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Education and Ethics

The Effect of Organized Sports on the Moral Tone of the Nation

By JOHN R. TUNIS

PLEASE be advised that this is not really an article on intercollegiate athletics. As the Professor of Law at the University of Michigan remarked, in effect, anyone with an urge to write on this topic should drop dead.¹ This is an article on a serious subject. My topic is ethics. Ethics is, as you know, the science of morals. I am competent to discuss this subject for several reasons. Once, long ago, I took a course in ethics at the institution which our president in one of his less grim moments called "the Southern California of the East." This course in ethics was given by a world-famous authority whose name was even whispered at Oxford and Cambridge. A tiny bit of it must have hit home, because several years later I joined the Fellowship of Educated Men with a fine, 20-karat system of moral principles. Being young and quick to learn in those days, it soon struck me that I was making painfully little progress toward becoming Junior Citizen of the Year. Not having married a rich wife, it became necessary for me to make a choice. Consequently, before long I abandoned moral principles and ethics in favor of money. Shortly after, the money came rolling in.

So nowadays instead of telling the Seniors at the local high school that They Stand upon the Threshold of Life, for once in a way I come clean. Instead of advising them to adopt a system of fine moral principles guaranteed to keep from freezing in a temperature of 24 degrees below zero, I admit that ethics is hardly consonant with what we like to call the American Way of Life, which includes, among other oddities, the Oath of Allegiance on every possible occasion, the Salute to the Flag every morning at 8:15, "The Star-Spangled Banner" whenever we play a football game or open up a new shoeshine parlor. Ethics, I explain with care to the Seniors, will get you nowhere except insolvency. It got Willard Uphaus of New Haven, a really good man, one year in the Merrimack County Jail in Boscawen, New Hampshire.

¹Marcus L. Plant, "The Place of Intercollegiate Athletics in Higher Education: Faculty Control," JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION, XXXII (January, 1961), p. 1.

JOHN R. TUNIS has been covering sports for over thirty-five years. He is the author of many novels and numerous magazine articles on the subject. As a broadly educated and sensitive observer, he has had an unusual opportunity over the years for first-hand observation of the impact of athletics on education in this country. This is the fourth in a series of articles on the place of intercollegiate athletics in higher education.

So I advise the boys and girls, when they finally get to be Attorney Smith, General Smith, Mayor Smith, Professor Smith, or President Smith, never to monkey with ethics. Especially if they are going into education. As in other phases of our society, in education the battle is the pay-off. History tells me that ethics has paid off in few battles.

A RECENT instance helping to prove to me that ethics does not pay off concerns the University of Minnesota, an institution which seems never to have suffered severely from the football malady. The faculty has, indeed, several times expressed openly its opposition to such fantasies in the world of sports as bowl games. This past autumn, bad fortune scowled on Minnesota for the first time, and the team was tagged for the Rose Bowl.

A meeting was held, the 168-man Faculty Senate of the University was polled on this subject, and only two members voted no.² I suggest that the following inscription be carved in stone on some prominent structure at Minneapolis.

One hundred and sixty-six members of the Faculty Senate of the University of Minnesota: *Football Is More Important than Education.*

Two unknown members of the Faculty Senate of the University of Minnesota: *Education Is More Important than Football.*

This figure two, by the way, seems to be a magic number. Each member of the Big Ten this winter was eligible for \$23,000 from the Pasadena Loot. Last May, the Faculty Council of Ohio State University asked the Athletic Council (whose actions they review) not to accept any moneys from the Rose Bowl. Jack Fullen, alumni secretary, has this to say in the January, 1961, issue of the *Ohio State University Monthly*, the alumni publication:

The Athletic Council, having hidden the hot potato all summer and fall, finally had to handle it. They came in with a recommendation that Ohio State take the money. . . . The vote: FOR, two alumni, two students, three faculty members; AGAINST, two faculty members.³

I have been waiting in vain for some college president to admit openly that intercollegiate football does not help an educational institution either in (a) enrollment, (b) prestige or scholarship, or (c) endowment or sound learning. In fact, quite the opposite. All one gets is platitudes such as those in the recent Conant report.

. . . I wish to emphasize . . . the importance of the local school board (page 46).

The gymnasium is more important in colder regions . . . than in . . . warm areas . . . (page 31).

Interscholastic athletics and marching bands are to be condemned in junior high schools . . . (page 42).⁴

²*New York Times Magazine*, January 1, 1961, sec. 6, p. 15. T. E. Pettengill, clerk of the Senate, informs me that the action of the Senate on the invitation to the Rose Bowl was by voice vote.

³"Teacher, What Are Colleges for?," XLII, p. 2.

⁴James B. Conant, *Education in the Junior High School Years* (Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service, 1960).

No doubt you think I made these up. Not true. After reading the experts, one is forced to the conclusion that education is like war. It is too serious a business to be entrusted to the educators.

I recall hearing as a young man, in the days of Rutherford B. Hayes, of a fictitious character who, badly injured and lying in agony on the ground during a football game, looked up and boldly declared, "I'd die for dear old Rutgers." At President Kennedy's alma mater in my time, it was fashionable to be amused at this peculiar standard of values, and, in fact, to be inclined to look down upon it. Lately I have been thinking that perhaps this naïve youth from Rutgers had something. At any rate, he was vastly superior to the college basketball stars who shaved the point spread for dear old Bradley, dear old Manhattan, and dear old Kentucky, as well as to those doing the same thing today in other colleges and universities throughout these more or less united states. I find the Rutgers lad superior in every way to the football heroes from Minnesota, Ohio State, and other institutions of learning in the land where athletes are bought and paid for at so much per pound, F.O.B. Chicago or Kansas City.

THE purposes of education? They have been defined a million times from the period of Socrates to the present day. Last June the President was awarded an honorary degree at Cambridge. (If I quote Mr. Kennedy *ad nauseam*, it is because having a President who reads books and has never been named Big Brother of the Year is a refreshing novelty.) Mr. Kennedy then defined the purposes of education as "the advancement of knowledge and the pursuit of truth." Why, I often wonder, is this pursuit so frequently concealed from the participants in the search?

What we laughingly call intercollegiate sports has many positive values and an educational side which I would be the last to deny. But in this age, surely the most material period of history since the time of Nero, organized sports have had a part in lowering the general moral tone of the nation, and have helped to corrupt all of us. Particularly, of late years and for several generations, they have assisted in the corruption of the nation's undergraduates in college. Obviously, they observe that the lofty principles they hear espoused in the classroom are denied and derided on the field of sport. "How do you teachers expect young men and women to have standards of value?" I asked a professor of philosophy at the University of Illinois recently. His answer was, as might be expected, a timid confession of failure.

"We hope some of it will stay with them."

But the students know that athletes in college are bought, that they have privileges others do not obtain. They know, as a recent article in a national magazine showed, that an Olympic track star takes about \$10,000 a year from amateur sport. A victorious Davis Cup star can expect a \$50,000 contract from promoter Jack Kramer. How much a basketball player like Lucas is worth is anyone's guess. Since the students, like everyone else, are aware of the situation in athletics, no wonder they

leave the halls of learning eager for the quick buck, irresponsible to the problems of the nation within and the world outside.

Most universities boast—see these souped-up products of conspicuous consumption called university catalogues—that their students are exposed to athletics of various kinds under competent physical instruction for four years. No doubt this is true. What effect has it had on them? How have the students reacted? What sporting or civilized values did the undergraduates of the University of Georgia have when a defenseless Negro first enrolled there? What kind of sportsmen were Barry McKay, a graduate of the University of Michigan, and Chuck McKinley, from Trinity University in Texas, in Australia last year? As members of our Davis Cup team, they had been taught that the only thing which counted was winning. Consequently, when they lost to the Italian team at Perth in December, 1960, they protested the calls of the linesmen, threw their rackets at the spectators, and acted like boors. The plain fact is that we have been so used to being top dog in sports that whenever we are beaten by the Russians in the Olympic Games or by the Australians in the Davis Cup competition, we consider it an affront. Then we console ourselves by calling our adversaries a bunch of professionals who are supported and paid by the state.

Athletics is the phase of collegiate life that touches undergraduates closely and affects them intimately. When they see that their elders are fakers and trimmers, they assume that this is the road to success. It does not take the young long to learn in school and college that unless you win, you are a failure. For the victor, the juicy contract or the pay-off in any number of ways. For the loser, contempt. Cheating in sports is never condoned when exposed. All adults give lip service to the ideals of sportsmanship. There it ends. The football coach and the athletic director, despite their precarious tenure, are more powerful on campus than anyone else, and have been for years.

These things are obvious to the most turgid undergraduate mind. Worst of all, our system of athletics has corrupted university officials and college presidents, who seem to operate with one eye on education and one eye on the athletic balance sheet. A university, like a foundation, a corporation, or a battery of field artillery, is no better than the man at the top. Perhaps one man alone cannot make an educational institution, although N. M. Butler, A. L. Lowell, and R. M. Hutchins did a great deal along this line. Nevertheless, by looking the other way at the right time, by lack of example, by cowardice at vital moments on vital decisions, one man can make an institution of learning into a football factory.

A PERCEPTIVE observer of the American scene, John Crosby, remarked recently, "It does not take laws or money to practice virtue. It takes training and a habit of mind." Agreed. But is this enough? Doesn't it also take, in education, men who are living examples

of virtue? Doesn't it take an educational system in which quality has not been sacrificed to quantity, and educators who would rather teach in a classroom in a district school than betray their principles? These men, these leaders indoctrinated with virtue, exist. Unfortunately, they are hard to find.

A sign on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street claims that "a family which prays together stays together." This slogan, which seems to me Madison Avenue at its most odious, may perhaps be sound, although it needs more than a billboard sign to convince me of its validity. However, we are today the most prayed-over nation on earth, as the last Inauguration ceremonies showed, when everyone save a witch doctor from the Hopi Indians got into the act. Were we, I wonder, not better off morally years ago, when fewer folks crowded the churches but the zeal for the quick buck had not as yet corrupted the nation?

In considerable wordage—space in this review being less tight than in its competitors *Life*, *Look*, *Pick*, *Click*, *Wink*, and other dispensers of culture to our civilization—I have been attempting to say one thing. Perhaps ethics is important to a nation. Possibly college sports as practiced today are unethical. Their values may be harmful ones. Athletics, as we know it, practice it, and condone it, has for years had a deleterious effect on our mores and on our young people. It has assisted in breeding a race of chiselers. It has profoundly affected our morals, mostly for the worse, by proving to everyone that if you get away with it and win, nothing else really matters.

Now, as *Herr Doktor* Mort Sahl says, Is there anyone I haven't insulted? If so, I most sincerely apologize.