

## **SPORTS AND THE MEANING OF LIFE**

by Henry C. Scuoteguazza

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Over the years I've discussed just about everything with fellow Objectivists, from metaphysics to politics. Yet there is one topic--one that is quite prevalent in our society--that was hardly ever brought up: sports. There probably are a variety of reasons for this, but I think one of the biggest reasons is that sports are thought of as a non-intellectual pursuit. Hence, playing a sport or, even worse, watching a sport are looked upon as unworthy of us. I have heard this said on a number of occasions. I plan to challenge this viewpoint. Please note: I won't be arguing that everyone should like athletics. Instead, I claim only that enjoying sports is a suitable activity, that in most cases they are not mindless, regardless of whether we are a participant or an observer.

Many non-Objectivists I know follow particular sports, such as baseball, football, basketball or hockey; they may also pay particular attention to specific teams and/or players. As I thought about why many people (including me) do this I came up with a list of features sports offers. They range from primarily physical skills to intellectual ones. The following list offers virtues and capabilities necessary for professional athletes to excel in their field, which can also apply to amateurs.

Grace. Most sports need some kind of coordination, whether it is the hand-eye coordination of tennis, baseball and golf or the speed and agility of basketball. This requires the total control of how our body moves through space. Perfect examples of this is a well-executed fast break in basketball that is capped with a slam dunk and figure skating in which incredible acrobatics are integrated with music. In fact, figure skating can be one of the most emotionally moving spectator events.

Courage. This can be physical courage such as a hockey goal tender who stares in the face of pucks fired at him at 100 mph or the football center who starts the play plus tries to protect the quarterback from being sacked. It also comes into play when an athlete chooses to play when injured. A couple years ago in the NBA playoffs, Larry Bird of the Celtics was playing with a bad back. Finally, he had to leave the game because the pain was so intense. His teammates struggled without him and started to lose their lead. In the third quarter, he came back, rallied his team and helped win the game.

One could say that Larry was foolish for risking his back for a stupid game. Larry Bird and others like him don't see it that way. Their sport is their profession and livelihood. Kevin McHale, also a Celtic, once responded to a reporter's question about whether he was going to go out and just play for fun with, "This uniform is my work clothes. When I'm out there I'm working."

Concentration. To perform well an athlete has to focus his or her attention on a ball, a puck, or the opponents while filtering out external distractions such as the audience as well as the elements and internal distractions such as self-doubts, fatigue and pain. Some sports require absolutely intense, relentless concentration that would put other

professions to shame. Bjorn Borg, the former tennis star, said his head hurt after playing Wimbledon from concentrating so much.

Attention to detail. A natural side effect of this concentration, if coupled with an analytical awareness, is the finely tuned sense of details in order to gain an edge. A base runner may notice that a pitcher has a certain hitch in his delivery which signals he will pitch to the batter and will not throw to first base. A tennis player reads how his opponent prepares his racket and knows from this that he will try a drop shot. It is such attention to detail that makes an athlete a master of his craft.

This mastery comes only after the fundamental skills have been automatized and the senses are freed to look for the nuances. It also allows an athlete to switch from merely reacting to events to being proactive, to shape a strategy depending on the proper execution of skills.

Staying within character. Good athletes recognize their limitations and don't try to do things for which they are ill-equipped. For instance, a slow base runner should not try to steal bases unless he has worked to improve his speed (if possible) or his Jump on the pitcher.

Discipline. At the professional level, the price of success is eternal discipline. Wade Boggs practices his batting for hours on end, more so than his team mates. Larry Bird shoots baskets every chance he gets; he practices shooting in various situations. There probably is such a thing as the natural athlete among professionals the difference between the natural and others can be bridged by someone who is skilled and who diligently works to improve.

Determination. Obviously someone who is disciplined needs to be determined as well. Determination also entails the stubborn refusal to quit when things are going well, to refuse to accept less than the best one is capable or doing. This is a key virtue if you are behind in the score or are fighting to concentrate despite distractions.

Ability to cope. This covers a lot of territory. It means being able to cope with the pressure of competition. It's easy to be relaxed and perform well in practice when it doesn't count. It's another thing entirely when the game starts and everything you do counts. It's a common joke in tennis that you can often return a blistering serve that is out with a spectacular shot yet you can blow a dink serve at set point.

Coping also applies to how we respond to different styles of opponents. In tennis your method of coping will depend on whether you are playing a person who serves and volleys versus someone who parks on the baseline. Returning the serve of a net rusher means keeping the ball low while trying to put the ball past your opponent, whereas this is not a crucial when returning the serve of a baseliner.

In any competition there usually will be a winner and a loser. How one copes with the loss can affect future performance. An athlete who learns to shrug off the loss and looks instead at how he performed is

more likely to perform well the next time as opposed to someone who thinks of himself as a loser.

Drive to perfection. There seems to be a common denominator among the star athletes: a drive to become better, to perfect their skills. As George Will says in *Men at Work*: "We speak of such people as 'driven.' It would be better to say they are pulled, because what moved them is in front of them. A great athlete has an image graven on his or her imagination, a picture of an approach to perfection." This is remarkably similar to the Greek concept of "daimon," the idea that in each of us dwells an ideal self.

Relating the individual and the community. Many sports pit teams against each other, while some match individuals. Almost in all cases the athlete participates in a communal activity. At the very least he or she has a competitor and, in professional sports, an audience which through cheering or booing can influence the outcome (hence the "home court advantage").

The late Bart Giamatti, former commissioner of baseball, eloquently describes the larger picture sports symbolize. "So games, contests, sports reiterate the purpose of freedom every time they are enacted -- the purpose being to show how to be free and complete and connected, unimpeded and integrated, all at once.... The very elaborations of sport -- its internal conventions of all kinds, its ceremonies, its endless meshes entangling itself--are for the purpose of training and testing (perhaps by defeating) and rewarding the rousing motion within us to find a moment (or more) of freedom. Freedom is that state where energy and order merge and all complexity is purified into a simple coherence, a fitness of parts and purpose and passions that cannot be surpassed and whose goal could only be to be itself.

"If we have known freedom, then we love it; if we love freedom, then we fear, at some level (individually and collectively), its loss. And then we cherish sport; As our forebears did, we remind ourselves through sport of what, here on earth, is our noblest hope. Through sport, we re-create our daily portion of freedom, in public."

Excellence. Athletes, particularly the best ones, pursue excellence, to hone their skills so that the athlete can improve his or her efficacy. Whether or not an athlete is driven to excellence distinguishes the professional.

The pursuit of excellence partly rises from the need to improve in order to keep the game interesting. It's fairly common that once one has mastered a skill level we look for ways to stretch ourselves. We grow bored because we have improved our abilities to match or even exceed the challenge. We look for harder challenges to pique our interest. This is the "flow" concept about which I have written in a previous issue. Stated briefly, we can reach flow state when we stretch ourselves to meet a task. We risk becoming anxious if we choose a challenge too far beyond our present capabilities. Conversely, we can become bored if we can accomplish something too easily. By balancing our skills with our challenges we can reach flow states, where time seems to stop and

we concentrate on our action, almost to the exclusion of the rest of the world.

This pursuit of excellence also serves a cultural function. As George Will says: "A society with a crabbed spirit and a cynical urge to discount and devalue will find that one day when it needs to draw upon the reservoirs of excellence, the reservoirs have run dry. A society in which the capacity for warm appreciation of excellence atrophies will find that this capacity for excellence diminishes. Happiness, too, diminishes as the appreciation of excellence diminishes. That is no small loss, least of all to a nation in which the pursuit of happiness was endorsed in the founding moment.

"As Aristotle said, happiness is not a condition that is produced or stands on its own; rather, it is a frame of mind that accompanies an activity. But another frame of mind comes first. It is a steady determination to do well."

Integration of mind and body. Rand focused a lot of her energy on fighting the conventional dichotomy between the mind and body. To do well in sports the mind and body have to work in unison, the mind setting goals and issuing orders for the body to accomplish. This ties back to the first virtue, grace. To be graceful the mind and body need to work together as a unit, free of self-doubt and uncertainty about the goal.

So far I've talked about the professional athlete and how we can appreciate their performance by being cognizant of what it takes to be a professional. Many nuances and psychological aspects of competition are lost on the casual observer. partly because some sports are played at such high speed, partly because we need to understand a sport in order to even be able to look for the fine detail. Plus, we're not privy to the thoughts going through the minds of the athletes.

Nonetheless amateurs can glimpse these issues by participating in sports. Many companies sponsor leagues for bowling, tennis, softball or golf, which affords people the opportunity to test their own mettle and to have fun. The skill level will not be nearly as good as the professionals but the emotional involvement can be just as high.

Competition among amateurs can also be exciting, especially if their competence is about the same. Athletics always has an element of uncertainty because on any given day a weak team can be "on" and beat a strong team having an "off" day.

Amateurs who study a sport can become intelligent critics of the pros. I've had lunch many times with several fans of basketball. When the discussion heats up as they differ in their assessment of how the game should have been played. They argue over how the offense and/or defense should have done their job and whether the coach substituted the right person at the right time. In other words, the discussion centers on the strategy and execution more than the mere physical movements of the players.

Obviously a lot of people invest a lot of time, money and emotion in sports, which some Objectivists consider wrong or unhealthy. I believe sports touches on themes having deeper meaning than just physical conflict. There are elements of heroism, of the clash between the good guys and the bad guys and the even ritualization of war. The rules of sports, for the most part, try to strike a balance between offense and defense. And, athletics provide an opportunity to excel.

I would like to summarize by quoting extensively from George Will, who captures the importance of sports.

"To be an intelligent fan is to participate in something. It is an activity, a form of appreciating that it is good for the individual's soul, and hence for society.

"Greek philosophers considered sport a religious and civic --in a word, moral -- undertaking. Sport, they said, is morally serious because mankind's noblest aim is the loving contemplation of worthy things, such as beauty and courage. By witnessing physical grace, the soul comes to understand and love beauty. Seeing people compete courageously and fairly helps emancipate the individual by educating his passions.

"... America's problem is individual understretch, a tendency of Americans to demand too little of themselves, at their lathes, their desks, their computer terminals. The baseball men I have spent time with while preparing this book demonstrate an admirable seriousness about their capabilities. They also demonstrate the compatibility of seriousness and fun.

"If Americans made goods and services the way [Cal] Ripken makes double plays, [Tony] Gwynn makes hits, [Erell Hershiser makes pitches and [[Tony] IdRussa makes decisions. you would hear no more about the nation's trajectory having passed it apogee." So athletics can integrate fun, which I haven't discussed much, with a seriousness of purpose. As for me, I'm going to dig out my ripe sneakers and tennis racket and ask the pressing question: "Tennis anyone?"