

More of the Same

2002 was a relatively quiet sports year, except for the really weird stuff

BY BILL PETERSON

At the end of most years, it's quite easy to dream up a theme for the past 12 months in sports, even if it's something as broad and obvious as "change." The year 2002 hasn't been so generous.

We first heard about 2002 back in 1986, when a professional wrestling tag team calling itself "The New Breed" claimed to have traveled backwards from 2002, across the time and space continuum, to save the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) from the likes of Dusty Rhodes and Ric Flair. At this point, the NWA has seen better days, Flair is still kicking, Rhodes is barely kicking and The New Breed probably has returned to 2002 and settled into a quiet life.

One imagines that 2002 will go into the books as the year that time forgot and, doubtless, most sports fans will forget about it, too. In Cincinnati, the year delivered more of the same from the University of Cincinnati and Xavier University basketball teams, which is good; more of the same from the Reds and UC football, which is so-so; and more of the same from the Bengals, which is dreadful.

Tiger Woods won a bunch more golf tournaments, Lance Armstrong won another Tour de France and Mike Tyson continued to disintegrate. The Lakers won another NBA title for Los Angeles, which saw its bubble-headed step-sister, Anaheim, win the World Series. Another team from nowhere in particular, New England, won the Super Bowl. Another Atlantic Coast Conference school, Maryland, won another college basketball title. Detroit won another Stanley Cup, and Brazil won another World Cup.

Sports usually is full of surprises. Not in 2002. No interesting or dominant new athlete stepped up in any sport. Unless you're counting high school basketball star LeBron James, who's Dick Vitale's latest iteration of The Greatest Thing Since Sliced Bread — a Diaper Dandy, a PTPer. For all we know, Kobe Bryant could have whipped him one-on-one in his high school days. If anything, the very idea that ESPN piped out one of James' games nationally demonstrates the American sports fan's starvation for novelty.

The most interesting stories developed off the field. The two biggest concerned the expansion of athletic opportunity for women, which really should be a no-brainer, except it conflicts with two historically intractable interests — privacy and opportunity for men.

The *New York Times* has made a rather mawkish dolt of itself in the past couple months, going to so far as to temporarily kill two sports columns that disagreed with its mission to force the all-male membership of Augusta National Golf Club to accept women. It's a fine, high sentiment,

though one suspects that inclusion among a bunch of stuffy, old crackers isn't the finest way to treat a lady.

To understand *The Times'* insistence that The Masters be boycotted by Woods, rather than any or all other male golfers, we would have to venture deep into The Old Gray Lady's inner sanctum, and we really don't want to go there. That aside, one can support public equality along with private autonomy.

An important difference holds between equality in the workplace, which promotes access to subsistence, and equality in private clubs, which just promote vanity. And it's distasteful to prescribe behavior for private agents who aren't in trouble and aren't seeking that kind of help. So we probably should stop short of saying that if *The Times* feels so strongly about the matter and has any guts about it, the newspaper would boycott The Masters. But you get the idea.

The second such story concerns Title IX, intended to ensure equal educational opportunity. It's an important, legitimate and extremely valuable law that the Clinton Administration butchered beyond sense. Unfortunately, Clinton interpreted the law in such a way as to equalize opportunity not so much by expanding opportunities for women as by contracting opportunities for men. Only the Bush Administration could handle it worse, which means the next couple years are going to be dicey.

Bush's Commission on Athletic Opportunity, composed of a reasonable cross section of coaches and administrators across the athletic spectrum, is to recommend new rules for the enforcement of Title IX at its next meeting on Jan. 8. Presently, of the three tests for compli-

ance, the safest is to maintain women's participation at the same percentages as women's general undergraduate enrollment. The problem is that walk-ons are counted as participants, so even if women were to receive proportionate funding and scholarships — which they aren't — schools still would be out of compliance if more men than women were to participate of their own volition.

If the Bushes were to get this right and exclude walk-ons from their participation calculations, then everyone who wants to compete could compete without shorting women their due funding and opportunities proportionate to undergraduate enrollment. Colleges shouldn't be inventing women's sports and begging women to take their scholarships while preventing men from competing without compensation. Opportunity that answers to any other master than demand should go by some other name.

All that said, the emphasis on proportional participation misses the point, because real proportionality won't be achieved until funding is proportionate, and the men's

sports generate (or lose) much more revenue than the women's sports. But now we're just talking crazy. Very few universities are even close to funding women proportionally and, across the country, the idea that women will receive 56 percent of the athletic funding to go with their 56 percent undergraduate enrollment rate is a dream of a distant future.

That's if the Bush Administration doesn't reduce it to a complete fantasy. The commission will issue its final report on Jan. 31.

Moving on to a far less important issue, which still manages to exercise a lot of people, the ballot for the Pro Football Hall of Fame recently was released to its voters. The ballot includes a fascinating name, that of Eddie DeBartolo, the Youngstown shopping center magnate and former San Francisco 49ers owner who's been kicked out of the NFL for his sleazy pursuit of a riverboat gambling license in Louisiana. Basically, back in 1996, DeBartolo attempted to seal the deal by handing then-Louisiana Gov. Edwin Edwards \$400,000 in a suitcase.

So DeBartolo has been excommunicated from the NFL, but he's still eligible for the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Famously, the distinction has been lost on Major League Baseball, which extended its holy crusade against Pete Rose by prevailing upon the National Baseball Hall of Fame to exclude persons on its suspended list. With that ruling, MLB took a tiger by the tail. Battered and bloodied by the bites and scratches, MLB is stuck with having to consider Rose's active reinstatement when the whole matter could have been greatly defused by just letting him into the Hall of Fame.

The Rose affair dovetails with the only truly momentous Cincinnati story of 2002, the pending demolition of Riverfront Stadium, which has been a foregone conclusion for seven years. Through a glorious run from 1970 through 1990, five National League pennant winners and three World Championship baseball clubs played there, as did two Super Bowl teams. Four baseball Hall of Famers played there, as did a pro football Hall of Famer.

A Hall of Fame baseball manager worked there, as did a Hall of Fame football coach who owned his own team. So, too, did the baseball player who notched the most hits and the most winning games. Unfortunately, he pushed his luck in every way imaginable.

With Rose's demise and Paul Brown's death, the stadium lost its breath in the past 10 years. First one team decayed, then the other. Then one team left, then a section of the stadium went down, and now the other team is leaving and all that's left is the explosives.

The Reds will be in a new park next year. The view from 2003 will be more scenic. Here's hoping, also, that it will be more eventful.

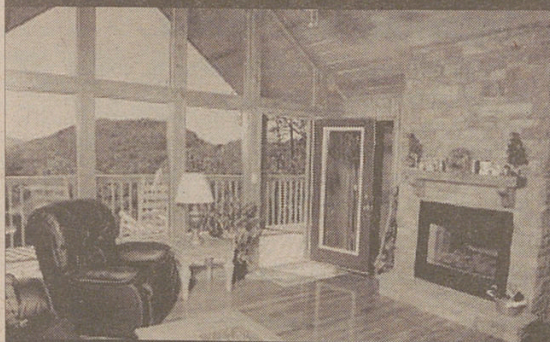
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