

The Drama of College Athletics

"...when it is real, the experience of a team is remarkable...."

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Campus athletic programs provide rich material for criticism. When an effort is made to see the world of athletics clearly and to judge that world fairly, the evidence cited is painful to all who, like myself, find a constant delight in athletics. As a player, as a coach, and as a spectator, I have found athletics a source of excitement and pleasure. My life is richer because of athletics, but I am troubled by the stories of abuse, deceit, and exploitation. What makes these accounts troublesome is the solid evidence on which they are based.

Costs have grown to staggering levels, and athletics reflect the practices and prejudices of our society. Expressions of racial bias are seldom overt anymore, but unthinking discrimination and even exploitation are well-documented. Sexual bias in athletic budgets is a scandal. The catalogue of ills can be expanded to include pressures from alumni and booster groups, recruitment practices, dehumanizing and brutalizing drills, the "win at any cost" mentality.

As troubling as the facts are, much of the reaction to scandal and criticism is even more troubling. Corrections are long overdue. The status quo is not acceptable. We may be on the threshold of a convulsion in intercollegiate athletics equal in force to the trauma that led to the establishment of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. The common

themes used in defense of athletics by university administrators and leaders of the athletic establishment are infuriating, and, ultimately, more destructive than the criticism.

Education is not an aspect of university life; education is the basis of that life, the reason for bringing together a varied collection of students, professors, clerks, janitors, accountants, computer programmers, administrators, librarians, coaches, physicians, cooks, and counselors. Whatever the task in the university, wherever there is an investment of human or material resources, the test of legitimacy is the contribution to education.

The end sought is human development. Thus, the campus provides a setting and occasions for the maturing of understanding, of language, of conceptualization, and of skill. In addition to the cognitive, the processes entail nurturing the human capacity to respond to others, to feel, and to express, and most important, the courage to make judgments and to value.

All that a university does must conform to this standard of purpose. When applied to the athletic program, the conclusion must be clear. The countless hours of effort, the life energy invested by coaches and players, the thousands and thousands of dollars expended annually in equipment, supplies and travel, the huge capital investment for facilities must have, as their end, human development.

The balance sheet on this investment would be read

differently by various members of the university community and by those outside the university environment. What conclusions a careful analytical study would reach are uncertain. But of this much I am confident - athletics can provide rich and varied educational experiences. It is this fact, and this fact alone, that ultimately justifies university involvement in athletics.

One of the most important human experiences is a sense of belonging, the establishment of a group relationship that commands the human response of person with person. Our lives are a steady succession of half-formed communities - of clubs and fraternities, of interest groups, of business or professional associations - which seem so often to lack integrity and power. Only rarely in life do we have a meeting that establishes a genuine community, a commonness in which we surrender a part of our individual self-interest and join with others.

Some of the most vivid experiences of belonging in my life are associated with teams and teammates. This is not always true; the experience can be empty of meaning and value. But, when it is real, the experience of a team is remarkable. What creates this sense of belonging? Is it a product of hard, sustained work together? Is it a consciousness of interdependence? Is it a sense of an intense loyalty to a common goal? Is it shared satisfaction and achievement? Perhaps no one who has had the experience would exclude any of these suggestions.

It would be wrong, however, to identify this experience too narrowly. The realization of community for many students comes through drama, or debate, or music, or campus publications. One of the sad commentaries on academic life is the fact that community is seldom realized as a product of consciously shared intellectual interest. Whatever the form, brief and fleeting though it may be, the experience of community enhances and develops human potential. It teaches through experience that important lesson that one man is no man and that man is more fully human with man.

Athletic competition occasions a sympathetic experience of drama; the experience drives life beyond the commonplace to the dramatic. Most of life follows a pedestrian pattern. The tingling feeling of tension and excitement is rare, all too rare. While the ordinary is not necessarily dreary or dull, the moments of drama in life are precious. Such moments stretch and enlarge life.

Drama moves through conflict and tension to climax. The conflict engenders the tension. With the acting out of the tension there is a sharpening of awareness and dynamic energy. The forces in conflict move toward climax and catharsis.

All who imaginatively penetrate the experience participate in this struggle. For the actors, the dramatic tension is something they must feel. An athletic contest can be a sympathetic experience for participant and spectator alike. The contest is only a game, yet the charged air, the sense of conflict and resolution of conflict, the joy and anguish, have an electric effect on all who are caught up in the moment.

If this is the sole form of the experience on campus, then the educational life of the campus is impoverished. But athletics can provide one experience of excitement filled with drama. Once it is experienced, never again will life be quite the same. The memory and capacity are part of life. Having been stretched, life can never again quite come back in the same shape.

Athletics also release at least momentarily, the human capacity for high emotion and an uninhibited sense of joy. We chain and gag so much of life, that only in those few moments when we lose ourselves in excitement do we experience what Nietzsche described as "the ideal of truly exuberant, alive, and world-affirming man."

In recent years one recurring topic of discussion in education has been affective or expressive learning. What is meant by these terms is not entirely clear, but the explorations of affective or expressive learning have exposed a void. Universities are so preoccupied with cognitive learning that they may waste human potential. We have fostered a climate in which education becomes a grim and joyless experience. The fact is documented by people's faces and attitudes. Student reactions suggest that undergraduate programs have the qualities of an obstacle course, a series of hurdles to be passed or jumped or climbed. There is little joy in the task. Where is the sense of delight that should mark such an experience?

To reach beyond yourself, to know you have become something more, is an experience full of satisfaction and happiness. Conditioning and training produce such an experience. The feeling of well-being is common to the well-conditioned athlete. The experience is described in the feeling of leaving a locker room after a practice session bruised and tired but somehow fulfilled. This experience of joy is not a matter of constant pleasurable moments, but of drudgery, pain, and stress. The joy is the satisfaction of becoming something more. To know this is to experience the meaning of development and to experience the only effective motivator for learning. If we could find some way to carry this experience into

the classroom, if we could produce a sense of delight, education would take on new life and force.

Ours is a culture that inhibits expressions and a system of education that cripples emotion. We all too seldom dance. Dance as a form of expression is awing in its capacity to express and develop human emotion. Many other cultures use dance for joy or sorrow or excitement or zeal. It may be that athletics fills the void created by the absence of dance. Ours is a culture in which men seldom touch or embrace in a free expression of joy and happiness. Yet it is a rare athletic contest without this experience. Tears come hard to most men, and when they come, are hidden in embarrassment. Yet there is a freedom to cry as well as embrace on the athletic field.

The nurturing of the expressive sense is one of the key justifications of an athletic program. Athletics for many serves as the only expressive movement in education. How uninhibited is the massed team as it huddles before a game! There is release of human potential in that movement. Only rarely in life do we feel free to express ourselves. What seems more natural than the crushing bear hug in the end zone? The embrace is an expression of joy. How open the tears; how freely the tears can flow!

Without the driving force of strong feeling, little will be undertaken in life and even less accomplished. To experience and to express strong feeling - this is a contribution to human development. Frank Broyles, speaking at a coaching clinic in Michigan some years ago, was describing the "Monster Man" defense at Arkansas. "You gotta believe, you gotta feel it" - over and over again he repeated the words. I thought for a moment we were going to have an altar call when he finished. But what made it a vivid and poignant experience for me was the contrast with the experience of the previous day, when I had been working with a philosophy seminar analyzing Hegel's philosophy of history. The class discussion had not caught fire. What I had been unable to interpret to my philosophy students' Coach Broyles had effectively conveyed to that audience of coaches. Before he was finished, Frank Broyles was unconsciously paraphrasing Hegel. The course of world history, Hegel argued, is the gradual unfolding of the idea of freedom in the state. This is the end, but the moving force, according to Hegel, is passion, where "the whole will and character is devoted" to the realization of the idea. Hegel wrote:

"...Nothing has been accomplished without an interest on the part of those who brought it about. And if 'interest' be called 'passion' - because the whole individuality is concentrating all of its desires and powers, with every fiber of volition, to the neglect of all other actual or possible interests and aims, on one object - we may then affirm without qualification that nothing great in the world has been accomplished without passion."

A realization of community, a sympathetic experience of drama, a sense of high emotion and joy - these are large tasks when applied to the development of basic human potential. But, the critic says, "After all, it's only a game and all the men merely players...."

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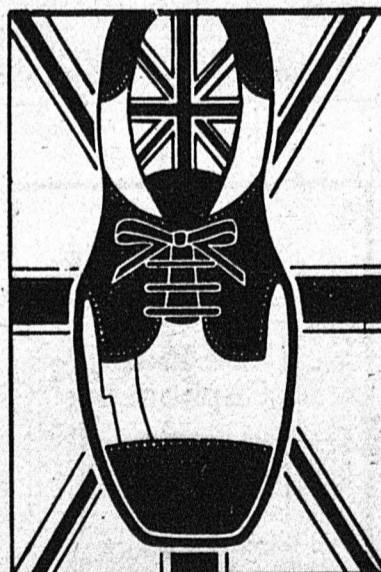
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