

As the Worm Turns

The antics of Dennis Rodman in North Korea detract from the efforts of serious diplomacy through sports



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As various parts of the world continue to present diplomatic challenges—North Korea, Iran, Syria, Venezuela—the need for an über-diplomat is high, perhaps even a superhero type who can tame the most villainous of despots. Cometh the hour, cometh the man. And that man is Dennis Rodman? Yes, Dennis Rodman, the “Worm” and

new BFF of North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-un, whom Rodman described as “a cool guy.” Apparently Rodman’s basis for this conclusion was that Kim “loves basketball.” Thus, Rodman and Kim were courtside together at a Harlem Globetrotters game in North Korea, the “clown princes of basketball” playing before two clowns. Rodman and Kim may have been the most unlikely couple to preside over a court since Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

When I first heard of Rodman’s visit, I thought there were two possibilities: 1) Rodman’s benefactor, Donald Trump, was testing out a new reality TV series to be called “The Celebrity Diplomat” or 2) Kim had mistaken Rodman for the North Korean villain with all the diamonds in his face in the James Bond movie “Die Another Day” and was giving him a hero’s welcome home.

It’s not that diplomatic efforts cannot be centered around sports in general or basketball in particular; it’s simply that diplomatic efforts cannot be centered around Dennis Rodman. An encounter between a repressive ruler who craves acknowledgement by the West and a constant attention-seeker with no portfolio is not the stuff of diplomatic breakthroughs. Yes, Rodman may have been the first American to get close to Kim. Would the State Department be interested in his Rodman-esque insight into Kim’s psyche? Probably. Will they seek a debriefing from him? No. This is a guy who once wrote about what it was like to have sex with Madonna. Do you think for a minute he would hesitate to speak publicly about what it was like to speak to a State Department debriefer? If that happened, Rodman’s visit would suddenly be cloaked in officialdom, which is exactly what he and his new “friend” desire.

One of my problems with Rodman’s latest antics is that they take attention away from the athletes who really do make the world a smaller place through sporting outreach.

The Harlem Globetrotters themselves certainly fall into this category. In fact, the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs has an official sports diplomacy program. Its website says, “Sports diplomacy uses the universal passion for sports as a way to transcend linguistic and sociocultural differences and bring people together.” The State Department has sent more than 200 U.S. athletes to more than 50 countries as part of a “sports envoy” program in the last eight years. Athletes such as baseball Hall of Famer Barry Larkin—who just went on a sports envoy program to India last month—are on that list, as are figure skaters Evan Lysacek and Michelle Kwan. Dennis Rodman is not (nor, as far as I know, does he ice skate).

But perhaps Rodman had more James Bond-ish designs in visiting North Korea. Perhaps he was following the example of former MLB catcher Moe Berg, who shot film of Tokyo Bay in the 1930s while on a tour with a group of American

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baseball all-stars. Berg’s film proved critical in the war effort, and he later became a spy for the OSS. Berg certainly qualifies as a historical analog for Rodman in at least one respect. Casey Stengel described Berg as “the strangest man ever to play baseball.”

So, we now have the valuable intelligence that Kim Jong-un likes basketball. If we find out that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad likes American football, do we deploy Randy Moss? If Hugo Chávez’s successor in Venezuela is a baseball fan (and particularly if he wants to open casinos) should Pete Rose be dispatched? While the State Department weighs these options, Rodman shows no signs of slowing down his diplomatic initiatives. As of this writing, he was in Rome trying to get an audience with the new pope. If Pope Francis obliges, it will surely be a sign of God’s grace.

Until then, there is perhaps another spiritual connection to Rodman’s sojourn in North Korea. On February 25, Allan Calhamer, the inventor of the popular board game Diplomacy, died. Rodman landed in North Korea the next day. ■

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