

To Do Anything At All Well Requires Strict Discipline

Winnipeg Free Press column of Aug. 7th, 1999.

<http://www3.sympatico.ca/ian.ritchie/Sport.Religion.htm>

I heard one of the PanAm athletes say just the other day: "I do this sport because it is hard. It is very hard to do this." Many sports are grueling: thousands of hours of intensive practice and training, sore muscles, injuries, long hours of practice when it would be more fun to be out with your friends going to a movie or just goofing around. But the athlete participates in order to receive a "crown": a gold medal. Or perhaps to prove to him or herself how much is possible.

In ancient Israel athletic competition was frowned on. But in ancient Greek culture athletics were a way of demonstrating the integration of the whole person. And so the first Olympic games were run in ancient Greece. Christianity's relationship to physical culture has often been an uneasy one. On the one hand, the first century Christians based their belief in a person who came out of the Jewish heritage, with its suspicion of sport competition because of its parading of the body. But on the other hand, Christianity in the Eastern Mediterranean world lived and breathed in a Greco-Roman culture where sport competition was an accepted way of showing one's prowess.

Although Jesus seems to have had little or nothing to say about sport, St. Paul, in several of his letters, used metaphors from sport to illustrate his points. In I Corinthians 9:25-27 Paul says: "Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified." And in I Timothy 4:8, Paul says: "for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." (NRSV) Paul's point is that discipline of all types has value. But bodily exercise is of relatively less value than spiritual exercise. For the spiritual reward is eternal life, while the physical reward is a crown that eventually fades away. So Paul does not forbid sport, or even discourage it. He even seems to suggest the discipline that goes with it is a virtuous thing that should be encouraged. And this goes beyond the mere appropriation of athletic language to prove a point unrelated to sport.

To put it another way, we might say that anything worth doing is worth doing well. And to do it well you have to discipline yourself. You have to ignore the pain and deny yourself some pleasures, not because those pleasures are "bad" things, but because for the sake of the goal set before you, they have to be put aside for awhile. The value St. Paul gave to physical discipline was not lost on the founders of the "muscular Christianity" movement of the late 19th century, to which the formation of the Young Men's Christian Association is related. Known simply as the "Y" to most of us, this has been the place where so many of today's athletes got their start. Now the original purpose of sport, in the best sense, is that it is a means to bring the body to its greatest natural potential. The theory goes that competition is what spurs an athlete on to higher levels of achievement than would otherwise be possible. But if a drug is used in such a way as to give short term competitive advantage but produces long term damage to the body, then the original Greek ideal of sport is distorted and sport's purpose defeated.

Basing its principles on the ancient Greek ideal of sport, it is right that the International Olympic Commission has banned certain drugs from use in amateur

sport, even though some of them are quite legal in the larger society. The rationale is that these substances are performance enhancing drugs when used in high enough dosages, and if used on a regular basis are harmful to the body.

A Canadian roller hockey player tested positive on three banned substances. Should his whole team have to suffer because of one man's use of banned drugs? I have to agree with the IOC decision. Its hard to take, but yes, a team plays and wins as a team or loses as a team. What more poignant lesson in group solidarity than that all should rise or fall on the basis of what one member does. To a Christian, again the message of St. Paul is driven home: "we are all members of the one body." You can't expect to share in the glorious crown together if you are not also willing to share in the consequences of one member's fault. I was disappointed to read that a slight majority of Canadians polled felt that a whole team should not be punished for one man's breaking the rules. If it had been a team other than Canada's would that poll have come to the same result? I wonder.

It is perhaps even more distressing to find that professional players do not have anywhere near the same level of rigour in drug testing applied to them as to amateurs. If the Greek ideal of sport were of any value at all, I would have thought that professionals should be regulated just as strictly, if not even more so. This so because most professionals plan to stay in professional sport for a longer period of their lives than amateurs training for international competitions like the PanAm Games and the Olympics. And so professionals stand to suffer greater damage to their bodies due to longer periods of drug usage.

I am very happy to see Winnipeg come so alive and so festive for the PanAm Games, and I hope that this time can be seen as an example of what the city is capable of in the future. Let the Games continue and grow. But let us not forget the original ideal of sport, or allow it to be lost in the push for money, success or worldly glory.

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