

The Competitive Dimension of American Life

While we focus on college sports, and explore its many characteristics, and seek to understand its complex relationship with the society that so enthusiastically supports it, we often pay so much attention to the games and personalities of specific college sports and events that we think less about the underlying context of competition.

Because our society is built on a commitment to competition, it is useful to look closely at how we have expressed, glorified, and promoted competitive behavior and its many consequences throughout our history.

We could start, for example, with the famous remark that has become part of the definition of American sports

**“Winning isn’t everything;
it’s the only thing.”**



The quote most likely was coined by former Vanderbilt and UCLA football coach Henry “Red” Sanders, who is credited by his players with first employing the slogan in the 1930s while coaching prep school football in Georgia.

The quote is directly attributed to Sanders by the late Fred Russell, long-time Nashville Banner sports columnist, as well as by Hollywood screenwriter Mel Shavelson (who appropriated the quote for the 1953 film “Trouble Along the Way” in which John Wayne plays a small-college football coach).

The quote also appeared in a 1955 *Sports Illustrated* article on Sanders. [From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.]

Vince Lombardi is not one of my relatives, Lombardi being a relatively common name, but his iconic presence as a football sage and an exceptionally successful coach has made his remarks endlessly quotable because they capture the depth of the sports commitment to winning.

**“WINNING IS
NOT EVERYTHING
BUT MAKING
THE EFFORT
TO WIN IS.”**

VINCE LOMBARDI

*If winning isn't
everything, why do
they keep score?*

— Vince Lombardi

**Show me a good loser, and I'll
show you a loser.**

Vince Lombardi

Much conversation about sports emphasizes the collaborative and mutually supportive activities of team members and speaks to the camaraderie created in the process of building successful sports performance, but this often understates the ruthless selection and filtering of individuals by the rare talents and intense performance successful competition requires.

However, candid or more or less candid interviews can clarify the nature of the competitive process. The next slide has some comments from John Schuerholz, a major force in building championship professional baseball teams. The interview, from 2005, reflects the wisdom of a long and successful career. We pay special attention to the convictions highlighted in red .

John Schuerholz (b. 1940) is an American baseball front office executive. He was the general manager of Major League Baseball's Atlanta Braves from 1990 to 2007, and then served as the Braves President for a decade from 2007 until 2016. Before joining Atlanta, he spent 22 years with the Kansas City Royals organization, including nine (1982–1990) as the club's general manager. Among the teams he built are the 1985 Royals and 1995 Braves, both World Series champions. His teams have also won their division 16 times, including 14 consecutive times in Atlanta. During his time with the Braves, they won three National League pennants and played in five National League Championship series. He was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2017. (Adapted from Wikipedia, 2021)

5 Tips From John Schuerholz on Transforming a Culture of Losing

- Gather everyone, communicate the plan and preach it daily.
- Constantly remind them it works.
- Don't be afraid to get rid of the people who don't buy in.
- Make the lowest-level employees feel as important to success as the top-level executives.
- Show trust in everyone to do their jobs well.

Note the conflicts:

We get rid of people who don't buy in, but we call for trust that everyone will do their jobs.

See the message that you first get rid of people and then you seek to create a level of trust and respect among the survivors.

We trust those left after we have eliminated less talented. The unstated expectation is that trust only lasts as long as the performance is the best.

The Culture of Winning, Atlanta Braves Have Secured 14 Straight Division Titles, And Team's GM Tells Why

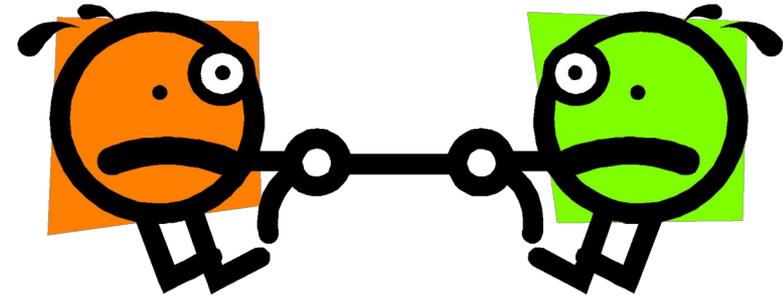
By RUSSELL ADAM , THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, October 5, 2005

Mr. Schuerholz: First, let me say this. Probably one of the greatest compliments ever paid to me was a comment made by Paul Snyder, our original scouting director when I came here, who was just inducted into the Braves hall of fame, who in his induction ceremony, when talking about me, said '**He taught us how to win.**'

I have a goal for this organization, and it's clear. And I have a game plan about how we can reach that goal. **Did we have to change some people? Sure.** Did we have to alter some programs? Absolutely. But the most important thing was to create a level of confidence and reliability and **trust. Honoring each other, respecting each other.** So that the rookie-league manager knew we cared for him and relied upon him as much as we did on [Manager] Bobby Cox.

The Power of Competition

- Competition is hardwired into all people, everywhere.
- Every human society has a structure of competition.



The issue is not whether there will be competition but how society will manage the competition

- Societies regulate competition in different ways, although some encourage more competition than others.
- All societies structure and regulate competition.
- Unmanaged competition destroys social organization, reduces the ability of groups to compete against other groups, and inhibits the capacity to maximize the benefits available within a larger environment.
- Each society and culture develops specific and distinct traditions, rules, and cultural norms to control, moderate, and direct the universal human drive for competitive success.



Imagine for a moment a society that permits pure unregulated competition



**In pure competition,
we can do anything to win.**

- We can kill people.
- We can capture and exploit people.
- We can take whatever we are strong enough to take.

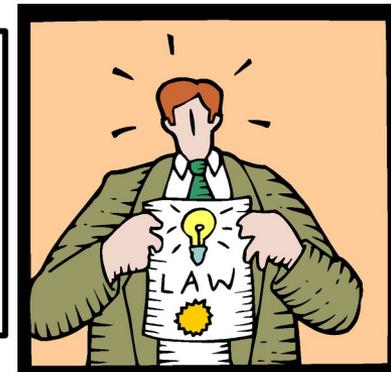


**No society survives following this model
of pure competition.**

- Every religion and civil code sets limits on competitive behavior.
- You can't kill someone else without a society-sanctioned reason.
- You can't take property without a society-sanctioned reason.

Every society has additional rules to moderate, adjust, and enhance competitive behavior.

By regulating individual competition, societies seek an advantage in their competition with other societies.



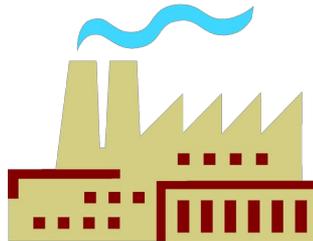
The United States is a society explicitly focused on the issue of competition and its regulation.

The context for American attitudes about competition:

The **colonies** competed for survival against the environment, for independence of thought and action, for land and trade.

History chronicles the management of the **competition** between colonies, then states; the constant testing of the relative powers of states and national government; and the development of **manifest destiny** to justify the competition against Native Americans, French, Spanish, and Russians for ownership and exploitation of the continent.

The **civil war** formally ended the competitive advantage individuals could gain from the human exploitation of slavery and asserted national over regional authority.



The **industrial revolution** opened a large new area of unregulated competition that eventually required the imposition of rules for labor relations, limits to competition among states and industries, and controls over the competitive acquisitiveness of the robber barons. Today, the same competitive drive produces the mega technology corporations creating billionaires, extracting value from overseas factories, and dominating commerce for many products and services.



The history of college sports echoes these themes.

- Unregulated beginnings.
- Destructive behavior prompts regulation of competition with the creation of the NCAA.
- Invention of ever more complex and sophisticated limits and controls over competition to ensure the continued success of the enterprise as college sports and higher education expand and prosper. These limits on competition restrict the competitive freedom of individual participants in the interests of the competitive fairness required for sports success.
- Regulation produces a continuing point-counterpoint between the regulation for fairness and the creative tactics that circumvent the regulations, thus requiring additional regulation.
- All of this regulation is designed to maintain the competitive structure that guarantees general acceptance of winning results that the audiences and participants for the sports require.

We celebrate and symbolize our commitment to this competitive framework in many ways.



American competitiveness requires a many symbols of sports victories to celebrate winning.

This celebration recognizes that while it reassuring to know that you are good, this is not enough. We want to know **HOW GOOD** we and our sports competitors are relative to others. We want to know who or what team is **Number One? The Best of the Best?**

In part, we could say that this reflects a fundamental insecurity about whether we, as individuals or as a country, are winning the **game of life** or the international competition for economic and political supremacy.

Yet, no matter how well we do, someone else seems to do better:

If we become president of the company, we worry that someone else is president of a bigger company.

If we study hard, we worry that someone else will earn a higher grade.

We like to compete, but in the complicated nature of our society, it is **VERY hard to know who's winning** and what they are winning.

This leads to the incredible American enthusiasm for **rankings**.



- The purpose of rankings is to produce the description of **winners** and **losers** in all areas of significant competition (and often insignificant). Ranking has the comforting expectation of providing us with an answer: **who won, who is winning, and who lost.**
- This is so important to us that we consume published rankings for an endless variety of activities, businesses, people, occupations, or almost anything else you can imagine. It's never enough to be good, you have to be identified as **near or at the top** in some category. We all want to win.
- The items listed below are simply samples. For almost anything, you can go online to read a report on the BEST (that is the winner) of anything.

- **America's Largest Private Companies**
- **America's Best Startup Employers**
- **America's Best Employers For Diversity**
- **The 25 best coaches in college basketball**
- **College Rankings 2012: Top Fraternities**

Sports is a score keeping business making ranking particularly popular. The games, being artificially constructed with relatively unambiguous outcomes, make measurement and the subsequent rankings calculations relatively easy. A very few examples:



A SMALL SELECTION OF COLLEGE FOOTBALL RANKINGS

AP TOP 25

COACHES POLL

CBS SPORTS 128,

PLAYOFF RANKINGS, FCS COACHES

AP COLLEGE FOOTBALL GREATEST PROGRAMS OF ALL-TIME



SI's Projections System: Ranking every team
in college basketball



High School Football Rankings



Elite 50: Ranking the 50 Best Colleges for Athletes

All Sports are about
Winning and Keeping Score

The enthusiasm for sports, winning, and rankings reflects society's obsession with competition and the hierarchy of individuals and organizations.

Sports does not cause this obsession with winning.

This enthusiasm applies to both professional and college sports, and all of youth sports as well, because all athletic competition has the same purpose:

To determine winners and rankings for each cycle of competition: game, championship, or season.

And to determine which players should continue or advance to higher levels of competition and which players should not.

In the American sports universe, **everyone is focused on keeping score** and identifying winners. However, it is not satisfying to identify only one winner at the highest level in a sports season, so almost all sports are subdivided into categories, generally by age and gender, and often by geographic locations. Then, the sports in each category create competitions that identify winners. In general these categories of competition are hierarchical so that those with the youngest or regional players in a sport are less powerful than those with older and national level players. All of this produces a constant focus on the competition at all ages and in all sports for the sorting of talent and performance.

The youth, through college, to professional process winnows players out of top competition as participants get older. The numbers of serious competitors falls off as the competition approaches professional levels. At the top, professionals who may well be clearly the best in their sport, have only a relatively short period before their skills decline and younger players take their place in the competition.

Of special interest to us in this process is the relationship between the most competitive college sports and professional programs. Both seek the highest levels of performance possible within their domains. And both, at the top levels, are highly successful commercial enterprises.

In the next slide we look at the differences between college and professional sports

College and Professional Sports Look Very Much Alike

They use similar rules and play in almost identical spaces

College football and basketball arenas are equal to or exceed professional arenas

The production values and TV networks of big time college games and pro sports are very similar.

BUT, although the two sports enterprises are **not the same and speak to society in different ways, the current trend pushes top level college sports closer and closer to the professional variety**



Pepsi Center,
Denver Colorado,

19,000 seats



Assembly Hall
Indiana University
17,472 seats



College vs Professional Sports: Some Distinctions

- **Based on students as athletes who joins a university or college and are expected to graduate.**
Based on professional career athletes who repeatedly sell their services to the highest bidder.
- **Highlights youth and becoming, short-term creation and re-creation of talent and performance.**
Highlights mature, highest possible level of long-term career performance of the best trained individuals paid the highest price.
- **Programs, with multiple teams and individuals, men and women managed and subsidized.**
Teams and leagues in individual sports owned for profit.
- **Represents an educational institution.**
Represents a profit-making organization.
- **Symbolizes the importance of the institution in the lives of the observers.**
Symbolizes the importance of sports in the lives of the observers.
- **Core allegiance comes from identification with an educational institution that never moves.**
Core allegiance is often to geographic constituencies that may change when the team moves.
- **Highlights personal, moral, and educational goals plus winning and high entertainment values.**
Highlights commercial entertainment values within a highly organized competition.
- **Moderates competition through rules governing play, controlling selection of talent, and cross subsidizing of different sports within the college program. Restricts payments to athletes, uses market-based compensation for institutional employees including coaches.**
Moderates competition within each sport with rules governing play, selection of talent, and limits on some expenses in some sports. Does not cross subsidize other sports. Uses market-based compensation by sport.

Other Key Differences Between **College** and Professional Sports Organizations

- Gender equity: (**College sports Program requires goal of creating equity between men and women**, Pro has individual sport specific organizations divided by gender, does not require equity).
- Racial balance: (**College monitored for access and equity**, Pros recruit only the best).
- Both college and pro enterprises criticized for predominantly white male management.
- Student standing: (**Colleges must maintain permanent connection to student status for all participants, certify amateur standing, and monitor academic progress**, Education is irrelevant for Pros).
- Finance: (**Almost all colleges run deficits paid by rest of institution**, Pro franchises are for-profit and designed to make money that players and owners share by contract.)
- Tax Subsidy: (**College sports subsidized by public tax base through institutional funding and not-for-profit tax basis**, Pro sports subsidized through state and municipal funding of arenas and exemption from antitrust laws).
- Personnel payments: (**College pays coaches market-determined compensation, athletes paid ordinary student maintenance expenses plus various indirect benefits although this system is in the process of significant change**, Pros pay everyone market rate and players through union contracts).
- Coach Compensation: (**College coaches paid market compensation, often much higher than anyone else in college**, Pro coaches paid at market often less than superstar players).

Challenges of College Sports and Society's Expectations

Requires close connection to social values beyond sports performance because its sponsor institutions exist to train and transmit social values.

Requires constant readjustment between sports goal of winning and institutional educational values that often conflict.

Requires constant self-justification to reconcile values of winning and learning.

- **Competition is a universal human value,**
- **College is an institution designed to improve the competitive ability of those who attend,**
- **College sports expresses a very special American image of idealized training for the competition required in American society.**

What else is interesting about the competitive context of college sports?

1. What are other critical differences between college sports and professional sports?
2. Why have colleges been so successful producing television entertainment competitions that do not have as high levels of performance as the professional versions?
3. What do those who watch, attend, and pay for the entertainment of college sports gain?
4. Why do sports of modest television interest nonetheless draw substantial numbers of fans on campuses: soccer, baseball, volleyball for examples?
5. What is the difference between the focus on the student status of college athletes and the focus on the professional preparation for other college activities through student government, music, business internships, or public service activities?
6. Why is the professional drive of a business school student, a nursing student, a pre-med student regarded as a good thing in college where the competitive drive and professional aspirations of student-athletes is disparaged?
7. Why do we care about the rankings of college teams, programs, and activities?
8. What difference does it make and to whom whether a team or program is ranked in the top 25?
9. What difference does it make and to whom whether a team or program is ranked 22 rather than 25?