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Do Sports Build Character or Damage It?

By Mark Edmundson

Do sports build character? For those of us who claim to be educators, it's important to know. Physical-education teachers, coaches, boosters, most trustees, and the balance of alumni seem sure that they do. And so they push sports, sports, and more sports. As for professors, they often see sports as a diversion from the real business of education—empty, time-wasting, and claiming far too much of students' attention. It often seems that neither the boosters nor the bashers want to go too far in examining their assumptions about sports.

But in fact, sports are a complex issue, and it's clear that we as a culture don't really know how to think about them. Public confusion about performance-enhancing drugs, the dangers of concussions in football and of fighting in hockey, and the recent molestation scandal at Penn State suggest that it might be good to pull back and consider the question of athletics and education—of sports and character-building—a bit more closely than we generally do.

The first year I played high-school football, the coaches were united in their belief that drinking water on the practice field was dangerous. It made you cramp up, they told us. It made you sick to your stomach, they said. So at practice, which went on for two and a half hours, twice a day, during a roaring New England summer, we got no water. Players cramped up anyway; players got sick to their stomachs regardless. Players fell on their knees and began making soft, plaintive noises; they were helped to their feet, escorted to the locker room, and seen no more.

On the first day of double practice sessions, there were about 120 players—tough Irish and Italian kids and a few blacks—and by the end of the 12-day ordeal, there were 60 left. Some of us began without proper equipment. I started without cleats. But that was not a problem: Soon someone who wore your shoe size would quit,

and then you could have theirs.

The coaches didn't cut anyone from the squad that year. Kids cut themselves. Guys with what appeared to be spectacular athletic talent would, after four days of double-session drills, walk hangdog into the coaches' locker room and hand over their pads. When I asked one of them why he quit, he said simply, "I couldn't take it."

Could I? There was no reason going in to think that I would be able to. I was buttery soft around the waist, nearsighted, not especially fast, and not agile at all. It turned out that underneath the soft exterior, I had some muscle, and that my lung capacity was well developed, probably from vicious bouts of asthma I'd had as a boy. But compared with those of my fellow ballplayers, my physical gifts were meager. What I had was a will that was anything but weak. It was a surprise to me, and to everyone who knew me, how ferociously I wanted to stay with the game.

Did I love the game? I surely liked it. I liked how, when I was deep in fatigue, I became a tougher, more daring person, even a reckless one. One night, scrimmaging, I went head-on with the star running back, a guy who outweighed me by 20 pounds and was far faster and stronger. I did what the coaches said: I squared up, got low (in football, the answer to every difficulty is to get low, or get lower), and planted him. I did that?, I asked myself. I liked being the guy who could do that—sometimes, though alas not often enough. The intensity of the game was inebriating. It conquered my grinding self-consciousness, brought me out of myself.

I liked the transforming aspect of the game: I came to the field one thing—a diffident guy with a slack body—and worked like a dog and so became something else—a guy with some physical prowess and more faith in himself. Mostly, I liked the whole process because it was so damned hard. I didn't think I could make it, and no one I knew did either. My parents were ready to console me if I came home bruised and dead weary and said that I was quitting. In time, one of the coaches confessed to me that he was sure I'd be gone in a few days. I had not succeeded in anything for a long time: I was a crappy student; socially I was close to a wash; my part-time job was scrubbing pans in a hospital kitchen; the first girl I liked in high school didn't like me; the second and the third followed her lead. But football was something I could do, though I was never going to be anything like a star. It was hard, it took some strength of will, and—clumsily, passionately—I could do it.

Over time, I came to understand that the objective of the game, on the deepest level, wasn't to score spectacular touchdowns or make bone-smashing tackles or block kicks. The game was much more about practice than about the Saturday-afternoon contests. And practice was about trying to do something over and over again, failing and failing, and then finally succeeding part way. Practice was about showing up and doing the same drills day after day and getting stronger and faster by tiny, tiny increments, and then discovering that by the end of the season you were effectively another person.

But mostly football was about those first days of double sessions when everyone who stuck with it did something he imagined was impossible, and so learned to recalibrate his instruments. In the future, what immediately looked impossible to us—what said Back Off, Not for You—had to be looked at again and maybe attempted anyway.

There were times while I was playing that I thought that I was an abject failure at the game. I simply never got very good. But I came to see that I was actually quite a success. I was able to show up every day, to work hard at something that was extremely difficult for me, and to improve little by little.

No one really noticed my improvements, least of all the coaches. But I did, and I took great pleasure in them. Football became a prototype for every endeavor in later life that required lonely, painstaking work and that was genuinely demanding. Through the game, I learned to care more about how I myself judged this or that performance of mine and less about how the world did.

When we seemed to get hurt on the field, when we went down and didn't immediately get up, the coaches had a common reaction: "Get up and walk it off." Sometimes, granted, the stretcher had to come out, but not often. It was surprising how many times it was possible to rise like Lazarus after a collision that looked (and sounded) like a couple of bowling balls rolling together. I once tried to tackle a tight end, six inches taller than I was and 50 pounds heavier. I bounced off and hit the so-called turf so hard that I felt the fillings in the back of my mouth shake; I passed out for an instant and woke up thinking my back was broken. "Get up. Walk it off. You're all right." I did, and I was.

Tim Green, a former defensive end for the Atlanta Falcons, makes a point about playing ball, a point that carries over into other areas of

experience. There's one factor at the heart of the game, he says: You have to get up. You get smacked around and knocked to the ground on at least half the plays, but then you have to go on to the next play. "I am defeated all the time," says Emerson, "yet to victory I am born." Football demonstrates that one is defeated, knocked down, time after time, and that victory is uncertain, whether you think you're born to it or not. But whatever the ultimate event, you do have to get up.

Speaking for myself, I've never had to call on the spirit of grass drills or double sessions, or channel an old coach to save myself or a child, the way James Dickey describes himself doing in his marvelous football poem "The Bee." ("Long live what I badly did at Clemson," the poet says.)

But I do recall what it felt like when, having thrown all I thought I had into writing a chunk of my dissertation, I returned from the job market a complete flop. I had come in with hopes that pointed to the heights: I didn't want just any academic job, though at the time even that would have been hard enough to get. I wanted one of the dozen or so best ones, which every year drew about 400 applicants apiece. If I couldn't get one, I decided, I'd quit and do something else. After the grand belly-flop, I knew that I'd have to work on a level far higher than anything I'd approached. I'd coasted through grad school, or so it now seemed.

I began living in the library—much in the way that I had lived at the football stadium my first summer on the team—arriving in the stacks early, leaving only to go to the gym in the late afternoon and to eat dinner, then returning until past dark. I built a wall of books on my table, as though to cloister myself, like a medieval monk.

Did I call on the old spirit of double sessions? Quietly, I did. I kept it largely to myself, since most scholars don't see much symmetry between what they do and what runners and jumpers and (especially) blockers and tacklers attempt. I read every book in the library on John Keats, the subject of my first chapter, and most of the articles. I wrote and rewrote my first paragraph about 30 times. By the end of the summer, I had a chapter I could be proud of, one that I knew would take me where I wanted to go.

Doctoral dissertations are tougher to write than one might imagine: It's lonely work, and no one (sometimes least of all your director, who has other things to do) cares much if you flourish or pucker on the vine. But compared with what some others are

compelled to endure—severe illness, divorce, the mortal sickness of a child—sitting in an air-conditioned library, trying to make sense out of the way other people have tried to make sense of the world, isn't all that daunting.

Others have called on their experience in sports to summon much larger doses of courage. They've used their old sports experiences as a map to take them back to reserves of strength they had forgotten they possessed. "Diversity of strength will attend us," Wordsworth says, "if but once we have been strong." For many of us, the time of being strong was the time we played a sport. Do sports build character? Of course they do. Who could doubt it?

Sports are many things, and one of those things is an imitation of heroic culture. They mimic the martial world; they fabricate the condition of war. (Boxing doesn't fabricate war; it *is* war, and, to my mind, not a sport. As Joyce Carol Oates says, you *play* football, baseball, and basketball, but no one "plays" boxing.)

This fabrication is in many ways a good thing, necessary to the health of a society. For it seems to me that Plato is right: The desire for glory is part of almost everyone's spirit. Plato called this desire *thymos* and associated its ascendancy and celebration with Homer. A major objective of his great work, *The Republic*, is to show how for a civilization truly to thrive, it must find a way to make the drive for glory subordinate to reason.

Plato believed that war was sometimes necessary, but that going to war should be up to the rulers, the philosopher kings, who have developed their minds fully. Some of us, Plato says, have a hunger for martial renown that surpasses others', and those people are very valuable and very dangerous. They need praise when they fight well (material rewards don't mean much to them), and they need something to keep them occupied when no war is at hand. Sports are a way to do that.

Plato would probably approve of the way athletics function in our culture—they let the most thymotic of us express their hunger for conquest, rather harmlessly, and they allow the rest to get their hit of glory through identification. The yelping fan, painted absurdly in his team's colors, cavorting half-naked at the stadium, stinking of beer, is still expressing a critical part of his inner life. Let him have his Saturday afternoon, worshiping his heroes.

But there are warriors, and there are warriors; there are athletes,

and there are athletes. In the Western heroic tradition, the paragon of the humane warrior is Homer's Hector, prince of the Trojans. He is a fierce fighter: On one particular day, no Greek can stand up to him; his valor puts the whole Greek army to rout. Even on an unexceptional day, Hector can stand up to Ajax, the Greek giant, and trade blow for blow with him. Yet as fierce as Hector can be, he is also humane. He is a loving son to his aged parents, a husband who talks on equal terms with his wife, Andromache, and a tender-hearted father. He and King Priam are the only ones in Troy who treat Helen, the ostensible cause of the war, with kindness.

One of the most memorable scenes in *The Iliad* comes when Hector, fresh from the battlefield, strides toward his boy, Astyanax. The child screams with fright at the ferocious form encased in armor, covered with dust and gore. Hector understands his child in an instant and takes off his helmet, with its giant horsehair plume, then bends over, picks his boy up and dandles him, while Andromache looks on happily. Astyanax—who will soon be pitched off the battlements of Troy when the Greeks conquer the city—looks up at his father and laughs in delight.

The scene concentrates what is most appealing about Hector—and about a certain kind of athlete and warrior. Hector can turn it off. He can stop being the manslayer that he needs to be out on the windy plains of Troy and become a humane husband and father. The scene shows him in his dual nature—warrior and man of thought and feeling. In a sense, he is the figure that every fighter and athlete should emulate. He is the Navy Seal or Green Beret who would never kill a prisoner, the fearless fighter who could never harm a woman or a child. In the symbolic world of sports, where the horrors and the triumphs of combat are only mimicked, he is the one who comports himself with extreme gentleness off the field, who never speaks ill of an opponent, who never complains, never whines.

But *The Iliad* is not primarily about Hector. It is the poem of Achilles and his wrath. After Hector kills Achilles' dear friend Patroclus, Achilles goes on a rampage, killing every Trojan he can. All humanity leaves him; all mercy is gone. At one point, a Trojan fighter grasps his knees and begs for mercy. Achilles taunts him: Look at me, he says, so strong and beautiful, and some day I, too, shall have to die. But not today. Today is your day. At another point, a river close to the city, the River Scamander, becomes incensed over Achilles' murderous spree. The hero has glutted its

waters with blood and its bed with bodies. The river is so enraged that it tries to drown the hero. When Achilles finally gets to Hector, he slaughters him before the eyes of his parents, Hecuba and Priam, and drags his body across the plains of Troy.

Achilles is drunk on rage, the poem tells us. His rational mind has left him, and he is mad with the joy of slaughter. The ability to modulate character that Hector shows—the fierce warrior becoming the loving father—is something Achilles does not possess. Achilles, one feels, could not stop himself if he wished to: A fellow Greek who somehow insulted him when he was on his rampage would be in nearly as much danger as a Trojan enemy. Plato would recognize Achilles as a man who has lost all reason and has allowed *thymos* to dominate his soul.

This ability to go mad—to become berserk—is inseparable from Achilles' greatness as a warrior. It is part of what sets him above the more circumspect Hector on the battlefield. When Hector encounters Achilles for the last time, Hector feels fear. Achilles in his wrath has no idea what fear is, and that is part of what makes him unstoppable.

Achilles' fate is too often the fate of warriors and, in a lower key, of athletes. They unleash power in themselves, which they cannot discipline. They leave the field of combat or of play and are still ferocious, or they can be stirred to ferocity by almost nothing. They let no insult pass. A misplaced word sends them into a rage. A mild frustration turns them violent. *Thymos*, as Plato would have said, has taken over their souls, and reason no longer has a primary place—in some cases, it has no place at all.

The kind of intensity that sports—and especially kinetic sports like football—can provoke is necessary for any society: *Thymos* must have its moment. But that intensity is mortally dangerous for society and for individuals, too. Sports can lead people to brutal behavior—I see no way to avoid the conclusion. To any dispassionate observer, it is clear that athletes find themselves in more brawls, more car wrecks, more spousal assaults, more drunk-driving episodes than the average run of the population.

Sports can teach participants to modulate their passions—sports can help people be closer to Hector than to Achilles—but they can foment cruelty as well. Athletes, as everyone who went to an American high school will tell you, can be courtly, dignified individuals. But they're often bullies; they often seek violence for

its own sake. Some athletes take crude pleasure in dominating others; they like to humiliate their foes, off the field as well as on it.

All too often, the players who go all out on the field but can't readily turn it off elsewhere are the best players. They're the most headlong, the most fearless, the most dedicated. And when they encounter a modulated, more controlled antagonist in a game, often they, the more brutal players, win.

Lawrence Taylor was one of the best players ever to appear in the National Football League. With his speed and ferocity, and his ability to run down the opposing quarterback, he made football into a different, more violent game. But he was often as much in a fury off the field as on. By his own account, Taylor led the life of a beast—drunk, brawling, high on coke, speeding in his car: He was a peril to anyone who came near him.

His coach, Bill Parcells, allowed him to cultivate this off-field character, knowing that it contributed to his prowess when he played. If the best players are the ones who are the least controlled, the ones in whom passion for pre-eminence trumps reason, then it is not entirely clear that one can say what American coaches and boosters love to say, that sports builds character. If having a good character means having a coherent, flexible internal structure, where the best part rules over the most dangerous, then sports may not always be conducive to true virtue.

My own experience in high school confirms this view. Playing football made me more confident; it gave me powers of resolve that I'd draw on later in life, and I'm grateful for those things. But it also made me more brutal. I came to crave the physical stimulation of the game—I came to like hitting and even being hit. When the season ended, I found myself recreating the feeling of football in a string of fistfights and all-in brawls.

I didn't become a thug—far from it. But I did let the part of me that sought power and standing—over others—go way too far. Having been down that road, the chances of my taking it again are greater, I suspect, than they are for others. Once the path has been cut, it stays open. I once shocked a colleague, and myself, by admitting that if someone ran a light and smashed up my car (which I loved more than I should), the chances of my popping him in the jaw were probably much greater than the chances of the average professional guy doing so. Once the punch in the mouth is part of

your repertoire—once you've done it a few times as an adult—it never really goes away.

There's another major difficulty with sports, especially with sports played by males. When males get together in groups, they often act badly. They appoint by quiet consensus an alpha male and follow his lead. They become more literal, more obvious; they jostle and compete.

And they're also disposed to scapegoating. Homosexuality—or any indication of homosexuality—tends to send heterosexual men into a horrible spin when they're together in groups. The male sports world is dramatically antigay. Those players who are homosexual know that they must hide it on pain of humiliation or even physical harm.

I believe that virtually all heterosexual men are made anxious by homosexuality. Show them—show us—a gay porn flick, and some significant part of the audience will get to the verge of physical illness. Why this is so is a great mystery, and whoever solves it will have taken a significant step toward understanding human nature. Straight women don't seem troubled by lesbian sex; or really much by gay-male sex, either. Is it, as psychoanalysis suggests, that all of us are in some measure bisexual and suppress one side of our desires? Is the effort at suppression so great that we turn against anything that challenges it? Do we turn against the stir of our own desiring bodies with our bodies—getting ill when we see what both pleases and outrages us?

The fact remains that in the world of sports, hostility to homosexuals, and to anything perceived as unmanly, is heightened to an extreme degree. The player enters a world of brutal distinctions—of rejection and scapegoating—and not surprisingly, he risks becoming more brutal himself.

Sport is also—it almost goes without saying—an intensely hierarchical world. In sports your identity and prowess are one and the same. When one teammate looks at another, what he sees first is how good the other is. He makes a quick calculation: Am I more or less able than he is? Or are we the same? If we are, what can I do to surpass him?

Sports are about standings, and not just of one team against others but within the team itself. Everyone has a place in the hierarchy, and that hierarchy is constantly shifting. This sense of relative

human importance is almost completely unsentimental—there's an accuracy of evaluation in sports that presides nowhere else in the world. There's no affirmative action on a football field. Everyone on a team knows who he is better than and who is better than him, and he acts his part. On NBA teams, the alpha dog, the best player, determines what his teammates will listen to on the locker-room sound system and determines much more, too.

A world that is so intensely hierarchical is a clear and energizing world, where meaning is available all the time. Who are you? I'm the best center in the league, or the second-best, or whatever. And I'm working to rise, or to stay on top, or whatever. One of the joys of sports lies in knowing who you are and where you are and what you have to do to ascend. Such knowledge is not available to most people in the world, and often they envy it, or they tap into it vicariously by becoming fans.

Yet a world of omnipresent hierarchy is also, by definition, a world that is low on compassion and kindness. The great spiritual teachers—Jesus, Confucius, the great Hindu texts—taught, perhaps above every other tenet, that we are all the same, and that we are all part of one great life. They taught compassion, which is the feeling that you and I and all of us live in a world of suffering and grief, and that our first duty is to treat one another with lovingkindness.

The world of sports is a pagan world—the agonistic world that came before the great spiritual teachers—in which compassion is not a prominent value. (In all of *The Iliad*, there is only one clear instance of compassion. It takes place when Priam comes to beg for Hector's body from Achilles. Achilles does actually seem to feel for the old king—though only for a moment.)

Professional athletes spend a lot of time pretending that they are part of the compassionate world: They are forever showing up at children's hospitals and attending worthy fund-raising events. But those gestures are designed, knowingly or not, to salve the conscience of the public. People want to believe that a violent game like football is compatible with the humane values of their religions.

The public has an allegiance both to strife on the field and to the ideals of kindness and compassion. We are the people who attend church on Sunday and listen to the loving Gospel of the Savior and then repair home to our television sets, turn on the game, and

watch young men try to bust each other's spleens. We must create a variety of fictions to live comfortably with this state of affairs.

From the perspective of the great teachers, it's demeaning and foolish to reduce people to their athletic prowess. They tell us that the only road to joy is having a sense of oneness with others and acting out of that sense at all times. When you do, you lose your meager and vain individuality in something larger, and then you can stop striving, stop desiring to constantly ascend. You can rest. The more ambitious you are, the more competitive you are, the less often you will experience serenity, a state in which, as Wordsworth says, "with an eye made quiet by the power of harmony, and the deep power of joy, we see into the life of things." The man who lives in that spirit, Schopenhauer tells us, is the one who, when he passes another on the street, says to himself, "That too is me." Those who whisper, however subliminally, "That is another" live in the purgatory of individual pride and desire.

Do sports encourage you to be part of a group, the team? The team, in this way of thinking, is simply an extension of "me," since it is defined by the desire for supremacy over others.

What about women in sports? Will they change the character of athletics? Will they make sports more compassionate, less vainglorious? It's still probably too early to tell. Women began participating fully in athletic life in the United States only with the passage of Title IX legislation, in 1972. It's not clear what the shape of women's involvement in athletics ultimately will be. But if I had to wager, I would bet that female athletes will become more and more like their male counterparts: Some will build their characters by playing, yet some will be ruined, too. Sports will enhance individual women's capacity for both good and ill, much as they have done for men.

Do sports build character? Sports are what Derrida, in an essay on Plato, associates with something called the *pharmakon*, a substance that is both a poison and a remedy. Sports can do great good: build the body, create a stronger, more resilient will, impart confidence, stimulate bravery, foment daring. But at the same time, sports often brutalize the player—they make him more aggressive, more violent. They make him intolerant of gentleness; they help turn him into a member of the pack, which defines itself by maltreating others—the weak, the tender, the differently made.

Some thoughtfulness is necessary here. In Plato's spirit, one must

give the thymotic drives of the soul full recognition and reasonable play, but at the same time keep them in check. This is an ideal—Hector's ideal, we might call it—and it is not impossible to attain. But there is something in the drive for glory that despises all reflection. A certain sort of glory-seeking must in fact overcome reflection, as Achilles shows, and go headlong. So sports will always be a world of danger, as well as one rich with humane possibility.

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