

***Paidia* and *Paideia*: The Educational Power of Athletics**

Drew A. Hyland

Robert Simon, in his usual lucid and insightful manner, set out for us some of the major issues, some of the major controversies, and many of the confusions and mystifications that need clarification regarding the question of the compatibility of high-level athletics and academic education in this country (I add “in this country” because I want to note here how instructive it is that it is primarily, though not exclusively, in the United States that this issue is a controversy). In my judgment, he correctly identified the primary issues in this debate and began the important process of clarifying many of the confusions and misunderstandings surrounding it. He also, as is usual for Bob Simon, formulated the issues in a rhetoric that is as gentle as it is insightful. When he introduced the goals of his article, he told us that first, “I will argue that a reasonable case can be made that *in some contexts* [and he italicized the last phrase], intercollegiate athletics and academics not only do not conflict but *may* [my emphasis here] be mutually reinforcing.” When he turned to his insightful criticism of the books of William Bowen and, respectively, James Shulman and Sarah Levin (and make no mistake, despite the gentle rhetoric it is insightful criticism), he cautiously formulated his critique as simply raising “questions the study leaves unresolved which, if examined further, might [note the caution again] yield data that at least would soften the study’s rather harsh evaluation of the academic performance of athletes,” and so on. Well, I am willing to be the philosophical “bad cop” to Simon’s “good cop” by strengthening the force of his many insights to say that not only *does* athletics have profound educational potential but that the real scandal is that such conferences as this are necessary because we in this country have so woefully neglected the educational potential of athletics that is built into our tying of athletics so closely to educational institutions. We should have known better, because we hardly invented this idea. It was the ancient Greeks, after all—and those Greeks, we might allow, knew a thing or two about education—who established as the two foundational disciplines for education to full humanity *mousike*, what we call the arts, and *gymnastike*. (Another such conference as this—or a hundred or so—might well be organized about our failure to recognize the educational significance of art, but leave that for now.) Let me explain what I mean here.

There is a curious ambivalence about this issue in our American culture. On the one hand, we have decided to join our athletic culture closely to our educational

The author is the Charles A. Dana Professor of Philosophy at Trinity College, Hartford, CT.

culture, at least until graduation from college. The locus of much of organized sport until the professional level for us is in the school system, whether elementary, high school, or college. High school sports events are often the primary social unifier in many towns across the country, and we are here at this conference today largely because of the enormous cultural impact of college sports in this country. Those of you who have spent time in Europe know that most European nations have made a very different decision than we have on this issue. They have decided to clearly and decisively *separate* the experience of athletics from the formal educational experience. The Sorbonne does not have the best basketball team in France; the Free University of Berlin does not supply the German national team with its soccer players. Instead, every city and even every small town has one or more sports clubs that one can join, and it is those sports clubs that are the locus of athletic culture in those countries, not the universities. The implicit view embodied in this European cultural decision is that athletics have no significant educational component, that education can proceed adequately and best without the presence or cooperation of athletics.

We in America *seem* to have decided otherwise. By joining the major strand of young people's athletic opportunities to their formal educations, by placing the primary locus of athletic opportunity in the school systems, including the universities, we imply a recognition that there is a significant educational component in the athletic experience. As these comments will no doubt make abundantly clear, I am deeply convinced of that conviction. Having joined together formal education and athletic experience—insightfully in my opinion—we all too often, however, allow the educational richness of that relation to disintegrate. We risk taking back the very insight embodied in our joining athletic experience to educational experience by disastrously labeling athletics “extra-curricular,” by relegating physical education (a term that itself is rarely heard for its serious meaning) to an elective or a once-per-week or so bit of developmental fluff, and by too often transforming interscholastic and intercollegiate athletics into a mini (or in some cases maxi) business enterprise that has almost no serious connection any longer to the educational enterprise. In so doing, we imply that we do not, after all, *seriously* believe that athletics is a significant component in our education to full humanity. We forget the wisdom of the ancient Greeks. This raises, I think, a question that we can hardly hope to answer in one sitting but that I invite you to begin thinking about: What would it mean for us as a society to take seriously the conviction implied in our joining together formal athletics and formal education, that athletic development is a significant element in a truly humane and liberal education? What changes would have to be made not just in our formal structures and organizations but in our attitudes to begin to realize this conviction?

We need to understand, first, that the educational potential of athletics is a classic case of a double-edged sword—or in this case a triple-edged one. Yes, done rightly and under the right conditions, athletics can be a deep and abiding educational experience—that is surely the insight of the ancient Greeks, and our insight as well. Under less healthy conditions, conditions of which we all are aware, athletics can, however, as the title of Simon's article implies, absolutely *undermine* academic education. Third, the relation of athletics to education can be one of utter indifference—as the Europeans apparently have decided it usually is. The question becomes, which way should we go on this?

Most of us have had the experience of the many positive educational values that can be derived from intense experiences of athletics. In addition to the usual, but real, bromides regarding learning teamwork, being a good winner and loser, potential health benefits, etc., there are other, perhaps deeper, educational experiences available if not exclusively then surely paradigmatically in athletics. Let me expand just a bit on three: the issue of racism; the experience of deep, passionate commitment; and self-knowledge. I will do so within the context of recent experiences at my own institution, Trinity College. In the past few years, we at Trinity have joined a growing number of colleges and universities committed to bridging what has been perceived as the growing divide between athletics and academics by establishing a program of what we call “faculty liaisons” with each athletic team. That is, each athletic team is assigned one or more faculty members whose charge is to work with the team members at the often complicated process of integrating their athletic experience with their academic commitments. These faculty liaisons are in almost every case suggested by the team members, and the outcomes are sometimes delightful! It is hardly surprising that I, as a former college basketball player, was recruited (!) by the men’s basketball team, but consider this: the football team has two faculty liaisons, one a female economics professor, one a female English professor. The men’s hockey team—not surprisingly, mostly composed of white males—selected an African American female professor of music whose specialty is opera. Our hockey team now has more opera buffs on it than probably any collegiate hockey team in the country!

More about this faculty liaison program in a moment, but I want first to discuss the aforementioned issue of racism and how athletics can function as an educational force in this regard. Last year at Trinity, there occurred one of those events that, deplorably, continue to happen sporadically on almost every campus in the country, an incident of racial harassment. That incident precipitated, as it usually does, an all-campus meeting to try to address it. As it happened, the meeting occurred in the late afternoon in the late fall, when the men’s basketball team was down at the gymnasium practicing. At that large meeting, many of the predictable issues were raised. Well-meaning people lamented the presence on campus of such racial insensitivity. Others also lamented the large element of self-segregation in the student body, even among those students who considered themselves “nonracist.” In the dining halls, for example, African American students for the most part choose to eat with other African Americans, as do the Hispanic students and the white student majority. People wondered what could be done to overcome this unfortunate self-segregation, a phenomenon by no means peculiar to Trinity, as everyone understood. As I sat listening to the discussion, I thought of the men’s basketball team down there at the gymnasium, “my team” as I was their faculty liaison. There were 12 players on the traveling team, 6 white, 6 black. That team was, and happily still is, a paradigm of successful integration. They room together in mixed groups. They eat together in the dining hall. At the insistence of the team, when a potential recruit comes to campus for his recruiting visit, he is assigned a member of the other race from him as his host.

I left that all-campus meeting and went directly down to the basketball practice and asked the coach for a few minutes to talk to the team. I related to them what I had just witnessed at the meeting, pointed out the obvious, that they were as a team *actually living out* the experience of genuine integration that the huge

crowd of people at the meeting were trying desperately to fathom how to accomplish. I asked them to begin thinking about just how they were accomplishing this integrationist ideal. It did not take them long. It was not that basketball players are inherently nonracist—though we did for a moment indulge in that pleasant fantasy. Instead, they saw very soon that they were all so deeply committed to a common goal—the success of their team—that the sort of cultural differences that in other circumstances might become determining simply paled into insignificance. They cared first about their team, and that commitment enabled them to put the question of race in its place—not *no* place, they quickly agreed, but a place entirely subordinate to other, in their opinion, more overarching goals of their little community. They saw that what the college as an institution needed to do was to open the space, both conceptual and physical, for other occasions of such deep community commitment that might also put the question of race in its proper place for the large college community. I encouraged them, and I continue to encourage them, to make the success of their own little community a much more publicly visible phenomenon, not limited to those who attend their basketball games and might notice the racial harmony. They began speaking to various first-year seminars. They began making it a point to attend campus events together in racially mixed groups—student theater and dance performances, visiting lectures, and the like. Hopefully, they are beginning to make an impact. Whether they are or not, however, the experience is certainly making an impact on them. They have come to understand that they should not, ethically cannot, regard their successful experience of integrated community as simply that they are “the lucky few,” that instead the gift they had been granted conferred on them a *responsibility* to distribute that gift as best they could more widely, and they are trying their best to do so.

Is there any academic experience in any of their classrooms more educationally decisive than this one these student-athletes are having through their basketball experience? In how many other campus venues are they likely to have such an experience? And athletics have no significant educational value?

Time does not permit me to develop adequately the similar educational lessons these student-athletes are learning regarding the experience of deep commitment and that of self-knowledge. I will just mention that these students—and athletes typically—have a remarkably strong athletic experience of deep, almost all-encompassing commitment to getting better at their sport. Their bodies, surely, but also their minds, their emotions, their very sense of self, are involved in this strong commitment to athletic excellence. They all know this. What they don't always know, and what they need to have pointed out to them, is that not everyone has such an experience, that they *know* something that not all their peers know: what it really means to deeply and totally commit themselves to a communal project. They need only to be reminded that such knowledge is transferable to the rest of their lives and to begin to transfer it.

The case is similar with self-knowledge. I know from personal experience that there was no experience in my scholastic or college education that led me to more self-knowledge than my basketball experience, no course or classroom in which I learned more about my capacities, my limitations, where I was willing to compromise, and where I would take my stand. Again, these student-athletes need only to have this pointed out to them, and they will *make it* part of their education.

Well, if athletics is so educationally wonderful, why is this conference necessary? Why are we questioning, in Bob Simon's words, whether athletics *undermines* education? For very good reasons! The potential educational significance of athletics is being undermined and abused everywhere! Note the shift I made in the last sentence: what strikes me most of all about our contemporary educational culture is less that *athletics* is undermining *academics* than that the educational power of *athletics itself* is being undermined. By what?

By many factors, no doubt, but here surely is one of the major culprits: filthy lucre! The enormous financial potential of some of Division I athletics and the consequent overemphasis on winning so that the cash keeps flowing in has allowed us, no, led us, to forget what we recognized once to our credit, that athletics is a powerful educational force. Too often it is no longer such, having been transformed from a powerful educational into a powerful *financial* force. If this phenomenon had been limited to a few high-powered Division I programs, we might well lament it, but it would hardly be the crisis that we face today. Certainly Bob Simon and I, from the small, Division III colleges of Hamilton and Trinity, respectively, would not be here talking to you about the problem. Instead, there has been an all too visible trickle-down effect, which, as Bowen and Levin claimed in *Reclaiming the Game*, has even reached such elite liberal arts institutions as those where Bob and I teach. Even though the basketball teams and football teams bring no financial gain to those institutions, even though no athletic scholarships are offered, the coaches recruit student-athletes as if their careers depended on it (and perhaps in some cases they do!). Many of those student-athletes show up at college as freshmen believing as strongly as their Division I counterparts that they are "there to play basketball" (or football, or squash, or whatever).

Although the problem should not be there, it is. What can be done about it? That is, what can we do to restore to athletics the educational power that it can and should have so it is a genuinely integrated part of the students' overall educational experience? I close with just a few suggestions, but I do so first with the emphasis that these suggestions are meant to be *restorative*, that we are seeking to find those steps that might *restore* athletics to its proper educational place, not give it something that it does not implicitly have. I emphasize this because I fear that the books of Bowen and crew are implicitly and sometimes explicitly arguing the latter thesis, that athletics really have no meaningful educational value, that they really are *extra-curricular*, a thesis which I regard as totally misguided.

We risk having forgotten the educational force of athletics. What steps can be taken to remind us of that force? Small but important first steps are being taken by colleges and universities such as Trinity and Princeton, steps such as establishing the kind of faculty liaisons that I discussed earlier, with the explicit charge of calling to the attention of the student-athletes some of the educational lessons they are learning from their athletic experience. Academic faculty show up in classrooms not simply to have students read certain books but explicitly to draw out with and for them the educational significance of the texts they read. The same sort of thing needs to be done with and for our student athletes. I have not heard of any college where such a program has been implemented that does not report a powerful and positive impact. Other steps might include reasserting the once widely held recognition that coaches are—or perhaps I should say *should be*—among our most important teachers. They should be reintegrated into our faculties as

formal members. They, like their counterparts in philosophy or chemistry, should be asked to occasionally make public presentations to the rest of their colleagues of what they are doing—for their colleagues' education! These are, I emphasize, small but important first steps, preludes, one can hope, to the larger transformation in educational institutional practices such that, once again, *gymnastike* in its contemporary manifestation might once again take its rightful place at the core of our young people's education to full humanity.