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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

In a recent ad for Under Armour sneakers, the actor Jamie Foxx intones the following: “You know, the Greek philosopher Aristotle said ‘You are what you repeatedly do.’ Huh – but in our book, we take it a little deeper. We say, ‘You are what you repeatedly do when things get hard’” (Under Armour 2015). Foxx goes on to say, “My apologies to Aristotle, but excellence doesn’t become a habit by running the same path over and over. No, No, No! You know what the excellent ones do? They reinvent the rules altogether. The excellent ones just step up to the line and ask ‘What’s the record?’” (Under Armour 2015).



Dr. Timothy Madigan

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In a recent ad for *Under Armour* sneakers, the actor Jamie Foxx intones the following: “You know, the Greek philosopher Aristotle said ‘You are what you repeatedly do.’ Huh – but in our book, we take it a little deeper. We say, ‘You are what you repeatedly do when things get hard’” (*Under Armour* 2015). Foxx goes on to say, “My apologies to Aristotle, but excellence doesn’t become a habit by running the same path over and over. No, No, No! You know what the excellent ones do? They reinvent the rules altogether. The excellent ones just step up to the line and ask ‘What’s the record?’” (*Under Armour* 2015).

Since I am a philosopher by profession, it’s perhaps not surprising that I cannot help but connect current topics with the age-old wisdom of thinkers of the past. What might they say to this claim that “excellence” is all about reinventing the rules?

The goal of all life, for Aristotle, is to excel through one’s abilities within a social framework (or a civilizing process) that channels our energies in fruitful ways by giving us rational guidelines to follow. This theory is known as “Virtue Ethics” and the concept of good sportsmanship is at its very heart. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*,

a work he wrote in part as a manual for his son Nichomacheus on how to develop as a virtuous person, Aristotle also discusses the concept of *eudaimonia*. Usually translated from the Greek as “happiness,” a better translation would be “self-fulfillment through personal excellence” or “human flourishing.” For Aristotle, the good life consists of developing one’s natural abilities through the use of reason. A virtuous life is one where proper habits are formed that allow one to reach one’s full potential. The word “eudaimonia” itself comes from combining two Greek words—“eu” meaning “good” and “daimonia” meaning “soul” or “spirit.” Literally, then, a happy person is one who has achieved a state of fulfillment (or “personal best”) and thus demonstrates to others the possession of a “good soul.” The “soul” in this regard is the essence of person, or as Jamie Foxx puts it, “you are what you repeatedly do.” That is to say, one’s essence is determined by one’s habits and these habits can be judged to be good (virtues) or bad (vices) in regards to how they relate to the means by which one achieves one’s goals. When both a person and a society reach a point where the only thing that matters is winning—by whatever means necessary—then from a moral perspective both the person and the society can be judged to be despicable. There is no honor when records are set by vicious means.

For Aristotle, the struggle to be one’s best necessarily involves respect for one’s opponent—it is the genuine struggle against a worthy adversary that allows a person to truly understand his or her own abilities. As the old saying goes, when you cheat you’re only cheating yourself. How can one really know if one has done one’s best if victory involves deception or less-than-worthy means of achieving one’s ends? While this may seem an “old-fashioned” view, it is important to note that those modern-day athletes who have been judged to be cheaters or deceivers are not usually admired as persons, nor considered to be proper role models. An Aristotelian perspective still, I would argue, predominates in our love for sporting records that are achieved by following the rules.

Sportsmanship involves fair play, decency, and respect—for oneself, the competitor, and for the sport itself. Ideals of sportsmanship, such as competitiveness, hard work, fair play, obedience to authority, and dedication, are tied to a society’s cultural morality. Sportsmanship is tied to morality because it represents an ideal form of behavior—to be a good sport and to play fairly.

Sportsmanship, then, is an expression of morality and provides a code of acceptable behavior for athletes to abide by in their pursuit of fair play. Good sportsmanship involves conduct and attitudes considered befitting to participants, especially in regards to a sense of fair play, courtesy toward teammates and opponents, game officials, and others involved in sporting contests, as well as grace in losing. Good sportsmanship generally implies that participants play sports for the joy of playing. However, it should be noted that because sportsmanship is tied to cultural standards of morality, norms, and values, ideal types may vary from one society to the next. But this involves more than simply following rules—it also implies a *respect* for those rules. To wish to *reinvent* the rules simply because they are inconvenient would seem to be a mark of a poor character. More to the point, most athletes and their supporters expect their opponents to play by the rules, and become enraged when blatant disregard for the rules is demonstrated.

Ideally, athletes should not need to have “codes of conduct” from sports leagues impressed upon them. One would hope that they already possess internalized codes of restraint and respect for others which obligates them not to harm others or violate the rules for their own benefit. Contemporary moralists ponder whether violent sports have a place in modern civil societies; especially societies which attempt to impose a civilizing protocol among its citizens. Others address the ways in which athletes, coaches and fans can still achieve a virtuous life through their participation in sport. For instance, Aristotle felt that some activities, such as watching plays or engaging in sporting events, can help people to harmlessly release energies which, if directly acted upon, could have a detrimental impact. For instance, if one is angry because of feeling slighted, a person could act out that anger directly by deliberately hurting another person through an act of violence. This would be morally unacceptable. But simply bottling up the feeling of anger would not be beneficial. Engaging in vigorous physical activity, though, or even watching others engaged in such activities, can allow one to vicariously release the feelings of anger. He called this *catharsis*, which literally means a cleansing or purging. One could argue that sporting events from both a participatory and spectator perspective fulfill this cathartic goal and allow for civilized individuals to purge themselves of energies that would otherwise be uncivilized or harmful.

Yet it is important to note that most people affiliated with the sports world, including spectators and fans, athletes, coaches, and officials, *do* behave in a civil manner. Contemporary moralists, including both philosophers and sociologists, ponder the ways in which athletes, coaches and fans can still achieve a virtuous life through their participation in sport.

Many ethicists see a return to an Aristotelian “Virtue Ethics” approach as a rejection of moral theories based simply upon merely learning and applying rules. Virtue Ethics—as identified with Aristotle’s teachings—stresses the importance of character development, including the harmonizing of one’s personal traits, applying good judgment, and having a sense of pride in doing one’s best, rather than necessarily winning or achieving public recognition. While civility may be under attack, it is also clear that athletes, coaches and spectators who violate such norms do receive public criticism and, in extreme cases, are prosecuted for their infractions. It is by no means the case that a “winner take all” attitude permeates modern society to such an extent that boorish behavior, violence and cheating are generally acceptable practices.

In that connection, I would like to briefly discuss a St. John Fisher College program which I feel should be better known – the Honorary Coach program initiated by the football team’s head coach Paul Vosburgh. Since 2005 I have had the privilege of serving every year as an honorary coach for one game each season for the St. John Fisher College Division III football team, the Cardinals. (My “winning” record, in case you’re wondering, is 7-3.) The program is open to all Fisher faculty and staff, and each game – including away games – usually has two or more such “honorees.” It has been a great learning opportunity for me. I have been able to meet the coaching staff, the players, the parents, the chaplain and other team supporters in a way I could never have done as a fan in the stands or a teacher in the classroom. In particular, I have been able to observe several of my athlete students as they prepare for the big game, work with their coaches and coordinate their team activities. I have thereby learned a great deal about these students which I could not have done if I had only known them in a classroom setting. A few years back I had the memorable experience of riding with the team to an away game in Vermont, an 8-hour bus ride. I’m glad to say the Cardinals defeated Norwich University 45 to 6—it would have been a long ride back otherwise!

I would encourage more schools to initiate an honorary coaching program such as Fisher promotes. I was able to incorporate my experience in a Learning Community class I co-taught with Mike Gibbons, a Sports Management professor, on “Ethics and Sportsmanship,” and I invited Coach Vosburgh to give a presentation to the class on what sportsmanship means to him. Turnabout is fair play. But I must admit, Coach Vosburgh did a far better job as an honorary professor than I have done as an honorary coach. I didn’t actually have to formulate any plays in the field—all I needed to do was bask in the reflected glory of the victories and encourage the students to learn what they could from their defeats. The Honorary Coach program exemplifies the true meaning of “honor” in that it allows academic participants to better understand the hard work and dedication that goes into planning for and participating in the game, and how such activities relate to the formation of the character of student-athletes.

Aristotle’s notion of a virtuous victor, while it may sound trite in today’s increasingly competitive world, still rings true for all those who love sports—athletes, coaches, support staff, officials, and fans. This is especially the case when one considers how engaging in and given support to athletic competition can help to build character and unite people in a common cause. With all due respect to Jamie Foxx (an Academy Award winning actor, for those who keep score), excellence is not about reinventing the rules but rather testing one’s abilities in light of those rules.

-**Tim Madigan** is Associate Professor of Philosophy and an annual “Honorary Coach” for the St. John Fisher College Cardinals Football team.

