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# Sport and Human Values

Angela Lumpkin

Most Americans believe that sport promotes what we may call “human value development.” This conviction, however, has recently been questioned with increasing frequency, and at times refuted outright. Although sport, here defined as “competition to win,”<sup>1</sup> offers the promise of human values, in fact many if not most sports in America diminish rather than enlarge such values. Human values are herein understood to mean “attitudes and behaviors which emphasize and enhance the dignity and worth of man and his capacity for self-realization.”<sup>2</sup>

One may safely conclude that Americans believe generally that competition “made this country great,” and that sport epitomizes the drive to succeed.<sup>3</sup> For many, our national motto “In God We Trust” is rapidly being replaced by “We’re No. 1,”<sup>4</sup> even as the United States must wonder about its long-declared pre-eminence in the world, witness the teams and athletes claiming that distinction, more or less convincingly, in the world of American sport. Unfortunately competition to win does not insure human values. On the contrary, it may and in fact tends to diminish them. For what an aspiring athlete learns early in our culture is that winning is more important than anything else. The catchy saying “everybody loves a winner” is challenged only by “winning is everything and the only thing.” The value of playing has been replaced by the imperative of winning. Parents, coaches and teammates reinforce a strenuous commitment to this imperative. For more and more athletes and at young ages, we are learning, it absorbs the fun of playing and leaves little time for anything else.

Sport has become big business. Little leaguers imitate the pros with their uniforms, manicured fields and communities that seek to sponsor the best teams. Despite tight budgets, schools field several teams to try to publicize themselves. Prominently placed trophy cases filled with symbols of athletic victories represent the importance accorded athletes. Multi-million dollar college programs rely on television appearances, alumni donations and successful teams to operate in the black. While professional teams may show deficits, players in various sports receive an average of \$40,000-\$100,000 in salaries.

Sports reflect and reinforce the bureaucratic ethic demanding an acceptance of social stasis.<sup>5</sup> Research shows that athletes are conservative. They are encouraged to accept coaches’ authority, sublimate personal aspirations to team goals, and dedicate themselves to sport, all at the expense of other aspects of life. Increasingly this has meant that athletes must concentrate on a single sport and train for it the year round. Coaches and administrators believe that without these expectations and demands, winning will be less likely. Worse, writers such as Shaw, Hoch, Scott and

Edwards tell us that sport's appetite for victories dehumanizes athletes. For example, drills are designed to break down a player physically and mentally so that he will voluntarily give up his scholarship, and black athletes are recruited for their skill, without regard for their education and social needs.

Athletes must practice long and hard to achieve the machine-like precision acceptable to a coach. They endure verbal and physical abuse, and accept treatment as puppets who must dress, eat and behave as their coaches want them to. Success in sport derives from hard work and deferred personal gratification for the benefit of the team and the institution it represents. All this is called for in the name of winning, which—especially in college sports—keeps athletics financially solvent. In truth, directors of athletics are more businessmen than sportsmen.

Inherent in this perspective is continual pressure on the athlete. He is expected to improve constantly. He is repeatedly exhorted to win, win, win. We expect this demand at the professional level, but it is rampant in intercollegiate athletics and even scholastic competition and worst of all increasingly evident among children. Motivated in part by the dream of lucrative financial reward, athletes relinquish control of their lives to coaches. Championships are the goals, and drugs, cheating, recruiting payoffs and brutality combine to conquer opponents in order to achieve it. Those who win the glory in school and college and are rewarded financially as professionals are few. Those who fail are labeled losers and forced out of athletics. While little research is available about the emotional trauma such athletes experience, scars do develop from the stigma attached to losing. Too many of the unsuccessful ones become bitter and drop out of sports, sometimes very young:

Elimination is a long term process. Although it may occur at an early age, it can last a lifetime. By eight or nine years of age, many children have already turned off sports. In one study, many young children who opted out of sports indicated that they never wanted to go out again.<sup>6</sup>

There is here a sad irony. Studies have shown that children would rather play on a losing team than sit on the bench of a winning team. They want to be active; unpressured by competition to win, they would choose sports actively, even if it did not result in winning. But when the value of playing is replaced by the urgency of winning, not to win can prompt one not to play. Even the successful professional knows he has but a short playing career before a younger player overtakes him, if injury does not displace him first.

It is hardly necessary to point out that unrestrained pressure to win makes it impossible to play for fun and enjoy the game. But that is not all. The pressure to win becomes so intense that athletes frequently resort to cheating.

Craftiness has been valued along with physical skill. The athlete who finds ways to beat the game, while continuing to respect at least the illusion of its rules, is often accorded a special kind of admiration.<sup>7</sup>

Scholastic and collegiate athletics, nevertheless, manifest positive as

well as negative aspects of sport. School and community unity are promoted. Publicizing teams brings recognition, funding and college admissions. Sport provides entertainment and social control. Unfortunately it creates problems. Sport can become irrelevant to the academic mission of schools, and where a competitive athletic program is emphasized, most students become spectators. The game becomes commercialized entertainment, and educational values suffer in comparison to the institution's reputation as a winner. Especially at the college level, the school makes money from its successful athletes as spectators flock to the arenas. Increased revenue leads to pressure to win from administrators and spectators, which in turn results in scorning human values and exploiting athletes even more egregiously. For the sake of winning, the coach sells his school and its program in the tough high school recruiting wars, regardless of which rules are violated and who is deceived. A report in 1929 stated that

The recruiting of American college athletics, be it active or passive, professional or nonprofessional, has reached the proportions of nationwide commerce. In spite of the efforts of not a few teachers and principals who have comprehended its dangers, its effect upon the character of the schoolboy has been profoundly deleterious. Its influence upon the nature and quality of American higher education has been no less noxious. The element that demoralizes is the subsidy, the monetary or material advantage that is used to attract the schoolboy athlete.<sup>8</sup>

A similar analysis would be equally applicable today.

Let us now analyze several human values ascribed to sport, such as fair play, cooperation, discipline, teamwork, emotional control and self-esteem, to determine "not what the boy is doing to the ball, but what the ball is doing to the boy."<sup>9</sup> McIntosh has suggested four basic sport values that should result from participation:

1. Respect for an opponent both on and off the field.
2. Acceptance of the official's decision without question or dispute.
3. Playing the game to the limits of human skill, endurance and strength without resorting to physical intimidation and brutality.
4. Honesty and openness in all things pertaining to the game on and off the field.<sup>10</sup>

Ideally, an opponent is respected as a skilled athlete who challenges and brings out the best in others. His performances are praised, and he is treated courteously at all times. These values are major stated goals of little leagues, scholastic teams and collegiate athletics. However, in the quest for victory, skill, technique and teamwork give way to intimidation and wanton aggression. Ruthless play leads to injuries while rule-maneuvering becomes a way of life. In such instances the athlete ceases to respect his opponent's expectation and right of fair play. Cheating to win deprives the defeated player of a chance to be victorious and cheapens the victory. When an opponent's integrity is questioned, mutual respect is lost.

McIntosh's second value applies to players, coaches and spectators alike. When the fans yell "Kill the ref," or the coaches verbally abuse the officials, or players argue about calls, not much acceptance exists. Rather



than viewed as essential to the game, officials are seen as the bad guys or enforcers. They are often barraged with insults and debris.

Theoretically sport is man versus man. However, when games are fixed or drugs artificially stimulate or aid an athlete, human abilities do not determine the outcome. When a basketball player fakes taking a charge, he tries to deceive the officials and unfairly burden his opponent with a foul. When the star of the opposing team is intentionally and often brutally put out of the game, winning has become too important. Additionally, intimidation and other psychological ploys detract from the sport and the skills its players manifest.

Honesty and openness are too frequently displaced by deceit and cover-ups, as a Watergate morality pervades sport at all levels. Youths cheat on birth certificates to gain a year's maturity on their opponents. Prep stars change residences in search of a superior team and a chance for a future scholarship. College coaches, usually with the consent of their recruits, as recently evidenced in the Pacific Ten Conference, falsify transcripts, offer illegal inducements, and bend, pervert and blatantly violate numerous other regulations. Hypothetically, McIntosh's values play an integral role in sport. But most athletes' lives are touched by the inconsistency of administrators or coaches who espouse the positive and practice the negative, usually in the name of winning.

One might logically ask, when were the values lost? As early as the turn of the twentieth century, some were voicing their concerns. One said:

Let the football team become frankly professional. Cast off all deception. Get the best professional coach. Pay him well and let him have the best man the town and the alumni will pay for. Let the teams struggle in perfectly honest warfare, known for what it is, and with no masquerade of amateurism or academic ideals. The evil in current (1905) football rests not in the hired men, but in academic lying and in the falsification of our own standards as associations of scholars and of men of honor.<sup>11</sup>

The 1929 Savage Report on *American College Athletics* blew the whistle on commercialized, devalued programs, yet few heard and even fewer responded with change. In 1952 a Special Committee on Athletic Policy of the American Council on Education recommended eight substantive revisions in college policies and programs, such as equal admission standards for all students and the elimination of scholarships and recruiting. These, too, fell on deaf ears. George Hanford and his 1974 committee's examination of "The Need for and the Feasibility of a National Study of Intercollegiate Athletics" and the resulting 1977 American Council on Education's Commission on Collegiate Athletics also expressed deep concern about sports' moral welfare.

A consistent theme recurring throughout these studies and even today is the commercialization of "amateur" sport and its repercussion. The recruited, grant-in-aid athlete in many instances is being exploited for the benefit of the university, as schools profit (money, reputation, prestige) from the sweat of their athletes. Interestingly, most universities are even exploiting the entire student body who through mandatory athletic fees underwrite athletic budgets. In some universities this support may be as

high as 50%. This commercialization becomes a vicious circle in trying to generate sufficient income to pay the bills of an ever-expanding program by filling stadia and arenas. Fans pay money but demand success. Needing the money, athletic departments demand victories to keep the fans moving through the turnstiles. Coaches who do not win lose their jobs. As a result, little time and energy is left for human value development.

The media have, of course, played a vital part in this commercialization of sport. While sport coverage sells papers and papers sell sport, television has had and continues to have the most dramatic effect on sports mania in this country.

Television has affected the economy, ownership and location of franchises, scheduling, staging, management, dynamics, and even the aesthetics of sport. Usually it has been cast in the role of villain and is frequently criticized on six grounds. (1) The avalanche of TV sports will turn the United States into a nation of viewers rather than doers, (2) TV reshapes sport to meet its own needs and whims, (3) TV is responsible for contriving artificial timeouts and excessive commercials, (4) TV at the collegiate level provides select schools with an edge in recruiting. (5) TV coerces sports into altering its rules, and (6) TV distorts the nature of the game it covers.<sup>12</sup>

Ironically, the very institutions which seek to promote sports—the media, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, Little League, and professional teams—have promoted an over-emphasis on commercialized sport that may even lead to its disintegration. Centrally-organized and management-controlled sports with winning as the only acceptable goal are becoming the norm. Fans readily identify with such highly competitive sport. They begin to put undue pressure on players, coaches, management and officials for their team not only to win but to crush all opponents. Disruptive behavior on the field or court as well as in the stands is accepted as part of the game.

Sport as a so-called opiate for the masses is expected to provide a cathartic mechanism for the pressures and tensions of a technological society. Sport becomes a panacea, touted as the last bastion of discipline, morality, amateurism and competitive fervor. Within its unreal or artificial environs, the prejudices and problems of the world are said not to exist, and all energies are to be directed toward competition. In fact, for many Americans, sport is evolving into the functional equivalent of religion.

Such lofty expectations for sport have scarcely been realized. The intensity of competition frequently leads fans to generate more hostile behavior than release such anxieties creatively. Discipline may be over-stressed when professional athletes are told when to eat, how to dress and when to go to bed (but not with their wives), or when little leaguers or college athletes become mere pawns for their coaches to manipulate. Concerning morality McIntosh states that sport rules are written and enforced to make it against the best interests of players and teams to play otherwise. Actually they may lead to an abandonment of moral judgment in sport; rules and not values set the boundaries for players' behavior and action.<sup>13</sup> For example, when a basketball player hits the ball out of bounds and the official gives the ball to his team, what does he do? The rules say the ball is his. His value system should require him to say that he touched the ball last.

Now that we have looked at some of the potentialities and problems of sport, let us shift to a different emphasis. Let us examine why sport exists. Does sport have to serve some purpose or can it be of intrinsic value. This paper has thus far analyzed sport from a social perspective; let us now look at sport “up close and personal” as one network likes to express it, for therein lies the basis for human value development.

George Leonard describes the ultimate athlete as

1. One who joins body, mind and spirit in the dance of existence;
2. One who explores both inner and outer being;
3. One who surpasses limitations and crosses boundaries in the process of personal and social transformation;
4. One who plays the larger game, the Game of Games, with full awareness, aware of life and death and willing to accept the pain and joy that awareness brings;
5. One who, finally, best serves as model and guide on our evolutionary journey.<sup>14</sup>

The implications of this description are awesome. The intrinsic values for those who actively seek fulfillment and joy through sport are boundless. Sports are fun. Sport helps people learn about their capabilities and their limitations and develop their own identity. Sport encourages maximal effort that results in genuine satisfaction. Sport provides private activities when solitude is desired and group dynamics when social interaction is sought. Sport eliminates some racial, social and monetary boundaries and becomes a common denominator for equality. Through sport a revitalization of body, mind and spirit renews one's perspective on life as a whole.

Clearly sport can be a meaningful part of our lives. Yet, as sport becomes increasingly commercialized and competitive and as additional non-participants such as administrators, coaches and fans are involved in sport, their values displace those available to the players. When sport at any level reaches this stage of development, play is replaced by work and human values are displaced and even cease. Only when the issues and problems presented in this paper are resolved can sport return to its proper status with winning defined by values rather than by victories. To borrow from the Bill of Rights for Young Athletes, maybe the following can serve as a sports bill of rights for everyone:

1. Right to participate in sports regardless of age, sex or ability level;
2. Right to participate in sports that promote safety and health;
3. Right of every participant to share in the leadership and decision-making of their sport;
4. Right to be treated with respect contingent on reciprocal attitudes toward others in sport;
5. Right to an equal opportunity to strive to attain their personal aspirations through sport;
6. Right to have fun through sport.

## Notes

<sup>14</sup>Sherif, Carolyn W. “The Social Context of Competition,” as reported in Landers, Daniel M. *Social Problems in Athletics*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1976, 23.

<sup>2</sup>Frost, Reuben B. and Edward J. Sims, *Development of Human Values Through Sports*. Proceedings of the National Conference on Development of Human Values Through Sports (October 12-14, 1973). Washington: American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation, 1974, ERIC Document ED 099 352, 6.

<sup>3</sup>Eitzen, D. Stanley. *Sport in Contemporary Society: An Anthology*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979, 90.

<sup>4</sup>Parkhouse, Bonnie, "To Win What Do You Have to Lose," *Journal of Physical Education and Recreation*, 50 (June, 1979), 15.

<sup>5</sup>Sage, George H., "American Values and Sport: Formation of a Bureaucratic Personality," *Journal of Physical Education and Recreation*, 49 (October, 1978), 42 and 44.

<sup>6</sup>Orlick, Terry and Cal Botterill. *Every Kid Can Win*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1975 as reported in Martens, Rainer (ed.). *Joy and Sadness in Children's Sports*. Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1978, 147.

<sup>7</sup>Leonard, George. *The Ultimate Athlete*. New York: Avon Books, 1974, 16.

<sup>8</sup>Savage, Howard J. *American College Athletics*. New York: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1929, 240.

<sup>9</sup>Devereux, Edward C., "Backyard versus Little League Baseball: The Impoverishment of Children's Games," as reported in Landers, Daniel M., *Social Problems in Athletics*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1976, 54.

<sup>10</sup>McIntosh, Peter, "Values and Competitive Sport," presented at the National Conference on Development of Human Values Through Sports, October 12-14, 1973.

<sup>11</sup>Denlinger, Kenneth and Leonard Shapiro. *Athletes for Sale: An Investigation into America's Greatest Sports Scandal—Athletic Recruiting*. New York: Crowell, 1975, 23.

<sup>12</sup>Leonard, Wilbert Marcellus I. *A Sociological Perspective of Sport*. Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1980, 266.

<sup>13</sup>McIntosh, Peter. *Fair Play—Ethics in Sport and Education*. London: Heinemann, 1979, 124.

<sup>14</sup>Leonard, George, 287.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Jerry R. (ed.). *Youth Sports for Coaches and Parents*. Washington: AAHPER Publications, 1977.

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## Moratorium on Articles for *Journal of Popular Culture*

Because of an impossibly heavy backlog of articles, and a justifiable growing grumble of impatience from authors whose articles I have held too long, I must declare a moratorium on articles for at least a year. Until I announce in a future issue of JPC that the backlog has been whittled to a manageable size, please do not send any more articles to the *Journal of Popular Culture*. Though I will stir up unhappiness in authors with articles ready to send out, I will balance that feeling with a sigh of relief from authors whose articles I have seen turning yellow in the file. Perhaps the two feelings balance each other out.