



PART TWO

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# **The Principles of Sportsmanship**

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## CHAPTER 3

# Respect for Opponents



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It was a long shot. They measured it at 565. Anyway, I used to have a terrible habit . . . the funny thing about the home run is . . . that I had a terrible habit of running around the bases with my head down, you know, because I didn't want to embarrass the pitcher. I know he was embarrassed enough already, especially one that long. As I come around second, I'm getting ready to get to third base, with my head down, I hear Frank Crossetti, the third base coach, holler, "Hey, look out!" And I looked up . . . and Billy Martin was on third when I hit the ball . . . he was tagged up like it was a long fly, and I almost ran into him. Of course, he's running on into the plate laughing, and I'm right behind him.

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—Mickey Mantle

If I were to choose one word to describe the Helsinki Games, that word would be "graciousness." The graciousness and kindness of the Finns toward all visitors. The graciousness of the competitors for each other; of the victors toward the vanquished; of the vanquished toward the victors.

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—Brutus Hamilton, U.S. track and field coach,  
1952 Olympic Games

In the 1987 movie *Wall Street*, Gordon Gekko, a Wall Street financial broker only thinly fictionalized, tells his young protégé that he's not in it for the money but because he really enjoys crushing people. Without vigilantly cultivated principles of decency and fairness, the competitive culture of Wall Street can be sadistically ruthless. But lest we blame it all on culture, consider the cruelty that young children sometimes inflict on each other. The truth is, it's a rare saint among us who has never felt the urge to crush an enemy, a rival—for that matter—a friend, a lover, a close family member.

Which is not to say we are all one step away from *Lord of the Flies* savagery—for it's just as easy to point to remarkable acts of unselfish sacrifice or charitable forgiveness instead of retaliation. But we humans are indeed capable—whether by enculturation, nature, or original sin—of ruthless dehumanization of our fellow human beings. Add

to that state of affairs a competitive situation such as sport, populate it with adolescents (not to mention a few adults who are trying to relive their adolescence), and things can quickly get out of hand.

Respect for opponents is not something that young athletes will naturally develop. It will be obvious to the coach who takes the principles of sportsmanship seriously that this is a problem area. Since the central focus of every practice session and every game is to beat the opponent, it's easy to turn opponents into enemies. And, to make matters worse, since many of the opponents they face will treat them with nothing but disrespect, the natural tendency will be to respond in kind.

Many of the principles of sportsmanship we'll articulate in the following chapters are directly related to the purpose of winning, and, for that reason, they will be more obvious to the athletes. In a team sport, young athletes can easily see that they need their teammates to win. That may not automatically result in respect for them, but it certainly lays the foundation for it. Likewise, it's not hard for them to understand that a good coach is essential for winning. But, at least on the surface, the situation is different with opponents. An opponent is not someone I need, but someone I'm trying to beat—someone who's trying to foil my every effort. In order to win, I don't have to respect an opponent. Far from it. In fact, some coaches are convinced that you can't beat an opponent you have respect for.

**Coach Skeptical:** Look, let's be honest, kids nowadays have to pump themselves up in order to perform. That's why all of these "no taunting" rules are just silly. I'm not just talking about football or ice hockey. Even tennis players do it.

Even sprinters. When someone asked one of the American sprinters during the 1996 Summer Olympics about his screaming and chest thumping, he responded, "This is war." That attitude is certainly widespread.

**Coach Skeptical:** If that's what it takes for him to win, then so what?

Well, with all due respect to him, the person we're thinking of didn't win. But even if he had, isn't there a difference between trying to kill an enemy in war and trying to outrun an opponent in a footrace?

**Coach Skeptical:** OK, it's not really a war. But, again, if that's what it takes for him to get motivated . . .

Maybe it does, but we think it's a little more complicated than that. Bob Lilly didn't have to do war dances over his fallen opponent to convince himself to hit hard. Chris Evert didn't have to shake her fist at her opponent after winning a point to be one of the most fiercely competitive athletes in the history of tennis. If it's true that kids nowadays do have to work themselves into a violent frenzy in order to be competitive—and the truth is, plenty of kids nowadays don't—then the response is not that we have to coach or educate them differently because they are different than the kids of previous generations; rather, if they are different it's because we've coached and educated them differently, and because all of the cultural forces have educated them differently. In education there's always this chicken-and-the-egg situation.

In other words, today's kids aren't different: Just like the kids of every generation, *they can learn*. They can learn to think that taunting an opponent with total disrespect is “part of the game”—or they can learn why respect for an opponent is a fundamental part of competition. And, although many situations will present great difficulties for applying the principle, we can help them develop the good judgment that difficult situations require. That they can learn, of course, means that we, their parents, teachers, and coaches, can teach them. Rather than throwing up our hands and saying they're different, we can get our hands dirty and try to teach them why respect for an opponent makes sense.

## WHY RESPECT OPPONENTS?

Why should I respect my opponent? On the surface, it's not obvious. It requires that we think about the nature of competition. It's only at a deeper level of understanding that we come to see that we should respect an opponent. Given that understanding we can then cultivate the *habit* of respecting an opponent, we can develop customs and rules that promote that respect; but understanding the reason for it requires that we think.

### Opponents Provide Opportunities to Excel

Although it isn't at first obvious, if we do step back from the heat of battle and think about the nature of competition, the principle of respect for opponents is remarkably simple. If participation in athletic competition is valuable, then a good opponent makes it possible for me to do something valuable. No opponent, no game. In chapter 2 we argued that competition, reflectively understood, provides us with an

opportunity to excel, both as athletes and as human beings. Opponents who do their best to beat me “oppose” my best effort to beat them, and on that level my opponent’s best effort can be downright infuriating; however, if I step back and think about what’s going on, I realize that my opponent’s effort to beat me has given me an opportunity, has challenged me to do my best.

Stefan Edberg once said that one of the best matches he played was one in which he beat Boris Becker by a completely lopsided score. Since on a good day Becker was at the very least as good as Edberg, a lopsided score could only mean that Becker didn’t have a good day. Since Becker was not at his best, Edberg could not have been truly challenged. In other words, Edberg could not have played his best match that day. In contrast, when Chris Evert, during an interview just after she announced her retirement from tennis, was asked what the best match she ever played was, she referred to all of the Grand Slam finals she played against Martina Navratilova. Five of those, a good tennis fan will remember, she lost to Martina at Wimbledon. Pushed to pick one match, she finally named one of the Wimbledon matches she lost as the best match she ever played. Martina brought out the best in her. It’s arguable, along the same lines, that John McEnroe lost his heart for tennis when his great rival, Bjorn Borg, retired. Likewise, Muhammad Ali needed his Joe Frazier; Gwen Torrence needed her Gail Devers. Great athletes need great opponents to excel. All athletes need opponents, or they couldn’t play the game; all athletes need good opponents who challenge them to excel, that is, well-matched opponents who give their best. For that reason, respect for the opponent goes to the very depths of sportsmanship.

**Coach Skeptical:** As I see it, an opponent is trying to take something from me. You know the saying in sports: An opponent is coming into my house. If somebody breaks into my house and tries to steal something from me, am I supposed to respect him for letting me have the opportunity to show I can protect my property? If I apply for a job and I don’t get it because somebody knows the boss better, should I thank him while I stand in the welfare line?

Interesting analogies, but they don’t really work. Victories in sport aren’t owned like property; they’re won by playing the game well. Even if you think of victory as a kind of property, it doesn’t belong to anyone until the game is over. Otherwise, why play the game? For that matter, it’s not even clear that a title or championship is something that you own. If you won it, last year’s title will be yours forever. But when the new season begins, the title is up for grabs again, just as it was when you had your opportunity to win it.

And competing for a job isn't like competing for victory in a game. You don't compete for a job simply for the joy of competing; otherwise, every time you got a job you'd resign immediately in order to compete for another one. Sport is different, though. Although we might savor a victory or mourn a loss for a moment or two, we always want to play the game again.

## Human Excellence Is Worthy of Respect

A second point needs to be made here. Far from taking away from my efforts to excel, the excellence of a fairly matched opponent contributes to my efforts; but, in addition, human excellence—whether of skill or of moral fiber—is in itself worthy of respect. If I think it's worthwhile to try to achieve excellence, then I should respect excellence in others. Even as we compete for the title, how can I not appreciate in others the achievements, the skill, or the character I so desire to see in myself? A beautiful backhand is a beautiful backhand, whether it's mine or yours; a perfect set in volleyball is a perfect set; a great effort is a great effort. Sport, then, is an arena for learning to gracefully acknowledge and to respect excellence in others. Respect for an opponent, then, also has to do with the respect for human excellence which our very decision to play the game seriously commits us to.

**Coach Skeptical:** I'm just afraid if you spend so much time worrying about respecting your opponent, you'll forget what you're out there for. I say forget about the opponent and think about yourself and what you're doing. You do your job as well as you can and do everything you can to win. Don't worry about the other guy!

Well, first of all competition simply doesn't work that way. It would be nice if you could just worry about what you're doing without paying attention to the opponent. But in most sports how well you do requires that you *respond* to what your opponent does—or that you make the opponent respond to what you're doing. If your opponent has an excellent backhand, you'd better take note of it. But respecting your opponent's excellent backhand doesn't mean that you'll put less effort into trying to win. It means that you aspire to hit a backhand well, too.

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## TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Come up with three stories from your experiences as a player or coach that exhibit in a striking fashion the principle of respect for an opponent—stories you might want to tell your players to give them models. Come up with three stories from your actual experience as a player or coach that exhibit in a striking fashion disrespect for an opponent.
  - Are there other situations in life in which it is difficult but important to respect a person with whom you're competing? What are other situations a young person might confront in which it might be easier to see that respecting an opponent is more appropriate than, for example, hating one?
  - Compare the attitude of respect with other attitudes you might take toward opponents. For example, explain the difference between respecting the opponent and liking an opponent.
  - Are there ever situations in sport in which it is appropriate to fail to respect an opponent? If there are, what actions are appropriate to show this disrespect? For example, at the end of the game, should we *always*, without exception, attempt to shake the hands of our opponents? Should a coach teach players that this requirement is *absolute*?
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## SHOWING RESPECT FOR OPPONENTS

Once you think about the nature of competition, the general principle of respect for opponents makes sense. But what does all of this mean in practical terms?

### Giving Your Best Effort

First, let's talk about what respect for opponents doesn't mean. It doesn't mean being "nice" to the opponent, although it does mean being civil. It most assuredly doesn't mean that you don't try to beat your opponent—that you don't take winning seriously. Anything less than your best effort to win is just as disrespectful as trying to win by cheating or by disrupting your opponent's mental state in ways that have nothing to do with the sport. Competition is only a "mutual striving for excellence" if both sides strive to win. I should give my best effort, and my opponents owe their best efforts to me. In fact, my



respect for opponents should include demanding their best effort to beat me. If a championship (or, in the pros, a lot of money) is on the line, it's awfully tempting to be thankful if an opponent tanks it and lets me win; but we've all been in a situation, even in a weekend pickup game or a friendly neighborhood tennis match, in which we feel cheated by an opponent who gives up, drifts off, makes excuses instead of playing hard. The most conspicuous version of not giving your best effort would involve consciously deciding not to try because you're going to lose anyway. But if you have developed a temperament that causes you to give up when things aren't going well, even that in a certain sense is giving your opponent less than you should. Respect for an opponent does not mean disrespect for the spirit of competition.

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## TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Treating an opponent as an enemy to be crushed is the obvious example of disrespect for the opponent. Can you think of examples in which a superior opponent shows disrespect by only playing hard enough to win? Give examples of verbal remarks, during or after the game, through which a superior player or team might show disrespect for an inferior but honorable opponent.
  - Is it ever acceptable to give less than a best effort to conserve energy?
  - In an individual sport such as wrestling, is it ever appropriate to let up so as not to embarrass an opponent? In most team sports, does the custom of not running up the score go against the principle of giving your best effort? How do you resolve these two? And what about stalling in basketball when you're ahead?
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## Avoiding Displays of Disrespect

I owe my opponent my best effort to win, but I should do it in a way that shows my respect for the opponent's effort and my appreciation for the opportunity that the opponent's effort affords me. I should display my seriousness about competition and about winning without displaying disrespect for my opponent. Although good-natured teasing might in some circumstances heighten the competitive spirit in the best sense, as good rivalries do, there's a point at which good-natured teasing turns into disrespectful taunting and trash talking. It requires an appreciation of the particular sport, the level at which it's

being played, and the background of the players to make particular decisions about where to draw this line, but it's a line that true competitors need to draw—and that good coaches need to teach them to draw. In fact, if *showing* disrespect to an opponent is the issue, then behavior that might appear disrespectful, regardless of intent, *is* disrespectful. In other words, when in doubt, keep your mouth shut. As a general rule, taunting, trash talking, and other forms of behavior that exhibit a disrespect for the opponent have no place in competition, because they display a misunderstanding of the nature of competition.

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## TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- In the 1996 Olympics an American swimmer “stared down” her opponent just before a race. Would you allow your athletes to stare down opponents? Consider this question in relation to different sports.
  - Do you believe it's appropriate to cheer when the other team makes a mistake?
  - What can you do to encourage sportsmanship among student fans? Other fans? Parents?
  - Is a player who is “cocky” disrespectful? Should you discourage cocky behavior? How?
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## Refraining From Gamesmanship

Because athletic competition always involves a psychological aspect, it's not easy to draw the line between acceptable tactics that disrupt your opponent's psychological balance and unacceptable gamesmanship. “Gamesmanship” is the attempt to gain a psychological edge in a manner that is not prohibited by the rules of the game, but which is nonetheless inappropriate. Gamesmanship shows disrespect for the opponent's effort to play the game well, and it also shows disrespect for the spirit of fair play.

In general, acceptable psychological strategy consists of actions that are “part of the game”—that is, using the skills that the game calls for to put the opponent at a psychological disadvantage. Gamesmanship consists of doing things that are not “part of the game” to disrupt the opponent's psychological state. Rather than using your skills at playing the game to gain the psychological advantage, you attempt to

gain that advantage by remarks or behavior that do not involve the skills of the game. To draw the line between acceptable psychological strategy and gamesmanship, we have to know something about the nature and the traditions of the sport. But there is a difference. That it's easy to see the difference between obvious examples of acceptable psychological strategy and unacceptable gamesmanship shows there's a difference. That it's difficult to figure out exactly where to draw the line means that those cases that are close to the line are harder to distinguish from one another, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't make the distinction.

If, for example, I'm playing a baseline tennis player who loves long rallies, there's nothing unsportsmanlike about serving and volleying in order to end the points quickly. That will put my opponent at a psychological disadvantage, but I'm doing it with the skills of the game. If, however, I repeatedly hold up a server who likes to serve quickly by claiming that I have something in my eye or need to adjust my strings—or, say, if I walk over to pick up the third ball, even though the server doesn't need it and it's not in my way—that probably would be gamesmanship.

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## TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- Give an example from your sport of attempting to disrupt your opponent's psychological balance in an acceptable way. In an unacceptable way. Explain the difference. Or is it ever consistent with the principle of respect for opponents to disrupt the psychological balance of opponents?
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## Celebrating Victory Respectfully

Along similar lines, although it might be wise to accept more outward expressions of joy than the traditional Calvinist strands of Anglo-American culture have allowed, celebrations of victory that show disrespect for the opponent, without whom there would be no victory to celebrate, have no place in competition. Or, restated in positive terms, the good sport has to figure out how to express the joy of victory without showing disrespect for the opponent. One traditional answer is to take it into the locker room, that is, don't celebrate in front of the opponent at all. Even if that approach might be overly cautious, it's worth noting that it is motivated by the principle of respect for an opponent. At the other extreme, sticking your finger in the face of the

defensive back whom you just beat for a touchdown pass, calling him names that don't merit mentioning here, then spiking the ball right at his feet—this sort of victory celebration (if celebration is the right word at all) exhibits an utter cluelessness about the nature of competition. Your spectacular touchdown catch was only spectacular because you beat a worthy opponent making his best effort. Suppose that he had simply stood at the line of scrimmage reciting the alphabet as you ran into the end zone uncontested and caught the pass? Would you have anything to be proud of?

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## TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- After winning a game or match, in what order should players turn toward fans, friends, family, teammates, coach, opposing coach, opponents, and officials to express joy or appreciation?
  - Your team has just won the state championship. Describe how you would like for your players to behave at the buzzer, with careful attention to the sequence. Describe with as much detail as possible forms of behavior that you would not like to see them engage in.
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## The Silver Rule

One useful test that might help to make such judgments is to apply something along the lines of the proverbial Golden Rule, which stresses the importance of attaining a broader perspective and considering the point of view of others. For centuries the development of a kind of impartiality has been seen by peoples and cultures all over the world to be central to moral education. The Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” expresses, for some, the very essence of the moral point of view. Some 500 years before Jesus offered this moral advice, Confucius probably first formulated the principle in its negative form, “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.” Some have called this the “Silver Rule.”

For our purposes, the negative formulation is more to the point: How would it make you feel if your opponent beat you and behaved that way? If it would make you mad, then you need to rethink what you're doing. If you're playing Bjorn Borg in the finals of Wimbledon, would his falling spontaneously to his knees in a gesture of joyful reverence after winning the last point offend you? Probably not. Or let's say you're playing Martina Navratilova. Would you be offended if she clenches her fist briefly, her eyes averted downward, after

making a beautiful shot, especially if she had clapped her hand against her racket strings a few points earlier to applaud a great shot you had made? Probably not. But what if your opponent runs up to the net after winning a point, or, worse, winning the match, and shakes his fist in your face?

Or consider a situation in which your victorious opponents embrace each other at the final buzzer, and maybe even dance among themselves a bit, and then come over to shake your hands with genuine appreciation for your effort. We're thinking, for example, of the Houston Rockets at the end of game four of the 1995 NBA finals. Their behavior was classy enough and respectful enough that an Orlando Magic player explained the loss after the game by saying, without the slightest resentment, that they were beaten by a better team. But what if, right after making the winning basket, your opponents run over to your bench and bump chests with expressions of hostility that call up images of cave men dancing over a mastodon they've just killed? To say it's all right because you intend to be in their position next time around misses the point.

Calculated disrespect is worse, but we also have to ask ourselves, whatever the intentions, how will a certain behavior appear? Will it appear consistent with the principle of respect for opponents? It would be nice if all we ever had to do was honestly express ourselves without concern for the effect on others or on the customs and institutions we play a part in, but the nature of competition requires that we think about how we express ourselves and that we develop the depth of character to express ourselves respectfully. The appropriate expression of joy is not an affront to others: the joy of doing something well, of participating in something exhilarating, the joy of winning. But there is such a thing as the inappropriate expression of the joy of victory. The other side of this coin, of course, is that we need to do our best not to misinterpret our opponent's legitimate celebration of victory. Simply because we wanted to win very badly doesn't mean that our opponent's joy over winning is an affront to us.

## Rituals of Respect

One final point: We should never overlook the importance of ritual as a way of forming the habit of showing respect to opponents. Think of the postgame handshake, in most sports a practice that is mandatory, not according to the rules, but by custom and tradition. This ritualistic exchange is an opportunity to thank opponents for the competitive opportunity they have provided and to acknowledge their excellence.

The coach who understands the principle of respect for an opponent will demand that it be done properly. Look your opponent squarely in the eye, offer a firm handshake—not a wet noodle—and utter one of the customary remarks (“Good game,” for example), and say it with conviction. The disrespectful variations of this ritual are of course endless, which means that you have to think about what you’re saying. After beating an opponent badly, if you punctuate the handshake with a remark of ironic condescension—for example, saying “You played a great game” when it isn’t true—you’ve missed the point of the ritual. If boxers routinely embrace after 10 or 12 rounds of trying to beat each other’s brains out, athletes in the nonviolent and moderately violent sports can shake hands with conviction.

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## TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- List the well-known rules, customs, and habits in the sports you are most familiar with that promote the habit of respect for opponents (e.g., the postgame handshake).
- Come up with sport-specific customs or rituals of your own that would promote respect for opponents.

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## WRAP-UP

In the end, we are again contending with the two extreme perspectives on competition that we discussed in chapter 2. At one extreme, my opponent is an enemy I try to destroy, for whom nothing but contempt is appropriate. At the other extreme, I make no effort to beat my opponent—I play “just for fun.” If we understand the nature of competition, it becomes apparent that both of these views exhibit a disrespect for opponents that misconstrues the very nature of competition. Again, one is too serious and the other isn’t serious enough. If I’m so determined to beat you that I can’t respect your efforts to win, then I need to remember that we are playing a game; if I’m so lackadaisical about the game that I don’t give you my best effort or demand your best effort in return, then I need to remember that I am participating in a competition.