them on the pitch. Japanese fans on away trips (especially if they are following the international team in soccer) famously tidied up after themselves, bringing brushes and bin bags with them to the game to collect garbage. This is not so much a mark of respect, necessarily; rather, it is a refusal to look bad in the eyes of the other. In European soccer, you actually want to look bad in the eyes of the other supporters, as bad as possible—without doing any lasting harm to anybody, of course.

This is a long way back to the Astros, but if I am being honest, the banging of the trash cans is the most vital part of that phenomenon for me, the flagrancy of their offense. In the early years of the Northern Irish Troubles, women from Catholic sections of cities like Belfast and Derry would bang

their metal dustbin lids on the street to let locals know that British troops were beginning to search the area, effectively summoning youths out onto the street to resist them. To my trash can-hardened ears and eyes, the Astros were not only cheating but doing so riotously, effectively telling the opposition that they were doing it, and that there was nothing they could do about it. Was this the real problem, that they were announcing the brute reality of cheating as an intrinsic part of the sport? Were they hooligans, announcing a threat to baseball law and order by proving how easy it was to succeed by transgressing against it? Riotousness is public disorder, and even if fans were apparently unaware of their stratagems, banging the can was effectively making their transgression public.

Cheating: Normal or Riotous?

Rivera: I am uneasy with the term "riotous." Injecting steroids, corking bats, or even arguing with an umpire vigorously (or riotously) embody a set of practices proper to the definition of riotous. When it comes to the Astros' unique scandal of detecting signs and pitch selection, they were ingeniously nonriotous, in that the players carefully disguised it, right? If by "riotous" we intend to mean the sheer level of planning and overt inclinations to cheat on display, as if there is no question they were deliberately and meticulously violating the rules of the game, then yes, it was riotous! The Irish may depict the Astros event, its form of life, as a "bold" speech act; a child in Dublin is "bold" when he is being naughty. The Astros assumed the status of naughty, not riotous, I would think.

Hinds: I will not say "in fairness," but they were definitely naughty, and they certainly sounded riotous. The funny thing to me is how what begins as a technologically sophisticated stratagem finds its ultimate expression with the banging of a bin. That is what seems so calculatedly egregious here, the gesture, not the cheating. The trash can was not only speaking to Astros batters but also to the opposition, a declaration of "Hey, we're cheating!" But isn't cheating actually a normal part of playing a game? Aren't the Astros' bins also saying, "Game On!"? I was reading Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, and he points out that it is a spoil-sport rather than a cheat whom we most tend to deplore, the kid who takes the ball away altogether in a huff in adversity: "The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game, and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle." The prob-

lem with the spoilsport is that he or she “robs play of its *illusion*,” “threatening “the existence of the play community.”⁶

Nobody would argue that the Astros brought the entire sport into jeopardy. Larger forces, if anything, will do that. So were the Astros spoilsports? You could definitely say that they robbed the game of its illusion, and noisily.

Rivera: Surely yes. Cheating inhabits the inner world of any sport or game. The Astros were manipulating the sport for an informational advantage. They did not deflate the ball (or juice the ball here) or cork the bats. Instead, the Astros stole information and then used it to their advantage, almost like reconnaissance in a wartime scenario, or how the Patriots would film the opposing team’s practices.⁷ Intel gathering about the style and tendencies of play of the opposition constitutes the heart of many sports, from basketball and soccer to football and baseball. Hence the import of film sessions and scouting.

Rules and implicit norms in sports are also boundaries against which the sport can rebel, and in this process, cause the sport to adjust those norms. For example, pitchers have used all kinds of tricks, many illegal (Vaseline or pine tar on the fingers), to harness their throwing skill. Eventually the mound was raised to fifteen inches above the field of play in order to help pitcher and batter attain equilibrium. The higher the mound, the better the pitcher: the high or steep angle (coming down from fifteen inches) generated so much momentum that the offense (that is, hitting home runs) came to a halt. Indeed, the mound would sometimes be secretly raised above fifteen inches, and the Dodgers in the 1960s were famous for building up the dirt mound to height above the legal limit, giving an even greater advantage to power pitching. Finally, the rule changed: in 1968, after so many offenses struggled to generate statistically compelling offense, the MLB lowered the height of the mound to ten inches above the field, where it stands today.⁸

What about bats? Differences in wood and density, in weight and length, each of those physical characteristics affect the play. Imagine if professionals could use metal bats! In college and Little League ball we use metal bats, and it takes little imagination to see how striking a baseball with a piece of metal could be dangerous to the health of the infielder!

Hinds: The alleged conduct of Tom Brady in Deflategate, in which team employees at the New England Patriots deliberately deflated footballs to the specifications he requested, seemed more spoilsportish to me than what the Astros did in a way, because it was an attempt to effect a result before a whistle blew. It also seemed very difficult to establish the actual advantage that

was being achieved and seemed strangely petty. Then again, it also seemed petty to pursue Brady for it so rigorously. Since it was preemptive, it seemed sneakier than something occurring in the course of the game itself. It is obviously not a big deal, but it *appears* worse, because it is puncturing the illusion of the game as something where things could be taken for granted. Like the ball. Yet messing with bats and apparatus strike me as absolutely intrinsic to the game; people adapt to try to get a material edge over the others, and they will do that until someone tells them to stop. That is where the commissioner comes in, I suppose, and that is why he exists—to establish what is cheating and what is not.

In "Birches," Robert Frost wishes for a boy "too far from town to learn baseball." This suggests that the potential for disrepute is there in baseball, and that to learn how to play the game is also to learn how to cheat at it. He seems to think of it as an inevitably corrupting activity, something that will bring about a fall from innocence. Frost wrote elsewhere that he never felt "more at home in America than at a ball game be it in park or in sandlot. Beyond this I know not. And dare not."¹⁰ He attaches a curious and careful ambiguity to what primarily appears as folksiness, almost as if the game reveals something pleasurable and terrifying at the same time.

If there is an often-heroic strain in the literature of baseball, we also persistently come across the allegation that someone is fixing or trying to fix the game, whether the players or the umpires. Like in "Casey at the Bat": "'Fraud!' cried the maddened thousands, and echo answered fraud."¹¹ Games are legal systems; they need to exist only because illegality is potential. To heroize players is in fact a part of this overall logic; we have to generate heroes because there will always be cheats and cheating. Sometime this all takes place within the same individual. The greatest hero of Greek literature, Odysseus, is not the biggest guy, but the most clever and cunning; maybe that is how we should read Altuve.

The Laws of Baseball

Rivera: I concur with this assessment. True, baseball is exemplarily a legal system; however, the legal system of baseball could be restated better as a form of life.

Hinds: Sure, and the first- and third-base coaches almost look like lawyers for the batting team; there is something of the courtroom in all that side-of-the-hand whispering. Inside knowledge seems to be everything in baseball;

it is not just about the bat and the ball but also the transfer of information pertaining to the bat and ball. Code-keeping and code-breaking are an overt part of what we see. It is a unique game in this regard; it practically seems to ask for cheating, or at least to see cheating as an acceptable risk of the game, because the information you might glean is so potentially precious. Maybe this is what Frost means by “too far from town to learn baseball.” Playing the game is one thing, but “learning” it takes you out of the domain of play and into strategy, cunning, and deception.

Rivera: Yes, it takes “inside knowledge” of baseball’s implicit norms to understand that those hand gestures are communicating a specific strategy to the batter, namely, not to swing on 2–1 count, or to the base runner to steal second base on a 3–0 count, and so forth. The rules of the game are only properly understood once you get to know the game. So when a pitcher “hits” the batter, it is necessary that when the batter’s team is pitching, that he retaliate and “hit back” one of their hitters. How would I know that retaliation is necessary? One would think such retaliation is illegal, and it is according to MLB rules, and the umpire has every right to eject the pitcher or the manager from the game. The retaliation is acceptable because it constitutes social “scorekeeping,” and baseball teams hold each other accountable in these implicit kinds of ways.¹² Fans expect retaliation and understand it as part of the normal implicit or “unspoken” internal consistency of the baseball game as *this* form of life and not some other form of life. Baseball brawls (like hockey fights?) reflect, too, a necessary mode of holding teams accountable to fair play. If one baseball team is out of line, for whatever reason, the opposing team may charge the pitcher and literally attempt to fight him on the mound. The clearing of both benches ensues, and often, but not always, a full-scale brawl is born as spectacle to behold on the television. No one really gets hurt in the brawl, but the posturing of the spectacle, while illegal, is an implicit norm in baseball. So I would say violating some formal rules in favor of implicit rules constitutes a central part of any sport and especially baseball. Again, one may infer this as a way of “being a baseball player and fan” once one undergoes inauguration into its form of life.

Hinds: Baseball fights in Japan were interesting in this regard, organized skirmishes in which nobody should get hurt. My favorite player over there, a sullen pitcher named Balvino Galvez, hilariously failed to understand that this was the script. He would casually thump people, at least it looked casual, and their astonishment when he did so was palpable. It seemed as if nobody could figure out what his problem was. Whenever he played, there was real

trepidation in the air, a sense that norms were going to be violated. I loved him, not least because he satisfied the idea that a palpable level of transgression is necessary to the experience and pleasure of sport. In some respects, it is what makes it most enjoyable and memorable. Apologies for using soccer as my reference point again, but Maradona's "Hand of God" goal in the 1986 World Cup is easily as memorable and great as anything else he did. The Astros did not spoil baseball, therefore; if anything, they made it newly interesting. Look at the pleasure fans took in booing them in the 2021 playoffs. Carlos Correa was a magnificent heel.

Cheating involves some of the grandest designs of sport, even on its most modest stage. In order to secure the cancellation of a forthcoming game, a lower league Irish soccer team pretended to league authorities that one of its players (incidentally, he was from Spain and had already moved to another team) had died. In reality, all of the players were going to a bachelor party.¹³ Nobody died, so there should not be too much outrage, and nobody was ever sign-stolen to death either. Yet the Irish scandal was quickly forgotten, and the Astros remain under intense scrutiny. I do not know if decoding a series of hand gestures is worse than faking a death. Maybe American cheats are less forgivable simply because there is so much more invested (literally) in their games. Yet maybe nobody would have cared at all if the Astros had lost.

Ireland, Fiers, and Back to Altuve

Rivera: As an American living in Ireland, I chuckle to myself because it is true to a chief difference between American and Irish culture. Irish culture, much like their Mediterranean counterparts, enjoy a fluid sense of time, and with this comes a more relaxed interpretation of rules in general, rules about sporting events, drinking, eating, attending lectures at university, banking regulations, and so on. This anecdote about the Irish soccer team feigning the death of a teammate would probably never happen in American sports. Perhaps the players know that American media machine, famous for its journalistic scrutiny, would unveil the horrors of the truth and, in turn, mercilessly moralize the affair as shameful. Obviously the Irish public found out about the stunt, and yet, while it is memorable (you raise it here and still remember the event fondly), it is recalled as an event of humor and clever manipulation, for the sake of lads celebrating each other at a bachelor party.

Life is a party, of course, and the parties serve to function as a cathartic release for whole cultures. America could improve its party instinct. That is: I do think, while outdated, the distinctly Protestant work ethic of American

capitalism (and German capitalism) proposed and defended by Max Weber more than a century ago, and critically updated by Kathryn Tanner in a recent set of Gifford lectures in Scotland, means that American sports culture makes winning the telos, the ultimate object, of sports. One can hear the tortured focus on winning a championship in most professional male athletes, for the competitive nature of a Michael Jordan, a Kobe Bryant, a Tiger Woods, or a Tom Brady is legendary. LeBron James is chasing championships as we speak, and he looks haggard for it. Yet, this haggard, if tireless, focus on winning is valued by the American public. Only those who sacrifice everything will be champions, and what nobler trait can one develop than being a champion? Who does not want to be a winner? Catholic culture, according to Weber (however outmoded his reasoning is), produces a more holistic approach to life, where winning is enjoyed but is not the bottom line or telos of one's vocation. It follows, therefore, that an Irish soccer team need not ensure that production (or winning) is maximized at all costs. One could say that the overly Protestant cultural norms (often implicit) could learn the joy of a broader definition of winning harbored in Catholic Ireland. Such a comparison remains pregnant with possibilities of cultural and historical analysis and offers little more than a suggestive framework for future considerations of fair play, sports, and a sense of vocation.¹⁴

Hinds: I don't know. We take some sport very seriously in Ireland, especially at the international level. That is a reflection of the smallness of the country, maybe, and the anxieties over prestige that come with it. Perhaps, if Ireland was more economically powerful, then it would care less about losing to England or France. As the Irish nation evolved out of British rule, the Gaelic Athletic Association invented sports in which they would not have to compete against other countries, hurling and Gaelic football. A smart move in terms of nation-building, perhaps. These are amateur games, but they are cutthroat and highly competitive. A faked death would be a massive scandal, as would drug use or any form of perceived illegality. Even if such things happened, you would more than likely never hear about it. Nobody would talk.

Which brings us to Mike Fiers, the pitcher who revealed the scheme to *The Athletic*. In some eyes, he might be viewed as the supreme spoilsport. He communicated an inconvenient truth, and many people would maybe rather he said nothing—including the commissioner. I am sure we could go on for hours about the peculiar status of whistleblowers in Western culture, and Fiers can be compared as a whistleblower (guardedly) to figures like Edward Snowden. But what was especially striking about Fiers was that he was not simply some kind of splenetic malcontent, operating out of resentment

against a former team, but that he was highlighting how the Astros' cheating compounded other injustices that were generated by the peculiar labor market that is attached to pitching. This brought the case into a different sphere altogether and exploded the idea of team unity in such a culture. In the original piece in *The Athletic*, he made it transparently clear that this was a problem for the game as a structure, and not just the Astros:

I just want the game to be cleaned up a little bit because there are guys who are losing their jobs because they're going in there not knowing. Young guys getting hit around in the first couple of innings starting a game, and then they get sent down. It's B.S. on that end. It's ruining jobs for younger guys. The guys who know are more prepared. But most people don't. That's why I told my team. We had a lot of young guys with Detroit (in 2018) trying to make a name and establish themselves. I wanted to help them out and say, "Hey, this stuff really does go on. Just be prepared."¹⁵

This is peculiarly consequential thinking and is a manifestation of the context of precarity within which so many people, especially young people, experience employment in the twenty-first century. The biggest reason to feel cheated in such a context is that you work as hard as the Protestant work ethic demands and end up with very little in return. Sports is a gig economy in extremis, where for every LeBron (although there is only one) there are thousands of expendable individual contractors who play ball and get relatively little in return. Europeans still have their social protections, and you can tolerate cheating when you have such a safety net. The most notorious transgressions center on match-fixing and on-field violence, but these are global and transhistorical issues. Occasionally there is a really egregious outrage, as when Spain won the Men's Intellectually Disabled Basketball Gold at the 2000 Sydney Paralympics, but many of their team had falsified their disabled credentials.¹⁶ Yet that case seems so bad that it almost becomes pathetic. Imagine wanting a medal so badly that you would steal one from an intellectually disadvantaged person. But now you can not only imagine it, you can even see how it was done! The rules seem almost irrelevant.

The sport that most closely resembles baseball in its form, cricket, has its issues, such as ongoing cases of "ball-tampering" and "sledging" (verbal abuse of opponents), but cricket is not really a European game, rather a colonial one, played wherever the British Empire was most hegemonic. Like cricket, baseball has never caught on as a participation sport in Europe. Maybe we are not prepared to work (and cheat) hard enough? The Astros scandal would not play out in the same way in Europe, largely because

the major sports there are not as susceptible to the kind of dynamic and real-time info cheating which happened on-field in Houston and on the road. As such, to European eyes, what happened there remains intriguing but fundamentally unfamiliar, nothing to get too worked up about.

For Americans, perhaps this scandal does not admit such a tolerance. The Astros are guilty of something simultaneously profound and meaningless. And whether he cheated or not, Altuve is still great, if just a little bit more mortal. Do we agree?

Notes

1. At the time of writing (April 2021), this issue dramatically intensified with the announcement by many elite football clubs in Europe that they wanted to form a breakaway league, without promotion and relegation. Many of the English teams involved (Arsenal, Liverpool, Manchester United) were owned by American interests.

2. For example, on fairness see the classic work of Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), chapter 1; also Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), lecture V.

3. Stuart James, "World Cup 2022: 'Political Crazy' Favours Qatar's Winning Bid," *The Guardian*, December 10, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2010/dec/02/world-cup-2022-qatar-winning-bid>.

4. For more on the conception of form of life and language game, see Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §23.

5. Thanks to Michael Parke for his clarifications over these language issues.

6. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1938; repr., Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2016), 11.

7. Dan Bernstein, "Spygate Revisited," *Sporting News*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/nfl/news/spygate-revisited-how-patriots-scandal-false-rams-connections-impact-legacies/ypdo4i8h1uov1xbp9u38mxhho>.

8. "Pitcher's Mound," *Baseball Reference*, https://www.baseball-reference.com/bullpen/pitcher%27s_mound#.

9. Robert Frost, "Birches," in *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 117.

10. Robert Frost, "Perfect Day-A Day of Prowess" in *Baseball: A Literary Anthology* (New York: Library of America, 2002), 263.

11. Ernest Louis Thayer, "Casey at the Bat," in *Baseball: A Literary Anthology*, 13–15.

12. Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 180–198.

13. Emmet Malone, "Dublin Soccer Club Fake Player's Death to Get Match Called Off," *Irish Times*, November 17, 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/sport/soccer/dublin-soccer-club-fake-player-s-death-to-get-match-called-off-1.3712590>.

14. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2001). For a modern reformulation of Weber and

thus for a testament to the enduring significance of Weber's work, see Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

15. Ken Rosenthal and Evan Drellich, "The Astros Stole Signs Electronically in 2017—Part of a Much Broader Issue for Major League Baseball," *The Athletic*, <https://theathletic.com/1363451/2019/11/12/the-astros-stole-signs-electronically-in-2017-part-of-a-much-broader-issue-for-major-league-baseball/>.

16. Michael Pavitt, "Official Sanctioned Over Sydney 2000 Paralympics Scandal Denies Knowledge of Cheating," *insidethegames.biz*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1113226/sydney-2000-paralympics-scandal-boss#>.