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Honors and Intercollegiate Athletics

GARY BELL

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Can there be anything more graceful and more athletically inspiring than a downhill slalom racer carving between the gates and proceeding at stunning speeds to vie for a medal? As a passionate skier, my personal favorites are downhill races and ski jumps, but whether it be ice dancing, figure skating competitions, triathlons, or even snowboarding, the recent Vancouver Olympics, in all of their international pomp and circumstance, reminds us of the place of athletic competitions in defining our humanness. It is exactly as the lead author, Sam Schuman, would have it in his well-written essay: the limits but also the glories of physical achievement, the role of hard work, and the importance of others in anything that we achieve, teamwork being essential to even individual events since there is always a support group behind even the single competitor.

How regrettable, then, that Professor Schuman chose to organize his essay, despite his opening disclaimers, around the medium of intercollegiate sports in his paean to athleticism. While it is true that he also gives a passing nod to intramural competitions and personal athletic prowess, the images that he conjures, at least to this Texas denizen, run more to “Saturday Night Lights” than to “Downhill Racer.” In taking the tack that he has, he has underlined, in my mind, one of the true catastrophes of American culture; in the process, the message of what athleticism can truly mean has been curiously obscured. The catastrophe is that we have become a society of observers, and this is perhaps nowhere more evident than in our relationship to intercollegiate athletics and its “grown-up” manifestation, professional sports. The fact, for example, that the recent Super Bowl activities registered the largest viewing audience in TV history, now surpassing the last television episode of *M*A*S*H*, is certainly worth noting (National Football League: Super Bowl XLIV website).

We historians look for societal markers of the status and health, past and present, of our national community, and for me the increasing popularity of Super Bowl Sunday, much like the establishment of the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center, marks a turning point in American civilization. Guantanamo threatens, from my perspective, the rule of law, a hallmark of

our national identity and character. Super Bowl Sunday is similarly enervating. In all of the hoopla surrounding the Super Bowl, we have taken what is essentially an utterly trivial pursuit (does it make one iota's worth of difference to the human situation whether the New Orleans Saints or the Indianapolis Colts win or lose?) played out by grossly overpaid performers, and we have turned it into an artificially constructed "cosmic event." Is even one child helped by this competition to climb out of poverty or ignorance? Is a senior citizen provided with even a modicum of improvement to her well-being in her declining years? Is any nation nudged toward greater accommodation and a more peaceful co-existence with its neighbors? Is any municipality (with the possible exception of Miami) assisted in its economic doldrums? (Vancouver, just for the record, has been left with a billion dollar tax hangover.) We are essentially saying, as a society, that it is perfectly fine, first of all, to focus nationally and obsessively on a completely inconsequential occurrence and, secondly, to be thoroughly passive observers in the process. Athleticism has become simply a spectator phenomenon. And where does it all start? I do not need to stress that, as Pavlovian mammals, we are conditioned to "Superbowlism" in our college or even our high school years. We are encouraged to believe that the victory of my university team over your university team is a matter of supreme importance. It simply is not.

But, one may argue, those fellows on the playing field ennoble us by showing us what spectacular achievement and close teamwork can accomplish. Hardly. First of all, very few of us play football (or basketball, or baseball . . .) past our early twenties, and very few of us played systematically even before those years. On our campus there are 350 student athletes out of a student body of roughly 30,000. The ratio of participants to spectators is a little better in high school, but not much. Early on, we have been socialized into being passive observers. Since the Super Bowl and its prequel, intercollegiate athletics, are strictly vicarious athletic experiences, "virtual" athletic realities rather than the real thing for their audiences, any lessons learned, I would submit, are similarly ephemeral.

As a second point, probably no more than a handful of our fellow Americans will be motivated by intercollegiate athletics, by the Super Bowl, or even by the Olympics for that matter to get off the couch and to do something physical. We have become a grossly obese and indolent nation. From my perspective, the rise of spectator sports, abetted by all manner of electronic conveyance mediums, has greatly contributed to this deplorable state of affairs. Just sit in the DFW airport and look at your fellow citizens walking by to gain some appreciation for this fact (US Department of Health and Human Services).

Finally, and most perniciously, as educators we can document the harm that collegiate spectator sports have done to what used to be a reasonably worthy pursuit: educating students. Remember those 350 student athletes to whom I alluded? The budget for athletic enterprises at my university jumped from \$45 million to \$54 million this last year, a figure that does not include the efforts to build a new \$25-million addition to the \$100-million stadium (used seven times a year for university purposes) that itself was completed just five years ago. We continue, of course, to service the bonded indebtedness for these facilities and for the relatively new \$65-million basketball arena, the new baseball diamond, and the rest of a list that keeps growing alarmingly. The academic units here, parenthetically, have been asked to give back 5% this year and 5% next fiscal year after having already experienced deep cuts in many of their previously anticipated funds.

But, the special pleading asserts, athletics brings in donor dollars, it cements alumni loyalty, and it is a key marketing tool for the university. While this is undeniably the case to a limited extent, it has been demonstrated repeatedly that athletic programs, at least in the “big name universities” but seemingly everywhere, are woefully expensive and consistently draining of scarce educational resources. Organized athletic efforts simply do not come close to paying their way, either through donations or revenue generated. We can argue about the marketing piece of the equation, but the bottom line at many schools is glaringly obvious. Intercollegiate athletics is literally devastating the educational missions of the universities in which they are prominent (see Murray Sperber’s indictment in *Beer and Circus*).

Well, the final plea goes, these events enhance school spirit and add to character development. Not even close. The “spirited fans” at many institutions have a justifiable reputation for reprehensible behaviors at sporting events. Often alcohol-fueled, they rush the field inappropriately; they shout fan language that regularly draws admonitions in local papers from embarrassed citizens; they boo the entry of the opposing team; and at least at our sporting events, they throw food onto the athletic pitch (in our case, tortillas) to express their disdain for referees and opponents. All this falls far short of “character enhancing.”

Nor are universities unique in these matters. The same story is repeated at athletic events throughout the nation—and abroad. While living in London, I resided in Tottenham, where the Hotspurs, a local football (soccer) team, held sway. Regularly, when the Hotspurs won, local fans trashed High Street in celebration; when the Hotspurs lost, the local fans trashed High Street in frustration. European football hooliganism is now a cliché. Spectator sports, it would seem, hardly inculcate anything noble in their spectating adherents (for an elaboration, see Christopher Hitchens, “Fool’s Gold”).

No, Professor Schuman, intercollegiate (and professional) athletics has much to discredit it. There are, moreover, too many Tiger Woodses among its practitioners at all levels. Athletes and their highly organized competitions should not be held up as universal exemplars. They most certainly should not be compared to the efforts that honors exerts on campuses nationally. If anything, campus athletics is seriously inimical to honors programs and honors ideals.

Rather, I suggest that we should reframe your panegyric completely. To be sure, the mind and the body are inextricably linked. As many of us in NCHC have been able to note personally, if there is a weakness in honors efforts nationwide (besides that omnipresent lack of resources), it is that they are geared almost exclusively to the intellectual world. We have exceptions—such as the offering of “Ropes” courses and the encouragement of some honors students to participate in intramural sports—as you correctly note (but only in passing). I would, however, make a plea that honors, with its current one-dimensional emphasis on academic group achievement and its encouragement of superlative individual intellectual accomplishment, should extend this focus into areas of physical endeavor as well. Honors should become an arena where we encourage and celebrate the athleticism of our student participants as well as their inevitably superior academic achievement. We should begin to stress the importance of rigorous **personal participation** in athletic and physical endeavors of all types. It can be cross-country skiing, backpacking, early-morning swimming, or pick-up basketball games. It can be jogging five miles through frozen fields at sunset, or it can be, as it was for Milo of Crotona, lifting a bull as the little rascal gets heavier by the day. It can be anything that pushes our bodies and (as medicine tells us) by extension our minds to their maximum as we search for a **personal, participatory** best effort. Teamwork, individual accomplishment, learning one’s limits, and coming to value hard work can all be inculcated even more thoroughly through the inclusion of athletic efforts; this is where sports becomes ennobling rather than patently destructive on a personal, societal, and educational level.

Personal participation, then, is a dimension that one might wish Professor Schuman had emphasized in a more balanced presentation of his tribute to the glories of athletic prowess. One can only wish that Milo of Crotona had prevailed, in the presentation, over the BCS-winning University of Alabama football squad. Maybe Milo, much as sportscasters and circus-promoting college administrators already do too readily, needed to sling around even more bull to enhance his celebrity and get the attention of an audience valuing brawn over brains.

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