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Give Optimism a Chance

I returned recently from a trip to China, where I was a guest of the Ministry of Education. The Chinese had a successful Olympics, and they want to expand their approach to sports from one that focuses on preparing elite athletes for international competition to one that also includes coupling sports and education in their universities. In addition to meeting with the leadership of their equivalent to the NCAA, I met with university presidents, administrators and officials in several cities.

It was my first trip to China. Like others who visited China recently, I was impressed by the urban building boom and the evidence of economic advancement. One city I visited was Shenzhen, an hour north of Hong Kong. Twenty-five years ago, it was a small village. Today, it is a modern city of over eight million, complete with, what seemed to be, hundreds of new skyscrapers.

As I talked with those both inside and outside the universities, there was one thing that caught my attention and that distinguished the current social milieu in America from that of China. It was not the enormous investments made in infrastructure or technology, but the attitude of the population.

There was almost a complete lack of cynicism.

I know that I met with a select and selected population. I spent the time in major cities, not rural areas. It was limited exposure, to be sure.

But there was a common attitude that I found remarkably refreshing. There was some willingness to disagree among themselves and with those in authority; but it always occurred matter of factly, not with the kind of cynicism that takes any situation, even a very good one, and focuses on the negative.

I spend my time these days, as president of the NCAA, in the college athletics community. College sports, I strongly believe, is one of the great subcultures in America. The athletes are enthusiastic and capable young men and women and the fans are avid supporters of the university teams for which they play. There are not many events that are as enjoyable as watching a hard fought football game on a sunny fall Saturday afternoon, or a basketball game between two teams proud of their university affiliations.

But, as good as college sports is, it is also embedded in and surrounded by cynicism. You read it every day in the press, hear it from media commentators and know that it is never far below the surface of fan exuberance.

Of course, college sports are not perfect. More than a few participants are moved by externalities — by future prospects for money and fame, rather than the joy of the game. The competitive urge sometimes overpowers the sense of fair play, for coaches and fans alike. But the cynicism in the air detracts from the overwhelming good of the activity.

Actually, I do not blame the cynics in college sports. They caught the virus from the rest of American culture. Americans these days permit and, indeed, encourage cynicism to pervade their lives. Well, maybe, the Chinese do too, and I just met an unrepresentative sample. But the refreshing example of the sample — whether it is representative or not — made me realize that it certainly would be more pleasant if we managed to keep our cynicism in check.

Being exposed to those who seem to have done so, makes obvious the benefits of not letting cynicism dominate.

I am a pathological optimist. It may be that, with the leadership of President-elect Obama, our culture will move away from its cynical attitude. Maybe, the good will not always be overwhelmed by the marginal or just imagined negatives. As we repair our broken economy, and as we relearn to lend a helping hand when needed, we can change the dominance of cynicism in our culture.

Such change, if it comes, is not likely to begin with sports. Cynicism is deeply rooted in the contemporary college sports culture. But, as we change as a nation, it should eventually reach the sports culture.

As I said, I am an optimist.