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Art, Sport and the Sweet Spot

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Seventh in a series of
occasional papers from
John Strassburger, President

URSINUS COLLEGE



Art is part of the daily life of every student at Ursinus. For example, Steve Tobin's PRAHA, named for the Jewish cemetery in Prague, is one of several sculptures outside the campus student center. It is one of 41 sculptures on the College's 170 acre suburban Philadelphia campus.

Art, Sport and the Sweet Spot

A report from President John Strassburger

Recently athletics at elite colleges have come under careful scrutiny, and the picture that has emerged is not pretty. William Bowen and Sarah Levin in their book *Reclaiming the Game*, show that compared to their non-athlete counterparts, athletes under-perform academically, cluster in the easiest majors and prove to be less generous and less civic-minded after they graduate.

Yet over the years, many of the students I have admired most have been athletes, and they have learned great lessons from their athletic involvement. The other group that, on the whole, has contributed enormously to my own ongoing education is composed of those students who are most engaged in the arts.

I do not mean to exclude scientists or humanists from the mix, because at Ursinus athletes and artists are also scientists and humanists, but I am thinking about the people whom John Updike described as “players who always are; who are, that is to say, about themselves and their art.”

Thus, in the wake of recent criticism of small-college sports, I find myself asking several questions. First, what is it about the experience of sport and the arts that makes them so enriching? Second, is there something we can learn from this deeper affinity that can help us see athletics in a more productive light, one that both strengthens us against the professionalization of athletics yet encourages us to stay in the game? We cannot ignore the warning signs, but I believe that Ursinus and colleges like us have a strong mission and traditions that can serve us well.

The Name of the Game is Learning

Many of us enjoy being spectators, and major spectacles in this country with all their electronic hoopla and hype do enthrall. Art and sport on a residential campus are different, however, just as the performers and the athletes are different. The fact that we all know one another accounts for much of the difference. And unlike performers and athletes at institutions where these activities are treated as pre-professional, it is also true that on a residential college campus everyone engaged in these activities has myriad other pursuits. Perhaps most crucial, though, is our ability to discern growth, and to discern it among those we are applauding or cheering or simply admiring in the studio. Over time we can see progress; we all witness the learning, the gaining in confidence, depth, skill and subtlety. Because all of us experience this growth, because all of us are sharing in one another's learning, sport and the arts create community.

The power of these experiences and the way they draw on all that a student is, not just some narrow part, suggest to me that both art and sport belong at the heart of any approach to liberal education, both as subjects of study and as experiences we seek to promote.

The goal at Ursinus, and for colleges like us—I am thinking first about the liberal arts colleges in our own athletic conference*—is to situate art and sport in an intellectually rich context. Part of that context is the understanding that things do not always turn out the way we might hope: the intellectual aspect of both sport and art is defined by our need to recognize and then diminish the gap between hope and reality.

* *The Centennial Conference, which is composed of Johns Hopkins University and Bryn Mawr, Dickinson, Franklin and Marshall, Gettysburg, Haverford, McDaniel, Muhlenberg, Swarthmore, Washington and Ursinus Colleges.*

Sweet Spots

In a liberal arts college, where actors are athletes are scientists are poets, sport and the arts should be knit into the fabric of life, and I am struck by the closeness of these worlds—not just their physical proximity on a campus like ours, but the creative and intellectual resources they engage, the discipline they require, and the seemingly miraculous outcomes they produce. At their best art and sport are performances that transform the circumstances of their creation into instants of perfection. And each achievement informs the next, whether it is the batter's well-struck pitch or the actor's portrayal of Antigone's grief.

Many of us like to speak of the transforming power of liberal education. That abstraction becomes real as students engage totally, one with another, in a communal pursuit of excellence. They are transformed as they are lifted by the strength of others and, as spectators, we are lifted with them. William Butler Yeats described the experience by asking, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" Athletes put it a different way. They talk about hitting "the sweet spot" and being "in the zone."

Several things have brought the transforming power of art and sport home to me. The first is seeing what young people accomplish. Our students have not been seduced or intimidated by the myth of raw talent. Based on their work habits and dedication, they do not believe that either art or sport just comes naturally. They learn that the more they bring to what they do, in terms of intellect, awareness, self-discipline and skill, the more they achieve. The second experience that prompted these thoughts was reconsidering an essay by John Updike, "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," about Ted Williams' last baseball game at Fenway Park. Merging art and sport, Updike models the very thing he is writing about: a supremely prepared artist, whose conscious life is devoted largely to one thing, meeting an occasion that engages all his capacities and producing something that unites performer and spectator, Red Sox fan and antagonist, Bostonian and non-Bostonian (and reader and writer).

The Enemy at the Locker Room Door

If Updike and today's Ursinus students represent best-case scenarios—the real sweet spot—that is, lives fully lived and selves fully engaged, what is the actual problem? What is most destructive to self, community, and potential?

The fundamental difference, as I see it, between art and sport is simply that of winning and losing. In sport, competition serves as the occasion for creative expression. It is almost inevitable that the goal of winning takes on a life of its own, and this generates the real problem for sport in any educational context.

As I read Bowen and Levin and consider the experience of my peers, it is clear that we are in the grip of a trend that runs directly counter to the mission of the liberal arts and, I believe, to the richest experience of sport itself, not to mention art and life. The threat is specialization. We have allowed to grow up on too many of our campuses a distinct culture within the larger culture, a ghetto, if you will, that includes athletes and coaches. As Bowen and Levin point out, students self-identify as athletes first and foremost, and they are often recruited that way. Coaches are concerned first and foremost with winning, not teaching, and they are recruited that way. To be sure, the danger is there in the arts as well, but by their nature these tend to weave into a college's larger intellectual purposes much more readily.

Intercollegiate sports have been around at Ursinus a very long time, and the problem is not entirely new. Our oldest football rivalry, with Swarthmore College,* dates back to the 1890s, so we have been thinking about amateurism ever since. The NCAA, organized by a group of distinguished academics at the beginning of the last century, was created to curb athletic excesses. One of the leading reformers, the famous Wisconsin and then Harvard professor and historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, was terribly worried about the rise of a "winning at all costs" ideal. I am tempted to say that the problem of specialization or professionalism is not just long-standing but endemic.

At the same time, because of a distinctive and highly unusual tradition, Ursinus has long had a model of what sport at its best can do in educating undergraduates. Women have competed in intercollegiate sports at the college for over a century. In fictional form, Updike recently wrote about the importance of that experience to his parents, especially his mother when she was a student here in the 1920s. It is important to note that the tradition included winning. For example, in 1984, the U.S. women's Olympic field hockey team included five Ursinus alumnae, one being its head coach. This is the only American field hockey team ever to have won an Olympic medal. Yet, in a sign of the times, our field hockey program has now become a solid contender in Division III because it became clear that without athletic scholarships, hordes of coaches, multimillion-dollar facilities, and all the rest, Ursinus would always be competing in other divisions at a severe disadvantage. The Ursinus tradition in women's athletics was unusual for a coed liberal arts college, and what is so sobering is that despite the great educational and competitive success of that tradition, it could not withstand the professionalizing of Division I athletics.

Modest Proposals

Ursinus has traditions that help us meet this challenge. As I mentioned earlier, we instituted sports for women long before Title IX. Today we field a full complement of 25 intercollegiate teams. The College made this commitment not merely out of a sense of fairness or gender equity but because it was right in terms of our mission of student growth and achievement. Just as it was right that Ursinus have a studio art program and an art museum on campus. In fact, the Philip and Muriel Berman Art Museum is at the center of campus, and I like to think of our new fieldhouse as its complement.

On the coaching side, Ursinus tried to address the problem of overspecialization five years ago by organizing the Snell Symposium to inform

women athletes at Centennial schools about the joys of coaching. It was named for the legendary Ursinus field hockey coach Eleanor Snell, who taught here for over forty years and was instrumental in developing women's intercollegiate athletics in the Philadelphia region. Snell was as concerned about her players' sense of self, deportment, language skills, and resiliency as she was about winning and losing. Which is to say she saw sports in the context of education. I hasten to add: her teams lost very few games. The Symposium addressed coaching in that spirit. While its original audience was the Centennial Conference, it has become self-supporting and spread to other conferences as well.

Thus, one of the answers to the challenges we face is to develop coaches who have had liberal educations. Another is to examine how we recruit to make sure that we do not reinforce students' narrow views of themselves or of their goals.

The value of this effort came home to me when I was talking with one of our more successful women's coaches, someone whose teams have won conference championships and competed in NCAA tournaments as well. She observed that over the years, the players whom she recruited less intensively tended to be more well-rounded, more engaged in college and even in their sport, and less in need of all sorts of counseling and coddling. So one goal might be for conferences to limit the number of calls we make to any individual student. Surely we run the risk of losing an athlete or two, but as this coach put it, the ones who do show up will be far more likely to understand that in going to college they are part of something far larger than one aspect of themselves. In truth, I don't think we will lose many athletes. One of our students profiled in this report is among the best baseball players Ursinus has ever had. He came here in part because he didn't want to spend all his time with other athletes. As he put it, "I came here to be educated."

In this regard, we also need to discuss whether the time has come to curb Early Decision for athletes qua athletes. We all hear stories—always from other institutions, it seems—of coaches saying: commit early and you will have a spot, because then I will not need to recruit another goalie, wideout, freestyler, etc. Nothing could do more to lead

students to stereotype themselves than receiving promises in exchange for “going early.” Allowing athletes to make their choices later, free from the idea that they have to choose on the basis of a spot on a team, will also, I believe, curb some of the disengagement that goes with ghettoization and special treatment.

But there are other answers beyond focusing on sport itself. At Ursinus, we have an even more powerful antidote to disengagement, and we have convincing data to suggest that it works.

Several years ago, faculty members here created a two-semester course for all first-year students addressing the most fundamental questions of human existence. Then the dean of students arranged for all first-year students to live in two sets of three adjacent residence halls. When we participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement, conducted at 600 campuses across the nation, we discovered that making intellectual engagement the first-year centerpiece for all students had succeeded beyond our dreams. The N.S.S.E. folks were struck as we were by the phenomenal results and will include Ursinus in their much more careful study of how twenty exemplary institutions—only six of which are national, coed liberal arts colleges—engender uncommon intellectual engagement.

We have been purposeful in making intellectual community the center of the first-year experience. Another antidote to compartmentalization, of course, is simply to have athletes engage in the arts, and actors, dancers and sculptors also compete in athletics. Some of these crossovers happen accidentally, but it is crucial, especially for those in the arts, to reach out to make them happen all the time.

Art's Urgency

Although I began the essay by praising the way in which sport and the arts both lift the education of everyone on a residential college campus and then noted the powerful parallels between the two sets of learning opportunities, I have said more about sport because the arts are under less scrutiny. But even with regard to the arts, we should remember that on many campuses they are relative newcomers, just as English as a subject for study did not gain legitimacy at Oxford until the end of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, the arts are crucial to education, perhaps more so than ever. On my own campus, where there has been an amazing flowering of the arts in the past decade—from a proliferation of campus sculpture to new programs in dance and sculpture, and burgeoning offerings in theater—it is easy for me to recall being moved again and again to laughter, grief and awe.

Three aspects of the arts make them crucial in our own times. One is their power to knit us together. These shared experiences—so magnified on a campus because we know everyone with whom we are sharing—nurture the humane conversation that is the marrow of community. And as the horrors and tragedies of the last century follow us into this one, the arts can inspire us to avoid the worst calamities by enlarging our experience through creative, connective acts.

Finally, the arts, as Vaclav Havel has argued, are so necessary now because technology and science have reached a point where reason, or at least operational goals, can outstrip conscience. We need to experience each other as creative centers, not as categories or instrumentalities, and the arts encourage us to do that.

Art is also the best antidote to pretension. As Saul Bellow said in his Nobel Prize speech in 1976, "Only art penetrates what pride, passion, and intelligence and habit erect." Yet sport, too addresses our illusions. One universally redeeming aspect of sport is that it allows for no pretension: no one can run faster, throw farther, or jump higher than she can run or throw or jump. Both art and sport can always be pressed into the service of a narrow

agenda, be it old-school chauvinism or xenophobic nationalism, but I believe the fundamental impulse of the people on the stage or the field and in the audience is to join hands.

Despite their relative newness on most of our campuses, the arts are much further along in their integration into college life. And the arts benefit from this integration. Athletics can benefit as well, and given the closeness of the two realms, their parallel popularity, and the creative and inspirational territory they share, they need to be as intergral as possible to our students' lives. Several of the athletes we profile on the following pages practice an art and a sport. They know the connections and the importance of living a life of multiple possibilities. That is why they are here.

One of our dance faculty, who is writing a book on creativity, makes the same point. He tells his students that creativity has a great deal to do with how they live their lives, that the quality of their interactions with the world, not a narrow focus, shapes their capacity to make art that reaches people. If that is true, so is the converse, that the richness of our creative experience, sport included, feeds back into all other areas of our lives.

Our students know this first hand, and they can express it better than I. So I am turning the remainder of this occasional paper over to ten of them, asking them to illuminate the deeper connections and benefits of art and sport. Some of them practice both forms of creativity, but all of them draw on a wide range of resources. Their words show why they could be the artists and athletes they are only at a liberal arts college.



Adams Berzins '05 is a biology major and an actor. He has participated in many Ursinus stage productions.

“There is an energy on the stage, in front of a crowd that wants to see what you have to give. That energy and the audience itself are part of a larger picture of the play—the whole of it, not just the actors, the script, the spoken lines. The adrenaline that comes from that experience feeds into the character you are playing on stage, not into you, the actor, so that the character feels it. This is the strange form of control you develop. You are in the action, reacting to the unexpected as the character would. You develop an awareness of everyone around you on the stage, but an awareness as the character. And in this situation, time seems to stop. You do a scene and you are not aware that you have done anything. The character you are playing has done it all.”



"When I am in the zone, I feel I can hit every shot. Everyone else seems to run in slow motion. As a basketball player, I live to be in the zone. This is why I play. But the adrenaline is so high you have to control it, use it to your advantage. There is a strong connection between the mind and the body, in art and athletics, and this is what our coach works on strengthening. Now, even when I am in the zone, I am no longer caught up in myself, I am no longer thinking consciously about how I must move to get open. I am patient. I see the game as a whole, see where everyone is, and I get other people involved. When we grow together as a team, that's a good game."

Dennis Stanton '04 is an English major and captain of the Ursinus basketball team, 2003 Centennial Conference champion. He is First Team All-Centennial Conference, an Academic All-American, and leads the NCAA in scoring.



Kyle Andrews '06 is an anthropology major and an actor. He participates in Ursinus theater productions and plays rugby.

“A good stage character is a character you already have inside you, but you have to find it. So acting then becomes a journey of self-discovery. I am the nice guy who has the bad parts, so bad even my mother wants to kill me at the end of the play. But I am willing to explore unpleasant aspects of myself in order to bring a character to life. It’s risky to seek these connections. You have to be willing to put up with chaos, and with people associating you with the characters you play, but that is the essential humanity of theater, its ability to connect you and audiences to other minds, other people. It draws on everything you know, an entire liberal arts education, and on what you find inside yourself. Once you have made the journey, seen what’s there, if you don’t like it, you are aware of what to correct in your life.”



"I am not an especially good athlete. It's a huge challenge for me, and there is more to it than just playing a game. As with academic work, it's an ongoing process of learning that feeds self-discovery. What do I learn on the field? To focus intently on tasks. To be disciplined. To block out negative experiences. And above all, to be self-reflective, for the game is largely about a mind set. So I ask myself, what kind of a player have I been? What kind of a teammate? Have I been able to turn my love and energy into something positive for those around me, as our coaches constantly encourage us to do? When a game breaks down or a play goes wrong, can I regain the focus to get myself back into the moment? In my sport, I am seeking self-balance—perfection in the mental, physical and emotional aspects of what I do. This is a form of grace."

Nadelle Ball '04 is an English major with a concentration in teaching. She has played women's lacrosse for the past four years.



Joyce Anne Koubaroulis '05 is an exercise and sports science major and a member of the field hockey team, 2003 E.C.A.C. champions. Second Team All-Centennial Conference and a residence assistant in the Ursinus residence halls, she is also a member of the Greek National Field Hockey team and an amateur portraitist.

“When I look at the hockey sticks and shoes in my closet, I say, ‘This is who I am. This is my life.’ Hockey has taught me everything. It’s a healthy escape, of course, just like my drawing, but it has also made me stronger mentally and physically. It’s constantly evolving as I perfect skills, and as I have gotten older, it has taught me how to mentor and be a leader. It is not about doing only what comes naturally but about helping others, directing others, creating situations in which everyone’s skills come into play. And when we move as a team, it is like a flock of birds in formation, all headed in one direction, changing places but keeping this form. What do I carry away from this? Nothing literal, but the joy, the passion, and the thrill of feeling completely alive.”



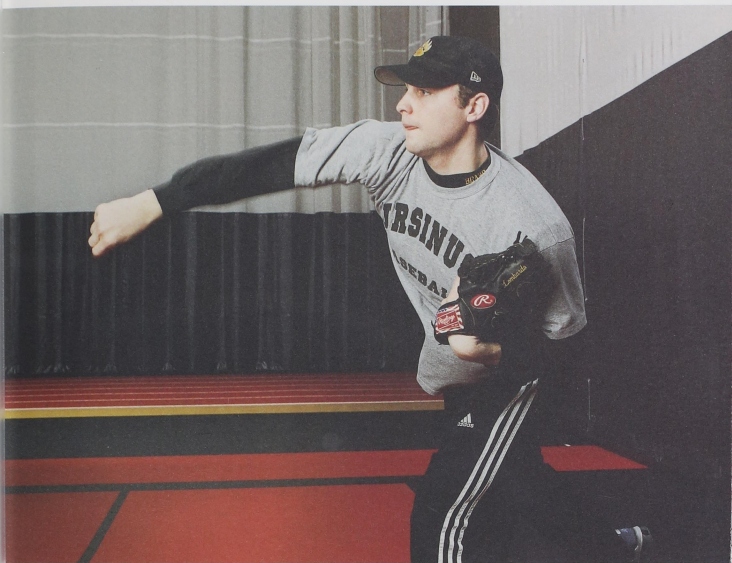
“Dance does everything for me, and even though I hadn’t planned to pursue it in college, I found I couldn’t leave it behind. It is an intense exercise, an outlet for the emotions, and a kind of meditation. And it taps into all the other areas of knowledge I experience at Ursinus. Knowledge helps me be more expressive on stage. I have never been very impressed by dancers who rely on the ‘wow’ factor, on their strength and speed. When I jump or move, I want to move expressively, embody an emotion. That requires nuances. So I will observe people around me, adopt their gestures like a chameleon. I’ll also read *Jane Eyre* in order to summon fear and loneliness. In order to create something that other people can relate to, you cannot be closed off.”

Ann Antanavage '04 is an English major and a dancer. She has appeared in solo and group performances at Ursinus.



Alison Shaffer '04 is an English major and a poet. She contributes frequently to *The Lantern*, the Ursinus literary magazine.

“Writing, like any art, means taking risks, and every time I write I have to confront the fear of the blank page. I don’t know how it will come out. I don’t know what I’m going to say. But that uncertainty is a good sign, and I’ll write until I stop being afraid. I love the thrill of not knowing. I sit down with a store of words and ideas that I haven’t been able to process rationally, and I’ll know there’s something important hiding there. When I was playing soccer, we would drill for hours, preparing, but once we got on the field, there was no telling how it would go. That’s what we were really preparing for, to be creative. I’ve become more willing to follow my instincts, to pursue what seems odd, interesting or beautiful and see where it leads, and I enjoy the process as much as I do the final outcome.”



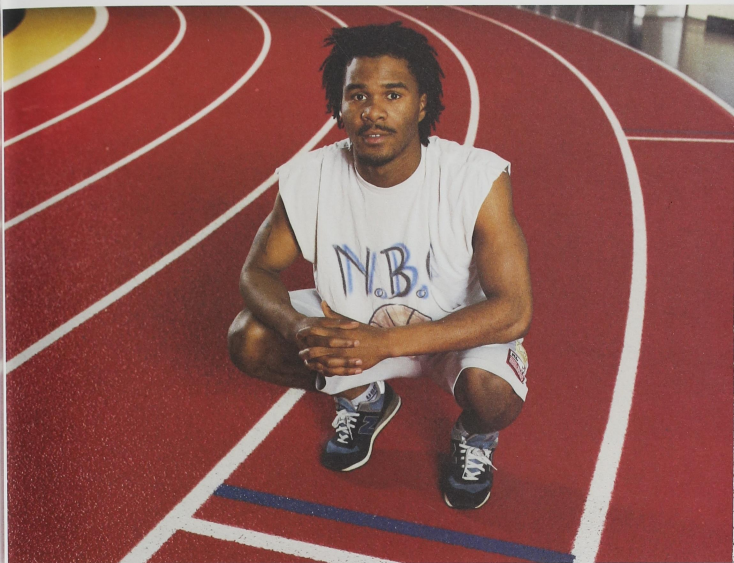
"To be honest, I got bored in the outfield. On the pitcher's mound you are much more exposed. You're always a little nervous because one play can change everything. But you also have the chance to control everything, to shape the game and set its pace, to make the batters do what you want. It's intricate, and you prepare for it just as you would for an exam, by studying. Over time you come to think like a pitcher, which means not trying to get the batter out on three pitches but letting him get himself out. That's the creative part, the finesse. I like strikeouts, but I love to have the fielders involved on every play and watch them come through in pressure situations. A great game, a beautiful game, is one we win 3-1 and I haven't overpowered a single batter."

Mike Lombardo '04 is a business and economics major and captain of the men's baseball team. He is First Team All-Centennial Conference pitcher.



Aubrey Andre '05 is a visual arts major. She is the co-captain of the women's lacrosse team and captain of the women's soccer team. She is First Team All-Centennial Conference in lacrosse and All-Centennial Conference honorable mention in soccer.

"In the studio, my canvas is white. On the field, it's green. I pick up a ball or a brush and I create. I seek the same feeling, the same satisfaction with both. Many artists want to transform or add to what they see, but I want to capture what I see—the forms and colors that make up a person's face and body, the naturalness they bring. You can learn to do this, if you have the patience to improve, just as you can learn in sports. I'm still practicing, and I carry this awareness around with me. I look at how light falls on a friend's face, and I think where a brushstroke would go and even how I would move my arm to do it. When I leave the art studio, I am struck by contrast of lights and darks. Painting can be an isolated activity, and yet through it I feel connected to everything."



“Playing ball is a form of expression, a style, a way of doing things as no other person would do them, and people want to see what’s extraordinary and exciting. We need a wide array of these forms of expression because without them, people cannot communicate. Many people express themselves without words. Some people do it on a court, some on a stage. We need them all. I find myself more aware of what these different ways of communicating have in common. In games, I will see artistry in plays and how movements have beauty. In my dance class I’ll make a comparison with how a defender guards his man, the gracefulness of it, or with the coordination of a team, how you all have to be disciplined and on the same page in order to produce something greater than yourself. People may not see these connections easily, but they are there.”

Naquan Williams '05 is a communications and theater major, a guard on the men's basketball team, and a member of the track team. An NCAA tournament participant with the basketball team, he also performs in theater and dance at Ursinus.

Coda and Overtime

In a college where athletes are also artists, musicians, and/or members of Phi Beta Kappa or publishing scientists, extracurricular activity is not something people merely stop and start, or compartmentalize as separate from the rest of their education or their sense of self. In an earlier occasional paper, I described how students doing lab research full-time for a summer saw themselves integrating their experiences into who they were. They spoke of the discipline of scrupulously logging into their lab books every half hour, of recording their data with precision, no matter how idiosyncratic their own results seemed. This need for constant scrupulousness led them to speak of living their lives whole. As one of them said, "It was no longer a matter of just understanding integrity; it was a matter of living it."



The College's LOVE sculpture echoes Center City Philadelphia's famous Robert Indiana landmark.

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