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In Response: Spiritual Development

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IN RESPONSE

**SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT
IN SPORT**

Neil Laughlin, Ed. D.

A long-time exercise and sports science teacher compares the emphasis on spiritual development in sport at Jesuit universities to those of professional physical educators in secular schools.

As someone who has taught for more than thirty years at a Jesuit university, what seemed especially interesting about the ideas expressed in the Spring, 2002 issue of *Conversations* is that they are so similar to those of physical educators who work in non-Jesuit universities. Concerned with many of the abuses ascribed to college sport,¹ a growing number of present-day professionals in higher education consider spiritual development an important aim of athletic participation. More specifically, many physical educators stress the importance of ethical principles in guiding conduct and describe sport as an enterprise which has the potential to enhance spiritual development or shape character.^{2, 3} If sport attempts to enhance spiritual development, what are some of the areas and practices in it which ethics should influence? Two areas will be selected for discussion: program administration and coaching behavior.

Program Administration

Whether a sports program is concerned with supervision, human relations, communication, design, facilities, finance, or performance, those who believe sport should be concerned with

spiritual development probably should look at each specific practice with a teleological focus. What is the ultimate end of any sports process? How does it contribute to the development of administrators, teachers, coaches, students, and athletes as human beings? These two questions are the kind which should guide one's view.

One aspect of the administration of a sports program which can be important for its spiritual implications is leadership. Those involved in sport who consider spiritual development important should strive to be models who lead those less knowledgeable toward truth -- truth about what is rational and right in sport and life. We can lead others to knowledge of things they do not know in the same way we direct ourselves through the process of discovering what we do not know.

Saint Thomas Aquinas once argued that teachers are instrumental causes and those taught are principal causes of events.⁴ Similarly, as instrumental causes, leaders possess power to produce effects greater than those led are able to engender by themselves. In this context, the statement, "s/he gave 110%," may be an accurate description of peak performance in sport.

Of paramount importance for spiritual

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leadership is ethics. Indeed, leadership should be governed by ethics or, more precisely, good ethics.^{5,6} Each act should be guided by reason in an attempt to do what is right. A leader concerned with spiritual development should be someone who directs others toward virtue, someone who inspires others to act virtuously.

For the administrator, teacher, and coach concerned with spiritual development, the plethora of unethical practices which plague college sport (e.g., illegal recruiting, ergogenic drug use, and *sub rosa* incentives) are cause for considerable concern. Indeed, one might question whether some present-day athletic programs should have any place in sport because they are almost antithetical to ethical tenets which foster spiritual development. If sport should enhance spiritual development, then one of its primary purposes should be to teach its participants to do what is morally right.

Coaching Behavior

For those in sport who stress the importance of spiritual development, one of the most significant roles which can be played by an administrator, teacher, or coach is that of spiritual mentor. The role of spiritual mentor embodies educational tenets which specifically focus on spiritual development. Some of these tenets have been discussed by Anthony Gulley and can be paraphrased as follows:

1. Coaching is a cooperative art. In other words, athletes learn from coaches by applying self-evident principles to certain competitive situations and, in turn, arrive at knowledge of things they did not previously know. Hopefully this knowledge leads to the pursuit of virtue.
2. Coaches do not simply stimulate players. While players possess an in-born potentiality for knowledge and good

behavior, coaches help them actualize this potential. Thus, by giving good example mentally, physically, and morally, coaches should attempt to teach athletes to play and live in a way which maximizes their full potential.

3. Coaching is centered in truth. In every sport, just as certain principles of play produce victory, they should also create good conduct. Coaches should be greatly involved in teaching these truths (principles).⁷

Whether an individual in sport is concerned with program administration or coaching behavior, if he or she wants to foster spiritual development, it probably must be a primary focus of any activity undertaken. Thus how "good" or "bad" athletes are should not only be evaluated by the conventional criteria related to successful performance, but also by the degree to which their performance enhances their spiritual development.

A good example of one coach's view of the importance of spiritual development in sport was Dante Benedetti, the University of San Francisco's Baseball Coach from 1967 to 1980. One of his primary goals was, in his words, "to teach individuals the difference between right and wrong through the game of baseball." Coach Benedetti frequently elaborated on this belief by contending that baseball's principles of play demanded hard work, self-sacrifice, concentration, and rational thinking -- all traits which characterize good behavior in many aspects of life.

Benedetti practiced what he preached. Players were evaluated and given the opportunity to play based not only on their performance in practice and games, but also on their leadership and moral behavior on and off the field. There were no "bench warmers" on Benedetti's teams. Everyone played because there should be no bench warmers in the game of life.

In "The "Decline of Civility and the Rise of Religion in American Sport," Shirl Hoffman eloquently expressed sport's potential for spiritual development when he wrote:

The human experience of sport achieves its highest purpose not when we respond reflexively to its primitive enticements to self-aggrandizement, but when we seize it as an opportunity to demonstrate -- to ourselves and others -- those human qualities that mark us as God's highest and most noble creations.⁸

In sport, it is often said "winning is everything." For those in sport concerned with spiritual development, "being is everything." If those involved in sport are important, if the development of their potential as human beings is important, then spiritual development should be an important aim of sport.



Photo Courtesy of Loyola University, Chicago

A LEADER IN
PHYSICAL EDUCATION
WITH
SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT
SHOULD BE SOMEONE
WHO DIRECTS OTHERS
TOWARDS VIRTUE

ENDNOTES

¹Mark Bandsuch, "Sports and Spirituality in Jesuit Higher Education," *Conversations*, Spring 2002, 21, 25-26.

²Peter Arnold, "The Virtues, Moral Education, and Practice of Sport," 51: 45.

³Russell Gough, *Character's Everything: Promoting Ethical Excellence in Sports.*, Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace and Company, xv, 29.

⁴Anton Pegis, Ed, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. I., New York: Doubleday and Co., 1976.

⁵R. Scott Kretchmar, *Practical Philosophy of Sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 237.

⁶William Morgan and Klaus Meir, Eds., *Philosophic Inquiry in Sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 141.

⁷Anthony Gulley, *The Educational Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas*. New York: Pageant Press, 98-109.

⁸Shirl Hoffman, "The Decline of Civility and the Rise of Religion in American Sport," *Quest*. 51: 83.