

COACHING FOR Character

*Reclaiming the Principles
of Sportsmanship*

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Preface

It seemed inevitable that we would write this book. Anytime we talked, the conversation would turn to the topic of sport—and then, inevitably, to sportsmanship. We talked about trying to teach it to the kids we were coaching and the kids we were raising; we talked about watching its occasional display and its frequent absence in college and professional athletics. Expressions like “respect for the game,” “respect for the opponent,” “respect for officials,” repeatedly surfaced. We apologized to each other for invoking sportsmanship clichés in our conversations, until one day we realized that expressions that sound like clichés to us many young athletes today *have never heard*.

Twenty years ago Gerald Ford remarked:

Broadly speaking, outside of a national character and an educated society, there are few things more important to a country's growth and well-being than competitive athletics. If it is a cliché to say athletics build character as well as muscle, then I subscribe to the cliché. (Ford, p. 247)

A generation ago many people might have nodded approvingly when such views were expressed. Twenty years later it is difficult to be as charitable when thinking about the moral possibilities of sport participation. What are our children learning as they turn off ESPN and hurry off to practice? There was a time when they may have had the good fortune of watching Mickey Mantle trot around the bases after hitting a home run, head down so as not to show up the opposing pitcher, exhibiting a respect for his opponent and a humility and grace in relation to the traditions and reality of the game of baseball. Now what do they learn when they watch sports on TV? Respect for opponents? Humility? Grace? Loyalty? Hardly. It would be tedious to recite a lengthy list of the disturbing aspects of contemporary sports: bench-clearing brawls, trash talking, taunting, strutting, college athletic scandals, cheating, drug abuse—why go on?

A cover story by columnist Robert Lipsyte in the April 2, 1995 issue of *The New York Times Magazine* even proclaims the end of American sports:

Sports are over because they no longer have any moral resonance. They are merely entertainment, the bread and circuses of a New Rome. Nothing

makes this more chillingly real than our current Babes: Mike Tyson and Tonya Harding. Two of the neediest, hungriest, most troubled and misguided young people in athletic history, they are the archetypal extremes of this frenzied, confused sports endgame. (p. 56)

But merely bemoaning the situation is not enough. Something seems to have happened concerning the substance of our collective moral lives, in sports and in society at large—and some kind of response is called for. Indeed, the proliferation of recent responses indicates the growing concern. A former philosophy professor and Secretary of the Department of Education puts together a collection of moral stories, a book about virtues, for parents to read to their children. The book is a runaway best seller. A national news magazine trumpets the growth of a “politics of virtue” as politicians from both the left and right stress old-fashioned themes of moral character. The nation’s president proclaims national “Character Counts” week to promote the “six pillars of character”: responsibility, trustworthiness, respect, caring, fairness, and citizenship. On public television Dr. Laura Schlessinger lectures on “Character, Courage, and Conscience.” Even in the academic realm, ethics courses return to the classical emphasis on virtue, and books with titles like *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life* are widely adopted.

In such a contemporary context, we think our book on sportsmanship is important and timely. We can’t expect children to do what is right if we don’t teach them. We can’t expect children to become good people unless we attempt to instill good habits in them and help them develop good character traits. Virtue, said Aristotle, requires practice. We contend that one can, and must, *practice* sportsmanship, just as one must practice a fast break, a base-running situation, or the timing for a poach in tennis doubles. But we can’t teach children sportsmanship and guide them in its practice if we don’t know what it is or why it’s important. While many have bemoaned the situation in today’s sports world, there appears to be little available in the way of a clear articulation of the basic principles of sportsmanship.

Given the overwhelming numbers of young people involved in sports as participants, spectators, and fans, it is imperative to reclaim moral language for sport in order for this part of their lives to be charged with the possibilities of moral growth and excellence of character. Sport is not the only arena, but it can and should be an important one for practicing virtue. And it doesn’t just happen of its own accord. Sport can—and often does—inculcate the worst habits, the worst character. In 1962 Brutus Hamilton, the great track and field coach, said: “When ideals are obscured in amateur sports, then comes the danger of an athletic injury to the character of the athlete” (Walton,

p. 117). One thing is sure: How we conduct ourselves as players, coaches, parents, and school administrators will make its mark upon the kinds of human beings we are going to be. Sport is an expression of our culture; and because of the enormous importance we attribute to it, it shapes that culture as well.

Being a good sport also requires *proper perspective* about what sporting activity is and what its central values are. In this sense, sportsmanship involves a kind of wisdom that requires proper insight, right attitudes, and good judgment, as well as appropriate conduct. Sport can and should teach lessons, and such lessons can be crucial for self-understanding. As you will see, we believe that sportsmanship primarily involves *respect*—for the opponent, for teammates, for officials, for coaches, and for the game. The principles of good sportsmanship do not supply specific rules for behavior; rather, they supply the general guidelines and the context in which good judgment, relying on experience and understanding, can arrive at specific decisions in a meaningful way. It is precisely that context that seems to be missing in today's sport culture.

The thread that runs through the entire book is a philosophic return to the old-fashioned notion of sportsmanship as the unifying moral concept that describes good character in sport. We choose the word *sportsmanship* as our central concept after much consideration and much discussion with coaches and ex-coaches who care about the sorts of things we are trying to express. As for it being old-fashioned, we need a word that carries the weight of tradition, for it is our contention that we need to get back in touch with something we were once in touch with. We also hasten to say that the second syllable of the word *sportsmanship* should not be taken to exclude female athletes; indeed, it's arguable that girls' and women's athletics has continued to place a far greater emphasis on sportsmanship than the male version. We occasionally resort to the expression "being a good sport," but even that expression doesn't have the resonance of the traditional noun. In an informal survey, we found several women's basketball coaches, themselves women, who quite reasonably avoid the expression "man-to-man" defense but don't hesitate to use the expression "sportsmanship." Our position is simple: Excellence of character, on the playing field and in life generally, is just as important for girls and women as it is for boys and men.

We hope this book will be useful as a basis for discussion and reflection about virtuous conduct in sport. We want this book to engage and provoke you, as well as guide and instruct. Throughout the book we provide questions and examples for further discussion and reflection. Admittedly, we tend to use examples from the sports

we are most experienced in, but the general principles of sportsman-like character derive from the nature of sport, not from a specific sport. We hope that you will come up with your own situations and examples from the sports we've devoted less time to—and reflect on them in light of the principles we articulate. We believe that something good happens to people when they engage in dialogue and reflection about important human concerns. Long ago Socrates argued that we should be most concerned about virtue and the greatest possible care of our souls. He exhorted his fellow Athenians to try, above all, to make themselves as good and as wise as possible. Reading a book on sportsmanship and thinking about such issues may appear to be a trivial response to Socrates' challenge. Yet where else do we have such an opportunity to connect with young people in an area they care about and raise these questions again and again? Why not exhort young athletes to be as good and as wise as possible when they play their games, as well as in life as a whole?

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The students in my graduate Philosophy of Sport course in the fall of 1996 were enthusiastic guinea pigs, and they helped to come up with questions for our "Time-Outs for Reflection," as well as suggestions for the appendix. Even Barry.

Craig Clifford

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Randolph M. Feezell

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Becoming Reflective

An Invitation to Coaches

Whether you are a new coach or a relatively experienced coach, you have probably used the term “sportsmanship” at some time or other. And certainly you’ve heard others use the term. Perhaps some sports-caster questions the sportsmanship of running up the score to impress the pollsters. Maybe a member of the school board questions the overemphasis on winning and the lack of emphasis on sportsmanship in contemporary sports.

But have you taken the time to think carefully about the issues involved? What is sportsmanship? Why is it important? How important is it? Am I teaching this value to my players? Would I ever be willing to sacrifice winning for the value of sportsmanship? Should I be?

These are difficult questions that every coach must face. Have you taken the time to reflect carefully about them? As a coach you are now one of the most important people in the lives of many young people. You have a responsibility to those who listen to you and who look up to you. As a coach you are supposed to be a teacher, but have you thought about what your players are learning from you besides the fundamentals and strategies of your sport? We often talk about how important role models are for our children. Do you realize that many of your players may see you as a kind of role model? Are you comfortable with this? Does your behavior reflect the kind of person you want your players to be?

In this book we want to help you think about these things, and we’ll offer suggestions for how you might apply your insights to your actual coaching. As we have said, these are difficult issues—among the most difficult any coach must face. They involve some perplexing questions, but they are, in some sense, unavoidable. As a coach you must face tough decisions about ethical matters daily, and many of these matters ultimately relate to your most basic views about the very nature of sport—why it’s important to you, why you care about it, and how it relates to the other things in your life that matter to you.

While you can scarcely avoid the many situations in which you must make important ethical decisions, you can certainly avoid thoughtfully engaging these issues. This avoidance is what we want to challenge in this book. We want to challenge you to become more reflective about coaching. We want you to think *with* us. You may not agree with everything we say, but that's natural. Our goal is not to preach, but to encourage and to help. We will encourage you to think for yourself, and we'll challenge you to develop your own answers to these questions. We believe, however, that we can help you think about these issues and give you a framework within which you can make your own decisions and help your players grow, not only as athletes but also as human beings. The ultimate goal of ethical reflection is practical: it makes a difference in how you act, how you treat others, and in what kind of person you are.

In part I, "Thinking About Sportsmanship," we'll provide a foundation for the rest of the book. In part II, "The Principles of Sportsmanship," we'll develop a series of principles derived from the foundation we've laid down in part I. These are the principles that we hope you'll apply to your coaching. In part III, "Thinking About Sport and Life," we'll ask you to go beyond the playing fields of athletic competition and think about the relationship between sport and the rest of life. Finally, in the appendix we'll offer some concrete suggestions for how you might go about teaching the principles of sportsmanship to young athletes.

Some of the things we'll say in part I might seem somewhat abstract, but the principles of sportsmanship that we'll offer in part II—respect for opponents, for the team, for officials, for the game—must be based on *something*. Otherwise, they will float about as nothing more than groundless recommendations. We believe these principles of respect are not merely our subjective impressions. Ultimately, the principles of sportsmanship are grounded in the very nature of what we're about as players, coaches, and human beings. Thinking about sport, as we'll see in part III, will inevitably lead us to the most fundamental questions about life. So bear with us—and think with us. The beautiful jump shot you had in high school won't help you, but the tenacity and courage that you've developed in the heat of athletic competition will.