Ethics and Character Formation in Sports: A Philosophical Perspective

Timothy Madigan
*St. John Fisher College, tmadigan@sjfc.edu*

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Abstract
The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) famously proclaimed that “God is dead and we have killed Him.” Might one say similarly that in today’s “winner take all” society “sportsmanship is dead and we have killed it”? Is the very concept no longer relevant in the modern age of competitive sports? In this essay I will show how three long dead philosophers—Aristotle, Kant, and the aforementioned Nietzsche—still have much to teach us about sportsmanship and its continued relevance for the present day.

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The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) famously proclaimed that "God is dead and we have killed Him." Might one say similarly that in today's "winner take all" society "sportsmanship is dead and we have killed it"? Is the very concept no longer relevant in the modern age of competitive sports? In this essay I will show how three long dead philosophers—Aristotle, Kant, and the aforementioned Nietzsche—still have much to teach us about sportsmanship and its continued relevance for the present day.

Aristotle on Excellence

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?

While he lived long ago, the ethical writings of the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) still have relevance to the present day, particularly when we try to understand the meaning of the term "sportsmanship." As a longtime advocate for finding philosophy in popular culture I was pleasantly surprised to hear his name invoked in a commercial for sneakers. With apologies to Mr. Foxx, though, I'm not sure he really captures the true meaning of Aristotle. First of all, as we shall see, Aristotle's concept of excellence (or areté) is not diametrically opposed to that of Mr. Foxx, since he too felt that it involves constantly trying to better one's self, not simply doing the same act over and over. But second and, more importantly, Aristotle would never assert that excellence
equals constantly trying to break the record, if by that one means trying to win at all costs. Admitting one's limitations as well as one's abilities is crucial to Aristotle's overall defense of excellence, and it remains an aspect of sports that continues to need stressing. The concept of arete for Aristotle involves the full development of a person's mind and body, with the proper understanding of one's true potentiality as well as one's true limitations. Or, as he put it in his work *The Nichomachean Ethics*, virtue or excellence consists of achieving a balance (or “golden mean”) between two vices: “the one of excess and the other of deficiency” (Aristotle 1962:43). In the case of athletics, this involves trying to do what is necessary to achieve one's personal best, both in the physical sense of maximizing one's bodily strengths and in the mental sense of coming to understand one's true nature. Such understanding does not come in a vacuum, however, but rather is achieved by accessing one's abilities through comparisons with other members of one's society. For, as Aristotle stressed throughout his writings, human beings are social animals and cannot thrive independent of social networks.

**Sportsmanship and the Civilizing Process**

Since we are, by nature, social animals, in Aristotle's view such personal fulfillment can only occur within a communal setting. One judges an individual by the way in which that individual excels, and one judges a community by the role models it holds up as types of citizens who best express that community's ideals. Personal excellence, therefore, is intricately connected with engaging in social activities. Such activities need to be regulated, so that one has a sense of just what is being judged. How, for instance, can you know if you are a good cook if there is no generally accepted sense of what constitutes proper cuisine? How can you know if you are a good mathematician if there are no teachers of mathematics to guide you? While rules can certainly be amended and, if necessary, even overturned, they have to exist in the first place if one is going to make any sort of judgment at all.

It is within this notion of rules of behavior that an Aristotelian defense of “sportsmanship” can be developed. We know, of course, how important sporting activities were to the Ancient Greeks, the founders of the Ancient Olympics. Indeed, in the *Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle himself gives a “shout out” to a famous athlete of his time, Milo of Croton, whom he uses to exemplify the fact that “the golden mean” differs from person to person: “if ten pounds of food is too much for a man to eat and two pounds little, it does not follow that the trainer will prescribe six pounds, for this may in turn be too much or too little for him to eat; it may be little for Milo and too much for someone who has just begun to take up athletics” (Aristotle 1962:42). In other words, what would constitute just the right amount of food for Milo (and therefore be a virtue) could be a vice for someone else who would find it either excessive or deficient. And notice the stress which Aristotle places on the role of the trainer, whose job is to work with the athlete to ascertain the proper nutrition necessary for the best sort of physical development. He adds: “The same applies to running and wrestling. Thus we see that an expert in a field avoids excess and deficiency, but seeks the median and chooses it—not the median of the object but the median relative to us” (Aristotle 1962:42).

Sport therefore can provide the means for testing one's own abilities through cooperative team activities against worthy opponents, with the support of a community to
inspire one to achieve one's best. While, in most sports, winning is the goal (or telos), how one wins is just as important as achieving the trophy or prize. To win by cheating, or by disparaging an opponent's abilities, or by excessive violent acts, would not be a mark of a worthy character. The winner should not take pride in a task that is achieved through unvirtuous means, and nor should the community treat such a victor as a hero. To do so would be the mark of a vicious, or non-virtuous, society.

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. As philosopher James Keating (2001) explains:

“Sportsmanship is not merely an aggregate of moral qualities comprising a code of specialized behavior; it is also an attitude, a posture, a manner of interpreting what would otherwise be only a legal code. Yet the moral qualities believed to comprise the code have almost monopolized consideration and have proliferated to the point of depriving sportsmanship of any distinctiveness. Truthfulness, courage, Spartan endurance, self-control, self-respect, scorn of luxury, consideration for another's opinions and rights, courtesy, fairness, magnanimity, a high sense of honor, co-operation, generosity. The list seems interminable [p. 12].“
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. Another great philosopher of the past, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), can offer us some further guidance on the meaning of “sportsmanship” when it comes to following the rules of play.

Kant on Respect for Rules

Imagine the following scenario. A football team just scores a winning touchdown. The hometown crowd goes wild. The opposing team hangs its head in shame. The referees nod sagely that all is well. Just then, the coach rushes up to the referees and says, “I’m sorry, but one of my players was offside. You didn’t see it, but I did. You must penalize us for this. I refuse to accept a touchdown that wasn’t properly earned.” When the announcers alert the crowd in the stands and the viewers at home to this bit of news, how will it likely be received? Will the coach be carried out of the stands in triumph for his strict adherence to the rules? Almost assuredly not.

Following rules is an essential part of any sporting event, and one of the most important roles which coaches fulfill (in addition to plotting strategy, motivating players, and inspiring the fans) is to make sure that such rules are both understood and followed by the athletes. One only has to watch the expression on coaches’ faces when the opposing team commits an infraction to see just how important sticking to the rules is to them.

Grantland Rice’s famous statement “It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s how you play the game” is a perfect expression of Immanuel Kant’s duty-based approach to ethics. For Kant, one should never allow anticipated consequences to cause one to deviate from following the rules of ethics. For him, a good character is one who practices reciprocity, that is to say treating others in the same manner that one wishes to be treated. If it would be wrong for someone to cut in front of me after I’ve waited in line for hours to get into my favorite sporting event, why would it be right for me to do the same thing to others? If the rule “one should wait in line before entering an event” is generally accepted, how can I justify being an exception to it? One can only wonder what sort of a coach Kant would have made. His pep talks during half-time might lack the fire of Knute Rockne’s exhortations. “Remember team,” I can hear him say, “don’t ever treat the opposing players as merely a means to an end.” Hardly as powerful as “Win this one for the Gipper!” But Kant was always suspicious of motivations based upon appeals to emotion. For him, an action can only be considered moral if it can be universalized. If it is wrong for the opposing team to win the game due to an uncalled penalty, how can it be right for one’s own team to do so?
Perhaps the real issue here is that the rules of sporting events are not as hard-and-fast as one might think. Allowance must be made for human fallibility. And often the sheer numbers of possible infractions are such that malicious-minded referees could plausibly penalize the athletes on almost every play, thereby giving both coaches attacks of apoplexy.

The usual stated antithesis to Grantland Rice's motto is that of football coach Vince Lombardi: “Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing.” But what Lombardi actually said is rather different: “Winning is not everything, but wanting to win is.” Surely even a Kantian coach would have no quarrel with that—if an athlete doesn't desire to win, then he or she should not be on the field. But if a coach knows that victory has occurred due to a lack of diligence on the part of the officials, it makes it rather unsporting to criticize the officials when the same thing happens to the benefit of the opposition. While I don't expect to ever see so dramatic a scenario as that with which I began this section, I can't help but think that a little dose of Kantianism would help restore the virtue of fair play which is so essential to any sporting event. Go out, and win one for the Kanter.

**Nietzsche on Pride and Honor**

Often, it seems, athletes are driven by other intentions beyond fair play and morality. The pressure to win may compromise the fair play ethos. Athletes may desire fame and recognition, material benefits and self-realization through victory even if it comes at the cost of sportsmanship. The desire to win, sometimes at any cost, causes some athletes to circumvent ideals of good sportsmanship.

Still, victories that occur because of bad calls or unnoticed fouls tend to be long remembered. Interestingly enough, such tainted victories can have their own long-term repercussions and can be motivating factors for those who were wronged. Jennifer Allen, daughter of the legendary Washington Redskins football coach George Allen, published an article in the January 12, 2003, *New York Times* editorial page entitled “Don't Let the Healing Begin.” In it, she writes: “My father, George Allen, was a firm believer in keeping open the wounds of unfairness.” He was so upset about losing a 1975 game to the St. Louis Cardinals, whose receiver, although credited with a touchdown, was on replay clearly out of bounds (later known as “the phantom catch”) that he brooded about it incessantly. “He shared his obsession with the team,” his daughter writes. “The cause bound them together and raised their level of play. In the 1976 season, the Redskins swept the Cardinals.”

As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche well knew, having the right enemy can be a powerful motivating force. He often spoke, in his provocative way, about the struggle for existence and the role which revenge plays in motivating us. In his 1872 essay “Homer's Contest,” for instance, he writes about the Ancient Greek concept of the *agon*, or “struggle,” and holds that the love for contests of all sort, especially sporting contests, was part and parcel with the desire for glory that motivated all the Greeks. Speaking of Aristotle, he writes: “The greater and more sublime a Greek is, the brighter the flame of ambition that flares out of him, consuming everybody who runs on the same course. Aristotle once made a list of such hostile contests in the grand manner; the most striking of the examples is that even a dead man can still spur a live one to consuming jealousy” (Niet-
zsche 1979:35). The example is that of the poet Xenophanes of Colophon, driven to be a better poet than the long dead Homer. Xenophanes sought to overshadow his predecessor, or in the words of Jamie Foxx, he stepped up to the line and asked “What’s the record?” “We do not understand the full strength of Xenophanes’ attack on the national hero of poetry,” Nietzsche writes, “unless … we see that at its root lay an overwhelming craving to assume the place of the overthrown poet and to inherit his fame” (Nietzsche 1979:36). And describing another famed wrestler of the Ancient Greek world, he adds: “How characteristic are question and answer when a noted opponent of Pericles is asked whether he or Pericles is the best wrestler in the city, and answers: ‘Even when I throw him down, he denies that he fell and attains his purpose, persuading even those who saw him fall’” (Nietzsche 1979:36).

One can perhaps admire the audacity and indefatigability of Xenophanes and Pericles for taking on the best and refusing to give in. But do they really meet the Aristotelian concept of virtue? One would rather say that Xenophanes is guilty of what Aristotle called hubris, or excessive pride—a vice rather than a virtue. While trying to overcome Homer might be a worthy goal for some, it doesn’t seem to be such for him—for while everyone has heard of Homer, who remembers Xenophanes? And if Pericles was truly pinned fair and square, denying this fact doesn’t change it but rather makes him seem ridiculous, much like the Black Knight in Monty Python and the Holy Grail, who keeps saying “it’s only a flesh wound” even after his arms and legs are chopped off in a duel. One of the most important aspects of sportsmanship is admitting defeat and accepting it gracefully—notwithstanding the desire to fight again later.

And while some might interpret Nietzsche’s advocacy of the agon as a defense of victory by any means necessary, it is important to note that he himself valued the ancient Greek concept of honor. To him, the struggle to be one’s best necessarily involves respect for one’s opponent and for rules. In his 1887 book The Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche addresses the concept of standards of value. What is we truly value? The most admirable person is one who adheres to a code of honor, and respects those who also bind themselves by their word. He is one who is “sparing with his trust but confers honor by the very fact of trusting, who gives his word as something that can be relied on, because he knows himself strong enough to keep it even in the teeth of disasters” (Nietzsche 2003:36).

**Is Sportsmanship Dead?**

One can ask: have the ideals of sportsmanship really disappeared? Or are they often merely overshadowed by incidents of narcissism and a “me first” philosophy? While we can all come up with many examples of athletes who have blatantly violated the rules, or achieved victory through duplicitous means, it is important to note that these are still exceptions, not the general rule. Sportsmanship is not dead. It does, however, at times, take a back seat to other sport priorities; specifically winning and making a profit. Thus, there are times when sportsmanship seems to be in contradiction with the primary goal of sport—winning. This is because sportsmanship, “insofar as it connotes the behavior proper to the athlete, seeks to place certain basic limitations on the rigors of competition” (Keating 2001:15). At times it seems more important in sport to win than to be a good sport.
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 example, 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.

As previously mentioned, contemporary individuals should not need “codes of conduct” from sports leagues or official organizations to tell them what the proper way to act should be. 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. Randall Feezell, for instance, is a professor of philosophy at Creighton University as well as an athlete and coach. In discussing the importance of “character” and sportsmanship, he writes:

First of all, I associate character with a kind of strength that forces one properly to take responsibility for certain negative events that befall a person. Such events might make one look bad in the eyes of others and oneself. It is the courage to take responsibility for defeat and failure when appropriate, to be honest about one's self. I know of no neat virtue term that sums up this quality, but it is obviously a kind of responsibility. It is akin to a kind of self-reliance, and its opposite is the perpetual whiner, blamer, and excuse-monger. John McEnroe's lack of this quality is expressed in his constant paranoid complaints to officials, as if he has experienced more unfair and incompetent officiating than anyone in the history of tennis. Lack of this quality is apparent throughout the sports world when officiating is blamed for defeat [Feezell 2004:139–140].

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.
Sports and Character Formation

Student athletic participation is an important part of the college experience. This is not simply a matter of achieving a winning record. It also relates to the formation of good character. Students who play a sport are learning discipline and teamwork. These skills can help a student to study. And because the team is depending on each of its players to remain academically eligible, studying and attending class brings with it added importance. Hard work and good grades in high school helps a student reach college. Once in college, the good study habits athletes learned in high school tend to carry over. And on the average, college athletes perform better and achieve higher graduation rates than non-athletes. Thus, the benefits of being involved in sports are vital to the entire college experience. In addition, such bonds often continue to connect alumni to the schools they went to as students, thereby fostering a further communal involvement.

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 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—or as Kant would say, this was a case of reciprocity. 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.

Conclusion

In conclusion, perhaps when it comes to understanding what “sportsmanship” means today, both on college campuses and in other venues as well, the main question is still
the one the philosopher Aristotle asked so long ago—what does it mean to be a virtuous person in society?

Aristotle's concept of the noble person, proud of one's personal achievements because they are personal achievements while also working within a community to help develop the best traits of that community, remains a living ideal, and stories of good sportsmanship need to be told, to counteract the prevailing focus on disreputable and unprofessional behavior.

Finally, another important question to ask is, when cheating is always an option, why don't most athletes take the opportunity to do so? Sports Illustrated columnist Joe Posnanski, in an article about the controversy over Alex Rodriguez's admitted use of illegal performance-enhancing drugs, addresses this nicely. He writes:

I remember years ago being in a high school accounting class. We had this teacher who let everyone cheat. Nothing subtle about it. Kids would walk up to her desk, copy answers, shout them out for all to hear. She wanted us to cheat—or at the very least did not care—and so it didn't seem like cheating. It felt like what you were supposed to do. Still, I remember one guy who refused. He kept his head down and worked out the numbers. The guy wasn't brilliant or holier than thou. I used to watch him sometimes and wonder what was going on inside his head. I never asked him. I wish I could now. Because, at the end of the sad day, the fall of A-Rod just shows that the real question isn't why some players cheated. The question is why some others didn't [Posnanski 2009:15].

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. Kant's defense of reciprocity remains at the heart of why we still, for the most part, respect the rules of engagement. And while Nietzsche's defense of the agon is at the heart of today's sports rivalries, his stress upon honorable victory also remains vital. 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.

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