

# A Break in the Action

Richard Hoffer

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*On September 11, 2001, terrorists seized four U.S. jetliners and pointed them at America's financial, military, and political centers. Two struck the World Trade Center in New York, leveling the twin towers and killing thousands, while another was directed into the Pentagon and a third, intended for the U.S. Capitol, fell to earth near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. **Richard Hoffer**, a senior writer at Sports Illustrated, chronicled the harrowing week in New York and around the nation – including in our sports stadiums, which stood empty and silent.*

*This is Hoffer's essay for Sports Illustrated, titled "A Break in the Action."*

Strangely, given our presumed dependence on the rituals of sports, nobody made a peep when all of them stopped in the wake of the attacks. There was some initial indecision, of course, until the scale of the devastation took hold. After all, we do not suffer disruption of our routines lightly. The ability to congregate each Sunday in ballparks – or visit one on TV – is one of our most sacred freedoms. The idea of a week without big-time sports in this country had no historical precedent.

You couldn't immediately appreciate the enormity of the event, though. Who could? A day after the attack, the fate of our games was still being debated. Some pundits pleaded for a continued schedule, the better to demonstrate the stiffness of America's spine. What more magnificent insult to terrorists than to show up in packed stadiums, which after all are the real symbols of our culture, and sound our defiance with a loud and lusty national anthem?

Then came the stories. A man who in better times might be called a corporate muckety-muck described how, late for work, he watched his

firm's floors collapse. He rushed to the scene and shook survivors to find what floors they had escaped from, but none of them had been higher than 91. About 650 colleagues had been on floors 100 and up. "I was hoping to find just one of them," he said, now crying. "Just one." Children in a lower Manhattan preschool waited and waited, into an increasingly clouded dusk, long past when any working parent should have showed up to take them home for dinner. The stories, even from a great distance, broke your heart. Thousands more were still to come.

It was a surprise in itself how inadequate our religion of sports was in all of this. The games, and the people who play them, have become so much a part of our lives that we have come to believe they matter. And they do matter, of course, but not in the way we thought. It turns out that sports is no more than an extravagance of our particular civilization, a luxury earned with hard work and good luck. Our absorption in them is our way of saying, *We've got it made*. Who else has so much time, so much money, so much freedom, to be this serious about play?

When our nation is running on all cylinders, those games are a powerful statement. Other nations are divided by civil war, torn by religious disagreements, so mired in poverty, hunger, and hatred that they may never make their way into the 21st century. *But would you look at us!* Our life is so abundant, we are known by the fun we have and the team souvenirs we buy. That's us: institutionalized leisure above all else.

In a short while, when the all clear is given, the stadiums will again be crowded and rollicking, and our nation will be back at play. It's hard to imagine otherwise. Maybe we'll sit there watching the San Diego Chicken or the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders or the New York Yankees and think that it all used to be more fun, that our old passion is only a quaint artifact of a more innocent time, when we didn't have to lock our doors or worry about skyscrapers falling down. More likely we'll get right back into it, doing the wave, gorging on Dodger Dogs, studying that televised crawl for news of another BARRY BONDS HOME RUN,

flaunting our ability to enjoy the silliest things. We're pretty resilient that way.

It's going to take a few more weeks, maybe months, to absorb all of the stories, to clear the rubble, to find so many dead, to organize a military response, to relocate ourselves in a geography that is newly tilted by terrorism. They may have seemed strange and defeated, those stadiums empty and quiet last week, but they had to be, no way around it. America was busy. It couldn't come out to play.