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RUNNING WITH ZOE

BY JOHN KILBOURNE

Dr. John Kilbourne's recent book, *Running With Zoe: Conversations On The Meaning Of Sport*, is the product of a lifetime of coaching, working with athletes and thinking about sports issues. Most of the book's chapters take the form of "conversations" which illuminate some aspect of sport. Professor Kilbourne's partners in these conversations include members of the Canadian National Figure Skating Team, the late sports journalist Howard Cosell and the author's 7-year old daughter, Zoe. Like many sections of the book, the opening chapter of *Running With Zoe*, entitled "Prelude," draws on Professor Kilbourne's own experiences.

PRELUDE

It was an extraordinary day, June 2, 1983. I was poised on the rear of a large flat-bed trailer that was being pulled down Broad Street in Philadelphia. Standing next to and around me were several players and their families from the 1983 National Basketball Association World Champion Philadelphia Seventy-Sixers. Other coaches, players and Seventy-Sixer administrative staff were on similar flat-bed trailers that preceded and followed ours. Yes! I was part of this great basketball team that was celebrating after having reached the promised land.

At the beginning of the 1982-83 season I had been hired by the Seventy-Sixers as the first full-time strength and conditioning coach in the NBA. Now, after a successful regular season (65 wins and 17 losses) and a nearly perfect post season, we were the 1983 World Champions of Basketball.

As the parade crept through the heart of Philadelphia we were surrounded by rejoicing fans. Some estimates were that as many as one million, five hundred thousand people participated in this tribute. Broad Street was absolutely wild. People were literally hanging from the windows of skyscrapers. Folks of every age group and of mixed ethnicity were waving and screaming with ecstasy. A few folks actually took their clothes off and were rejoicing naked. It was unbelievable, to say the least.

It was somewhere during the journey down Broad Street towards Veterans Stadium that I asked myself, *What is this all about? Just what is this phenomenon we call sport? And, what has sport done to these folks to cause this many to celebrate in ways never seen, heard, or felt, at any other time or place in my life?*

There were many moments in my life where I thought I had reached the height of human expression and spirit. As an adolescent I sat with my father and brother at a Doors concert in Sacramento, California, and watched Jim Morrison dance and sing in ways unimaginable to a fourteen year old. As a teenager I witnessed several demonstrations/concerts in the San Francisco area. These were the great Peace-Love-Music festivals of the late 1960's and early 1970's, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Country Joe and the Fish. And, as an amateur and professional actor/dancer I had performed on stage, hearing and feeling the cheers of appreciative audiences. One high point of my calling to the stage was performing with The American Ballet Theatre in the Ballet *Petroucka* at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles. Also, in 1980 as Graduate Assistant (Dance Conditioning) to then Head Basketball Coach Larry Brown at U.C.L.A. I was part of a team that went to the NCAA Final Four Championship in Indianapolis, Indiana. As spectacular as all of these life experiences were, none was even close to what I was feeling on this electrifying June morning. The celebration in Philadelphia was downright orgasmic. Ecstasy of the highest order.

It was during the Seventy-Sixers' parade that I began my quest to understand the phenomenon of sport. This revelation and the ensuing crusade originated almost fifteen years ago. During that fifteen years I have continued sharing information about dance, movement and conditioning with college and professional basketball players and teams, worked extensively with American and Canadian figure skaters, and remained active in the theatre and dance arenas. Most importantly, I have been a devoted sport



Above: John Kilbourne in Nagano, Japan
Below: John Kilbourne with Elvis Stojko,
Canadian Champion and Olympic Silver
Medalist



philosopher, thinking about and trying to understand the nature and conduct of humans and their participation in sport. Although much closer than I was fifteen years ago, I still seek answers to the many questions I have about sport. *Running With Zoe: Conversations On The Meaning Of Sport*, are my reflections at this juncture of the crusade. The book is a progress report on my journey towards an understanding of sport. It is my hope that by sharing my journey you will become closer to understanding the meaning of sport. Together, our nearness may help bring society into greater harmony with the values that are inherent in sport.

SPORT AND AMERICAN FOLKS

Sport is one of the most watched, participated in, read about, and listened to, events of our time. Five million American households watched Super Bowl 1997. Despite sport's popularity, those in sport and those who observe sport know little, if anything, about it.

I began to ask questions of myself and others about the meaning of sport after my revelation during the Seventy-Sixers' Championship Parade in 1983. To my surprise, those that I questioned at every level and from a variety of sports, primarily coaches and players, were as naive as I was. The naiveté seemed most apparent amongst the elite and professional athletes I was teaching and working with. Most of these folks had no concept of the influence sport has over persons, both past and present, in our society.

It was while working in the arena of college sport that I uncovered one possible reason for our lack of understanding about sport. During the research for my doctorate at The Ohio State University I discovered that there is not one college or university participating at the elite level of college sport (Division IA) which requires their student-athletes to take a single course that will enhance their understanding of sport. It seems that over the years organized education has created a culture of sport participants; team owners, administrators, agents, coaches, players, journalists, marketers, and spectators who know very little about the meaning of sport. Literally thousands of young

athletes pass through schools, colleges and universities throughout America and then advance to administer sport, coach sport, report on sport, sell sport, or simply enjoy participating in, or watching sport, without any insight into the meaning of sport for individuals or communities.

This lack of understanding concerning sport seems most evident in the arena of professional sport. The deficiency is reaffirmed almost daily as we witness the personalities, behaviors and deportments of many team owners, team administrators, coaches, athletes, agents, television announcers, and marketers. We are all too familiar with the pandemonium that surrounds professional sport.

Running With Zoe: Conversations On The Meaning Of Sport, is my attempt at trying to enliven the wonder of sport. My hope is to help the *sporting* public understand the deep meanings of sport. I have purposefully created a book that can be easily understood by the popular sport culture. Sport is a People phenomenon. Creating a work that is only understood by an esoteric few would have little impact on the future of sport.

PRELUDE

The following is a copy of a letter that was written to a living angel of sport, figure skating sensation Ekaterina Gordeeva. The letter is a *Thank You* message to Ekaterina and her fellow skaters for the wonderful eulogy they performed for her late husband, Sergei Grinkov, in February, 1996. Their performance in Hartford, Connecticut was certainly one of the most meaningful sporting events of modern times.

A LETTER TO EKATERINA GORDEEVA

Dear Ekaterina Gordeeva,

I am writing this letter to thank you and your fellow skaters for the worshipful tribute you did in Hartford, Connecticut. Your presentation was certainly one of the most meaningful sport performances of modern times. In the following letter I would like to share with you my thoughts and feelings about your performance eulogy. Let me begin with the magnificence of the words you shared following your personal tribute.

I am so happy this evening is happening. I am so sad it is all over. I want to start it again. I want to thank all of you. I will not be able to skate here if all of you will not come here tonight. So difficult to talk. I am so happy I am able to skate and show you my skating. But I want you to know that I skated today not alone. I skated with Sergei. It's why it was so good. It was not me.

With these words you brought to a close the emotional, loving skating tribute you performed for your late husband Sergei Grinkov. It was so wonderful that you returned to the ice, a hearth for most of your life.

Skating to Gustav Mahler's somber Fifth Symphony, you invited thousands of strangers to witness a personal homage to your Sergei, the father of your daughter Daria. Supported by friends, some of the decade's finest figure skaters, including Brian Boitano, Kristi Yamaguchi, Katarina Witt, Paul Wylie, Oksana Baiul, Viktor Petrenko, Scott Hamilton, Kurt Browning, Doug Ladre and Christine Huff, you honored the life of Sergei Grinkov, your life companion and champion.

This performance was, for me, one of the greatest sporting presentations of my lifetime. It was more momentous than Michael Johnson's, Kerri Strug's, or Donovan Bailey's heroic performances at the recently completed Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta. It was more indispensable than many of the monstrous accomplishments of basketball sensation Michael Jordan, the mastery of golfing great Tiger Woods, or the perseverance of tennis superstar Monica Seles. What made your tribute in Hartford, Connecticut so outstanding was that you and your friends were performing for something that is almost immeasurable. Your motivation was far greater than money, trophies, prizes, or celebrity. Your sacrifice in this public arena was of the innermost and oldest order. You were participating in a contemporary funeral game, honoring a departed soul through sport excellence; one of the oldest reasons for sport known to mankind.

Archaeologists have found evidence of funeral games as far back as the late Bronze Age (Thirteenth and Twelfth Centuries B.C.). And, in *Book 23* of the *Iliad* (750 B.C.), Homer describes the funeral games held in honor of Achilles' late friend Patroklos. He says,

And when they had built up the funeral mound on the ground, those who built the memorial started to return [to camp]. But Achilles stopped the people and seated them in a broad assembly and had prizes brought from the ships, large kettles and tripods and horses and mules and heads of powerful oxen and beautifully dressed women and gray iron.

This funerary event, held in 776 B.C., was the first known Olympic competition. It was a foot race to see who could first reach the altar where Patroklos was laid to rest. It seems folks for thousands of years have been gathering in performance of games and sport to honor those that have come before.

Over the past fifteen years I have made it my mission to keep track of modern day funerary events. Literally hundreds of athletes like yourself are motivated by dedicating their training and performance to departed souls. What is most profound about these performances and moreover, what modern-day athletes can learn from you and this ancient formula, is that sport goes much deeper than what science can describe and, that sport performance is motivated more by our human side than money. Sport, after all, is a struggle for our existence (life) and what better way to honor one's personal existence than to exult in those who have come before. Your skating performance at Hartford is by far the most extraordinary funerary performance I have observed in all my years of chronicling these events.

In addition to your phenomenal tribute, during the last three years, the world of ice skating has brought us other examples of exceptional funerary games. For example, just prior to the memorial in Connecticut, singles skater Rudy Galindo stunned the figure skating community with his heartwarming victory at the United States Nationals in San Jose, California. He dedicated his performance to his father who had died of a heart attack and his brother and two coaches who died of complications from AIDS. When he finished his long program he covered his face, made the sign of the cross and let emotion wash over him. In an interview afterward he said, "My jumps seemed so light and easy. Maybe it came from above – from my father, my brother, my coaches." It seems Rudy's secret motivation had just helped him to complete one of the greatest upsets in the history of American figure skating.

Still another skater who had this personal incentive for victory is Dan Jansen, the American speed skater. At the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary, Canada, Jansen, who had promised to win his race for his sister Jane who was dying of leukemia, learned of her death shortly before his race. Sadly, he fell during his race and failed to finish. Returning at the 1992 Games in Albertville, France he again was unable to medal. Then, at the 1994 Games in Lillehammer, Norway, in the last race of his extraordinary record-breaking career, he finished first and won the gold medal. Immediately following his race he circled the skating track with his young daughter Jane cradled in his arms. On the medal platform during the playing of the Star Spangled Banner, he looked skyward and saluted his late sister. He said afterward,

Jane was so much a part of my life, and she was there in the beginning of my career. So, when the anthem was just finishing, I saluted her. I knew she was watching.

Ekaterina! If you look for it, testimony of contemporary funerary events, like the one you did in Hartford, are all around us. That which seems to have always been part of the fabric of human sport is hard to erase. Contemporary funeral events, both celebrated and unknown, are a magnificent reminder of the human side of sport. They reaffirm the notion that at the deepest level sport is about relationships between people, about renewal, and about our continued existence. The ancient Greeks, for example, felt that sport and human existence were intimately linked. To these ancient folks sport was the greatest testimony to the perseverance of the human spirit. By honoring the past they hoped to safeguard their future. Like the sport of the ancient Greeks, the skating tribute you did for Sergei Grinkov was your safeguard for our future. Filled with emotion you provided this epilogue about our future, a future most assuredly guided by the memory of your late husband. You said,

I don't have enough words. But, I also want to wish to all of you. Try to find happiness in every day. Spend your life with at least one smile to each other. And say just one extra time that you love the person who lives with you. Just say I love you. It is so great. Ok! Thanks.

No Ekaterina! It is you we should be thanking. Through sport you and your fellow skaters have provided us with the hope that tomorrow will indeed be a better day. Thank you very much for this hope and please know that your performance is proof that Sergei can and will live forever.

Spiritful Experiences Make Faithful People,

John Kilbourne, Ph.D.

A Letter To Ekaterina Gordeeva is a speech that was delivered to figure skaters and their parents attending the Canadian Figure Skating Association's British Columbia Seasonal Training Camp, Whistler Mountain, B.C., Canada, August 1996.

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