



Why James Madison Would Have Loved Soccer *And Other Things I Learned from JMI's Summer Interns*

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If James Madison were alive today, what team sport would be his favorite?

It was, I'll admit, a bizarre question that came out of left field, so to speak.

But the responses it generated, on the fly, left me deeply appreciative of the college students that participate in JMI's summer intern program. And increasingly hopeful

about the future of our country (if students like these are among America's emerging leaders).

Now, before I share with you the lively exchange that my unusual query elicited, I probably ought to provide a little context.

Every semester, JMI sponsors a college intern program that is run by our Executive

Vice President Becky Limer. Since the students who participate in our summer program usually are not taking classes at the same time, Becky always has me lead a “book club” for the summer interns so that JMI can engage with these students around some intellectual content.

In years past, the interns and I have read a number of good books – from Jon Haidt’s “The Righteous Mind” to Robert Nisbet’s “The Quest for Community” – and we’ve had many animated and memorable discussions.

But no conversation has ever delighted – or inspired – me as much as the exchange that arose from my screwball question about which team sport would be Madison’s favorite.

I asked this question near the end of a discussion sparked by “What So Proudly We Hail: The American Soul in Speech, Story, and Song,” a fabulous anthology that comprised the focus of our study this summer. On this particular day, we were discussing several entries about America’s system of government, including James Madison’s famous essay, Federalist #10.

Eager to see how well the students understood Madison’s thinking about the Constitution, I asked my screwball question (fully expecting someone to have the good sense to say “baseball” since baseball is the quintessentially American sport, in my view).

The conversation started in a promising direction.

“Since he was the shortest of all our presidents, Madison probably wouldn’t have liked basketball,” one of the students chuckled. “Plus, basketball games often are

dominated by a single player like LeBron James – and I don’t think Madison would have liked that much concentration of power.”

“So far, so good,” I thought to myself.

“I think he would have liked soccer,” another intern offered. “Because the rules of soccer make it very difficult to score a goal, just as Madison’s rules make it very difficult to amend the Constitution.”

I couldn’t argue with that reasoning. Indeed, this intern’s observation reminded me of a silly comment I had once made in a USA TODAY column – that soccer ought to be the “official sport” of the sexual abstinence movement since it promotes good, clean fun ... without any scoring!

Still, I wanted to steer the conversation back to America’s pastime, baseball.

But the soccer enthusiasts started piling on.

“Yes, Madison would have liked soccer,” another intern offered. “Because soccer is a very democratic sport in which the ability to affect the outcome of the game is broadly dispersed,”

“But would Madison have approved of a soccer goalie’s special powers to touch the ball with his hands?,” I asked the group.

“I think so,” one intern quickly answered. “Because these special powers can only be exercised within a very limited area that has well-marked boundaries which are clear to everyone.”

“Yes, the goalie’s special powers are similar to the Supreme Court’s special powers,” another intern added. “They can only be exercised passively when things come to them – they can’t be used aggressively all over the field.”

At this point, I realized there was no steering this conversation away from the soccer field. And why should I try, anyway? For the students had displayed remarkable insight, without any advance preparation, about our nation's Constitutional principles. And I was thoroughly delighted by their observations and good humor.

While the exchange that day may have been the highlight of our summer book club, there were many other discussions that proved memorable. Indeed, one of the things our group most enjoyed about the anthology we read was its inclusion of fictional short stories that speak to the American character. So, in addition to reading many great non-fiction works commonly found in civics and history courses – the Gettysburg Address, MLK's Letter from a Birmingham Jail, and so on – we also read and discussed the themes found in short stories like Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" (equality v. equity) and O Henry's "Two Thanksgiving Day Gentlemen" (unexamined traditions).

For the final week of our study, we even read and discussed the lyrics to two songs about America – Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" and Irving Berlin's "God Bless America." This seemed fitting since Guthrie's folk classic – which ends with

several (rarely-sung) verses that question America's goodness – was actually written in response to Berlin's inspirational anthem.

Considered together, these two songs raised a question that we wrestled with all summer long: should greater emphasis be placed on the things that make America exceptional or on the fact that our nation has sometimes failed to live up to its lofty ideals?

It's a very important question that is at the heart of many of our current cultural struggles.

So, I was pleased when one of our interns made an insightful observation about a familiar line in "God Bless America."

"Even though this song's dominant message is positive and uplifting, it contains within it an implicit acknowledgement that we are very capable of making a mess of things," he said. "For why else would we sing, 'Stand beside her – *and guide her*'?"

It was, I realized, the perfect summation of our summer study. For the dominant message was celebratory; but the sub-theme could not be ignored. Ours is a great nation. But we are still striving to become a "more perfect union."

With insights like those offered by this year's crop of JMI summer interns, we may get there yet.