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# Sports in Schools

## *Beyond Winning and Losing*

By Patrick Kelly, S.J.

Sports have had a “place” in Jesuit schools from the very beginning. The first school buildings the Jesuits built in France and elsewhere typically had an open courtyard in the middle so that students could play sports. And time was scheduled into the school day and school year for sporting activities. In addition to feast days, every Thursday was a recreation day. It was common for students to walk on these days with the fathers to the Jesuit villa to engage in recreation and sport. When Jesuits started schools in the 19th century in the United States they continued to provide time and space for play and sport.

In this matter, Ignatius and the Jesuits were influenced by the Christian understanding of the human person as a unity of body, mind, and spirit. They were also influenced by Thomas Aquinas’s conception of virtue as having to do with moderation. According to Thomas, a virtuous person should not be working or studying all the time, but also needed to take time for play and recreation. Indeed, Thomas had a high estimation of play, even saying it was like contemplation because both activities were enjoyable and done for their own sake.

Of course, sports also have a “place” in Jesuit universities in

the United States today. Students, faculty, and staff routinely participate in pickup games of various kinds. Students compete in many intramural sports. These sports provide the clearest and most uncomplicated link to our Jesuit heritage and its emphasis on moderation in studies and the need for play and recreation for a fully human life.

Students at Jesuit schools also compete in intercollegiate athletics at Division I, II, and III levels. Our location in the United States has led to the proliferation of such intercollegiate athletic programs. Only in this country is there such a highly developed intercollegiate athletic system connected to higher education.

Sports in all U.S. universities also take place in the “location” shaped by modernity and its aftermath. In some ways this location negatively influences intercollegiate athletics.

## **The Place of Sport in U.S. Universities Today**

For example, although Cartesian mind-body dualism has been widely criticized and surpassed by philosophers, its effective history as well as new postmodern expressions of dualism are very much present in American universities. Consider that in many American universities the academic (mind) and athletic (body) sections have little, if anything, to do with one another. We rarely, if ever, ask students to reflect on the embodied experiences they are having in sports in the academic context.

Of course, we do pay a lot of attention to sports. But the attention tends to be directed primarily to who is winning and losing, how to win, and how much money a person or institution gets for winning. The emphasis on money is related to what Michael Sandel has called the move from having a market economy to being a market society. In a market society, the activities we engage in are increasingly valued only in monetary terms, and we lose the ability to recognize their intrinsic meaning or value. In such a context, leaders of universities easily begin to view sports only as a means to external goods, such as money and prestige.

Rather than paying so much attention to sports as a means to external goods, the focus needs to shift

to the internal goods or intrinsic rewards of sports. Retrieving insights about play from earlier periods can help our reflections. After all, as Thomas pointed out, play is engaged in for its own sake. As he put it, “Nothing further is sought in play than the soul’s delight.” In response to the objection that play cannot be virtuous because it is not directed to something else, Thomas says that it is true that play activities themselves are not directed to external goods. He points out, however, that the enjoyment experienced at play is directed to an end: the refreshment or restoration of the soul. In our language today we might say that enjoyment in play leads to the well-being or flourishing of the person. Our students and coaches, that is, practitioners, understand these intrinsic rewards of sport very well. Jim Hayford, our new basketball coach at Seattle University, pointed in their direction, for example, when he said he coaches a style of basketball that is “fun to play, fun to coach, and fun to watch.”

As mentioned earlier, from a Jesuit perspective, the human person is a unity of body, mind, and spirit. Thus the bodily activities that young people engage in, such as sport, impact their minds and spirits. From this perspective, it is important to invite students to reflect on their experiences in sport, not just who won, how to win, and so forth, and to consider how such experiences impact them in their interior lives and their making of meaning. The

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element of joy, which is so basic to play, is particularly important. While playing a team sport, students experience joy as they put their talents at the service of something greater than themselves. They learn that they become persons as they give of themselves

to others. At the heart of what Jesuit universities do is to help students discover what gives them joy—in their studies, and as they engage in service or consider work of various kinds. They also help students to identify their talents and to come to understand how they are going to use them to be of service to others. In this sense, joy can become the “pivot” point for our students, from their play and games to the rest of their lives.

This approach is grounded in Jesuit spirituality. In a meditation called the Two Standards in the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius has the retreatant con-

For St. Ignatius, everything in our lives should be directed *ad majorem dei gloriam* – toward the greater glory of God. But how can this be true of play, which is done for its own sake? With Thomas Aquinas’s insight that the enjoyment in play is directed to the recreation and restoration of the soul we have the beginnings of a response to this question. Jesus says, after all, that he came that “we might have life and have it to the full.” And St. Irenaeus famously taught that “the glory of God is a human being fully alive.” Thomas helps us to understand that play gives glory to God indirectly, then, to the extent that it helps us to be fully human and fully alive. Of course, whether play is doing this or not in concrete situations is something that needs to be studied and discerned. But to the extent we are paying attention to young people’s experiences and asking how these are related to their growth and flourishing, we are on the right track.

While we engage in play for its own sake, the joy associated with it points beyond itself. As Pope Francis has said, “Play reminds us of joy, the joy of the Lord.” For St. Ignatius, joy is one of the important characteristics of spiritual consolation. Ignatius himself learned this only after he was injured in battle and had time to step back from the pursuit of his own glory and began to pay attention to his interior life. There he discovered God speaking to him in the depths of his joy. In his rules for discernment Ignatius counsels that our major decisions in life should be related to and building on such experiences of joy, which he said “point out and open up the way we are to go.”

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sider how persons and societies are led off track when they are “ensnared” by riches, which leads to the honor of this world and then to surging pride. He says this is a temptation of “the enemy of our human nature,” a traditional way of referring to the devil or Satan. Whatever one’s views are on the ontological status of the devil, the phrase Ignatius uses highlights that when persons or societies are driven only by money, their humanity is undermined. When we focus only on money we take our eyes off of our students’ experiences in sports and so are unable to know whether they are related to their growth and flourishing.