

On the Ball and Off the Wall

This column is for non-sports fans who would like some enlightenment and hopefully humor beyond being sports fanatics.

Soul on Ice

This is definitely the time of year for casual sports fans to watch their frantic friends start bleeding from the ears for lack of real excitement in Jockworld.

Any time the highlights and headlines for the Sweaty Sciences lead with coverage of the NFL draft and announcement of the upcoming football schedule, delivered by reporters and commentators screaming like they are covering the Hindenburg disaster, you know they are serving up some pretty thin gruel. What makes these phony dramatics even more insulting/ridiculous/nauseating (choose one or all of the above) are the “mock drafts” that are conducted every day three weeks ahead of time. This is when self- (or network) anointed football “gurus” take a stab at predicting who will be drafted and in what order. It’s pitched like the jewels in the crown of prognostication, provided you realize the diamonds of wisdom being offered turn out to be rhinestones. You’d have as much luck making these picks as a blind man playing darts.

And the only reason any person with a life should care even one whit about the upcoming schedule is to find out the date Tom Brady and the Super Bowl champion Tampa Bay Buccaneers will be facing the atrocious Cam Newton and the New England Patriots. Head coach Bill Belichick and owner Robert Kraft would be wise to fake a positive test for COVID-19 that week and watch the game on TV safe at home.

Meanwhile, the Boston Red Sox and Celtics might as well be playing on fields and courts in the dark. Despite a roaring start, the Bosox are back to looking like the walking disappointment they are bound to be over the course the season. With a starting pitching staff and bullpen that should be hurling (an apt Aussie word for vomiting, a.k.a. Technicolor yawn, parking the tiger, laughing at the ground, etc.) in Worcester, expect little and they will definitely oblige you. If only Boston could get players like Mookie Betts and Andrew Benitendi.

The NBA, meanwhile, is absolutely unwatchable, as it consists only of three-pointers and slam dunks scored by physical freaks. Add to it the fact that everyone travels and palms the ball so blatantly it would make a CYO coach of days gone by pass out. To wit, the traditional small ball-handling point guard in the NBA now averages out at 6’5”+. Back in the day, when this writer played hoops in high school, he was the tallest player on his team at 6’4”, playing against other schools having the same normal human beings.

But wait, and cue up the Mighty Mouse theme song (“Here I come to save the day...” in case you were locked in the attic as a child). The National Hockey League undergoes a metamorphosis every year when the Stanley Cup playoffs begin, teams now playing with a speed, heart and soul that is a full leap above the tiresome regular season games. The hitting is ferocious, skating and technical skills are on gleaming display, the goalies perform body-bending Cirque de Soleil saves, and its end-to-end action makes you nearly go blind trying to follow the puck. Even if you had given up on pro hockey after they shamed the Original Six by putting teams in such well-known snowy winter enclaves as Tampa Bay and

Las Vegas (or Miami and Phoenix, ouch) turn on what every year turns out to be an annual entirely new — and eminently sensational — take on hockey. With all due respect to female athletes, the Stanley Cup is when you separate the men from the boys, along with the occasional shoulder from its socket and teeth from the gums. You wonder how these guys can even survive day-to-day.

So while COVID-limited attendance at Red Sox and Celtics games may hide the possible embarrassment of having fans with bags over their heads, the guttural roar of a full arena of hockey fans when an opposition player gets smoked into the boards or flipped over at center ice is badly missed and quite noticeable by its absence. Just don't tell that to the players who still play like their hair is on fire.