

RIISING TO THE CALL TAKES CHARACTER AND VIRTUE

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There are traditions and rituals in all cultures. Tradition does not ensure victory, but they are good reminders that something important is happening. Recently at the annual National Football League conference, Commissioner Roger Goodell proclaimed that we in sport are in the “bonding” business. We all connect through sport at some level. The 2015 Super Bowl television viewership broke records at an astounding 114.4 million viewers, becoming the most watched sport event in television history.

Living by the credo of “faith, family, football” is the perspective in sport we should strive to achieve. Enriching our youths’ lives with dialogue through a quiet strength by improving the education and care of athletes and coaches. As a mentor and consultant for professional and college athletes and athletic organizations, it is clear in my conclusions that we as coaches, trainers, and athletic families are a tight-knit culture, similar to a fraternity, with entrenched hierarchies and a fierce sense of loyalty among team members. We are ingrained into protecting these athletes and coaches. Happiness and success in sport begins where selfishness ends.

A great coach is someone who can give correction without causing resentment. Statistics show coaches are the figure of prominence in athletes’ lives fulfilled through relationship from recruitment to retirement. Research show that coaches who attend clinics, programs, seminars and are engaged in pastoral training lead lives with less “burn out” and have life longevity.

My husband and I have tried to instill a sense of family throughout 30 years of professional sport. Our son was on the sideline by my husband’s side from a very young age – first as a water boy and then as the film runner at camp in his teenage years, and now he is a quarterback at a high-level university program. Our three daughters all played at a very high level in volleyball and basketball. Our family schedules revolve around the balance of faith, family, and sport.

Complete and total loyalty, work ethic, organizational skills, discipline, integrity, and fortitude are all necessary tools that coaches must have to succeed. Coaches need to develop strong relationships with parents, and hold parents accountable for the athlete's faith formation. Studies have shown the emotional damage of parental unrealistic expectations. Our challenge is to shine a bright light on these problems that exists in the shadows of a very dark place. Failure on the scoreboard is not fatal, but to change the culture of character and virtue is of the utmost importance.

During a Senate Commerce Committee hearing in the United States in December 2014, lawmakers and representatives from the National Football League, Major League Baseball, National Hockey League, and their players unions met on a host of matters including domestic violence. A former player and presently an NFL executive delivered a personal and emotional testimony about domestic violence in his home as a child. The initiative for the 2015-2016 upcoming season for the National Football League is "Character and Virtue in Sport". This is creating another abandoned and isolated human group – the spouse, significant other, and family members of the athlete.

Sport communication plays a vital role within the platform of evangelization of the athlete and coach. The immediacy provided by the social media is available to predators. Athletic programs now use blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and many other programs to keep up with their fans and players. The devastation of an online attack on an athlete can lead to deep scars and has been documented in several well-publicized cases. The danger makes it difficult for us to distinguish between the meaningful relationships we foster in the real world and the relationships formed through social media. This aggressive style of reporting is worldwide and tags the athlete as leaders in sport reporting but can come with an extremely high personal privacy risk.

Memories are priceless. Not all trophies in sport are meant to be held onto. Some like the U.S. Open Cup or British Open Claret Jug are lent to players as if they were library books and must be returned after a year. Players get to hold the trophy, perhaps even kiss it, but they are perpetual trophies and the only way to defend them is to successfully defend ones title. Some tournaments trophies are limited to winning just once. Perhaps within the Vatican Office of Sport we design a moral trophy or award to "pass the baton" each year of character virtue in sport. Wouldn't it be beautiful if the award was on display in Vatican City for the global community of sport to view? Perhaps it's presented to one man and one woman each year as an outstanding individual or organization emulating Saint Paul's gospels and Saint John Paul II's vision of virtue and character.

Finding perspective in Sport, it is character building, it puts life into perspective. It's a path of the mind. There is the hard path athletes take and build for success, and there is the easy path which can be destructive. Perhaps in the education of a coach, we discuss pertaining to the athlete the progress of his/her academia more often than if he or she won the game. In doing so we can support the athlete by showing sympathy and empathy, about priorities and owning up to choices made. The head coach's relationship is astounding in that each team takes on the personality of the coach and the spiritual identity is taken on by the chaplain or priest of a team.

My husband Jack and I through the gracious support of Bishop Barber have a new chaplain assigned to our team. We have found that bible studies and chapel were good for athletes and coaches. But to provide sacraments to ground and bring the athlete and coach back to a spiritual refreshment of the mind it could renew the body and renew their bond with Christ in the Eucharist, and it was an edge for our young men and the wives and families that attend team Holy Mass.

The athlete is thirsty for the spiritual intangible values. Trust commitment and care of these challenges embrace the dignity and integrity of the coach. The choices coaches make are all part of the path of the player, one small error and decision can taint the legacy of a career and sport organization. This again is a reflection of the tone and accountability the coach sets and what he deems acceptable and unacceptable. An educational training requirement for new coaches would be most beneficial with a renewed seminar each year to encourage and discuss difficulties and successes of the coach, athlete and athletic program.

Commitment financially and morally to the team is of crucial value in the growth and integrity of the athlete and coach. The time the player spends with his mother and father or caregiver pales in comparison to the amount of time he or she is working on their academics or sport with coach, trainer and medical staff.

Women play a vital and crucial role in sport. Coaches and athletes testify the support of the woman brings integrity, inspiration and motivation on and off the field to their work. A faithful coach and his spouse work as a team, and it is very much within their covenant, a promise to cherish love honor and protect. The woman in sport is caring and supporting for her own family as well as the care and needs of the coaching and training staff and athlete's at the University and Professional levels. She has a perspective that man does not, intuitive as the Blessed Mother at the wedding feast in Cana.

The women's organizations within a sport team do great works of charity creating their own public platform for evangelization. These organizations help support the coach and athlete by providing trusted resources for the family reducing the burden of stress at home. The high demands in a performance based business put an immense amount of stress on the coach and player on and off the field, the woman in sport as a key element in reducing the peripheral distractions and by doing so greatly increases the success and character building component of the sport family unit.

We are missing the framework for coaches that exhibit effective, coaching techniques, spirituality, and moral development. As St. Therese demonstrated, it's in the little details, a small kind jester of kindness and compassion in a fierce competition is huge in they eye of the beholder. Let us globally answer this call of character and virtue in sport and work together united in Christ.

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