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Developing One's Character: An Aristotelian Defense of Sportsmanship

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Abstract

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

"While he lived long ago, the ethical writings of the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) still have relevance to the present day, particularly when we try to understand the meaning of the term "sportsmanship." For Aristotle, the purpose of ethical training was to help human beings achieve personal excellence, what he called "eudaimonia" or "self-fulfillment." Since we are by nature social animals, such 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 type of citizens who best express that community's ideals. Personal excellence, therefore, is intricately connected to engaging in social activities. Sport 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. 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. This theory is known as "virtue ethics" and the concept of good sportsmanship is at its very heart."



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Aristotle on Eudaimonia

While he lived long ago, the ethical writings of the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) still have relevance to the present day, particularly when we try to understand the meaning of the term “sportsmanship.” For Aristotle, the purpose of ethical training was to help human beings achieve personal excellence, what he called “eudaimonia” or “self-fulfillment.” Since we are by nature social animals, such 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 type of citizens who best express that community’s ideals. Personal excellence, therefore, is intricately connected to engaging in social activities. Sport 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. 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. This theory is known as “virtue ethics” and the concept of good sportsmanship is at its very heart.

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 the means of winning involve deception or less-than-worthy means of achieving one’s ends?

When it comes to judging a community’s moral standards, a good question to ask is: What happens when an athlete places honesty and sportsmanship over winning? Is he or she supported or condemned? Let’s look at a real-life example. In 2000, a Clarence, New York High School volleyball player, Jeffrey Glick, chose being honest and fair—good sportsmanship—over winning. During a tied (15-15) volleyball match, the referee awarded Clarence a point, ruling that opposing Williamsville players illegally struck the ball four times before volleying the ball over the net. However, Glick knew the ball hit his wrist between the four Williamsville strikes and told the referee that his team did not deserve the point. The referee ordered the point played over and Williamsville won the replay and, shortly afterwards, won the game 18-16 to clinch the match. Glick, who was also the president of the National Honor Society, had no regrets about his decision, reasoning that it would not have been right to say nothing about the incorrect call. Glick’s coach, Kevin Starr, supported his player’s decision, affirming that he teaches character and good sportsmanship as much as skills development (Peter Simon, “Student Puts Honesty Over Winning,” *Buffalo News*. October 21, 2000:A1).

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 (Randolph Feezell, *Sport, Play & Ethical Reflection*. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004:139-140).

Many ethicists see a return to a “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.

The point has often been made, but it is worth repeating: billions of people around the world love sports. Yes, there are troubling aspects about the institution of sport, but there are problems with *every* social organization. Sports adherents recognize the negative issues but prefer to concentrate on the more affirmative ones.

The vast majority of people who participate in sport have a positive experience with it. This includes both athletes and fans who have suffered through the agony of defeat. And some sports fans know about the agony of defeat better than others—Dr. Tim Delaney, my co-author on *The Sociology of Sport* and *Why We Love Sports*, is a lifelong Cleveland Browns fan, and I am a lifelong Buffalo Bills fan, so we can testify to the truth of this assertion! In this regard, once again, sport reflects life. Sometimes you win; sometimes you lose (with some winning and losing more often than others). Usually the rules are fairly applied, but sometimes they are not. Sport, like life, is not always fair. Just as we cannot give up on life, we cannot give up on sports, for occasionally bright moments and events occur that give us hope. And isn't that the meaning of life—to live for euphoric moments that propel us from the mundane? Sports provide many of these moments of exhilaration and that is just one reason why we love sports.

There are times when the positive aspects of sport participation and the desired ecstatic feelings of fans coincide. That is to say, sports fans and athletes share a euphoric moment in time together, and memories of such an event will always bring a smile to their faces. When this harmonic convergence occurs we are all reminded that sport, in its purest form, serves a vital, positive service to society, not least of all in showing that sportsmanship is alive and well.

One such experience—which is very relevant to today’s event—occurred on May 15, 2008 in a game between the State University of Oswego Lakers and the St. John Fisher Cardinals (coincidentally enough, the home schools of Tim Delaney and me). In the top half of the ninth inning, in a game that would decide who would win the Eastern College Athletic Conference tournament, host team Fisher was trailing by 9-5. Lakers’ player Dan Pecora, a junior at Oswego, hit a line drive down the third base line. Pecora watched in horror as the ball hit Oswego manager and third base coach Frank Paino on the side of his head, dropping him to the ground, where he instantly lost consciousness. Fisher coach Dan Pepicelli was the first person to reach him, yelling to Cardinals athletic director Bob Ward to call 911. An ambulance soon arrived and, while Paino (who—while sore for a few days—was soon back on his feet with no lasting injury) was taken to a nearby hospital, the Fisher players and coaches huddled together. After a few minutes of discussion, they agreed to concede the game to Oswego. “The gesture,” wrote Kevin Oklobzija of the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle* newspaper, “which ended Fisher’s season and NCAA Tournament hopes, truly defined amateur athletics. The Cardinals finished with a 25-14-1 record. ‘It was a lesson in the rules of the game of life,’ said Marilyn Montesano, a teacher at New Hartford High School near Utica, whose son Marc

was playing in the outfield for Fisher. ‘My son learned a life lesson I could not have taught him’” (Kevin Oklobzija, “St. John Fisher Baseball Players Get Lesson in Life,” *The Democrat and Chronicle*. May 10, 2008:A3).

Indeed, it was a lesson that soon swept through both campuses. “For the players,” Oklobzija continued, “the minutes and hours that followed—from the time Paino was struck to the time they learned his injuries weren’t believed to be serious—were traumatic but precious. Players cried. Parents cried. Players prayed. Parents prayed. And college baseball players grew as people” (Oklobzija, 2008:A3). The story also received national attention. It was featured on ESPN, which quoted Fisher’s pitcher Justin Lutes, a graduating senior whose pitch had been the one Pecora connected with, and—like seven other of his fellow seniors—whose college career thus came to an end: “It isn’t exactly the dream I had about how I wanted to go out. But there was a lesson that we all learned. People may think that sports are their life. But when you see somebody’s life flash before you, you realize there are bigger things in the world than a baseball game” (Wayne Drehs, “Inches from Tragedy, Oswego Overcomes.” *ESPN.go.com*. May 16, 2008:3. Available: <http://sports.espn.go.com/ncaa/news/story?id=3398247>). The NCAA’s Committee on Sportsmanship and Ethical Conduct awarded the Fisher team its national 2008 NCAA Sportsmanship Male Award. The Cardinals were also named as the Empire 8 Conference’s Male Sportsmanship Award winner. Dr. Delaney and I would like to think that the Fisher and Oswego teams arranged this for our benefit, to show that the schools of the two authors believe in the reality of sportsmanship.

Seriously, student athletic participation is an important part of the college experience. And as the story just told demonstrates, this is not simply a matter of a

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 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 (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.

Perhaps, when it comes to “sportsmanship”, the main question is—what does it mean to be a virtuous person in today’s world? Why, when cheating is always an option, don’t most athletes take the opportunity to do so? *Sports Illustrated* columnist Joe Posnanski, in a recent 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, and 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. (Joe Posnanski, "The End of an Era? Alex Rodriguez's Fall Tells Us All We Need to Know about the Steroid Years", *Sports Illustrated*, February 16, 2009:15).

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. That is why National Sportsmanship Day is such an important occasion to stress the continuing reality of fair play, honest effort and communal aspirations.

There's an old saying: it isn't if you win or lose, it's how you play the game. While that may sound trite in today's increasingly competitive world, it still rings true for those who love sport, especially for what it can do in helping to build character and unite people for a common cause. Sportsmanship, while a battered concept, remains a worthy virtue.

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