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## It's Amateur Hour in the Big Apple

Now that the House has voted on the Contract With America, the nation is getting down to really serious business: the NBA play-offs, the start of the major league baseball season, the U.S. Open (this year on Long Island), and the America's Cup competition.

This will be an especially tough year for New Yorkers, who are already witnessing the collapse of the Rangers, a team that won the Stanley Cup last year and showed its gratitude for the tickertape we showered on them by immediately resuming their losing ways. And the new smoking ban at Shea and Yankee stadiums will make baseball games far more dangerous if nicotine-deprived fans increase their beer consumption, causing severe crowd-control problems. Soon, the George Steinbrenner show in which a Tampa businessman threatens to move the Yankees out of town will resume. Even Christy Whitman is playing the game, with her proposal that the Giants and Jets adopt New Jersey as their moniker, not just their location.

It's time for New York City to stop subsidizing professional teams and invest in participant, not spectator, sports. We need a sports policy that serves the city's changing population and neighborhoods, not just the elites who fill the first row of Madison Square Garden. Soccer may never surpass football's television ratings, but it's the dominant game at Flushing Meadow Park. In Van Cortlandt Park, cricket is preferred to baseball, and in Gaelic Park, hurling and Gaelic football are the sports of choice. Even those Manhattanites who are too tired to jog and too round to rollerblade have found salvation in walking.

For the past two decades, city policies have undermined citizen involvement in sports: by converting armories into homeless shelters, by failing to maintain parks, by disinvesting in public school athletics and by turning Central Park over to entertainment companies. But even the boom in private gyms and personal trainers has not been able to kill community-based sports in New York.

The baseball diamonds of Randalls Island and Red Hook are jammed with kids learning how to score from first; the basketball courts on Tillary Street in downtown Brooklyn and Third Street in Greenwich Village are always busy in warm weather, and bikers, joggers and fishermen continue to parade on the Shore Parkway promenade. And thanks to the persistence of Tom Fox, head of the Hudson River Conservancy, the lower Manhattan waterfront has a new, no-frills bike path.

Before the mayor and governor spend almost \$1 billion to renovate Yankee Stadium, and then are forced to modernize Shea Stadium in order to level the playing fields, it's time to reconsider

the city's entire approach. Let's abandon municipal subsidies for professional sports in favor of renewing parks and constructing athletic facilities that can reinvigorate neighborhoods and keep teenagers out of trouble.

With the city short of cash and the construction industry in the doldrums, why not test the private sector's appetite for building and operating athletic facilities. For instance, why not construct tennis courts, ice-skating rinks and other facilities on the Brooklyn Heights piers? And with Queens West stalled, perhaps it's time to use parks and recreational facilities to create a market for housing, just as Central Park added value to upper Manhattan. Rather than replace Macombs Dam Park with new parking lots next to Yankee Stadium, we should replace the stadium with a new amateur sports complex. That would prove government can build something for kids in addition to correction facilities and high schools that resemble holding tanks.

Investing in parks and sports facilities will do more to improve the health of this city than any smoking regulation or upscaling of Yankee Stadium. Professional teams are not worth our loyalty or tax dollars, and most of the kids in this city can't even afford a Knicks ticket. Let's make New York a town for sports, not just sports fans.

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