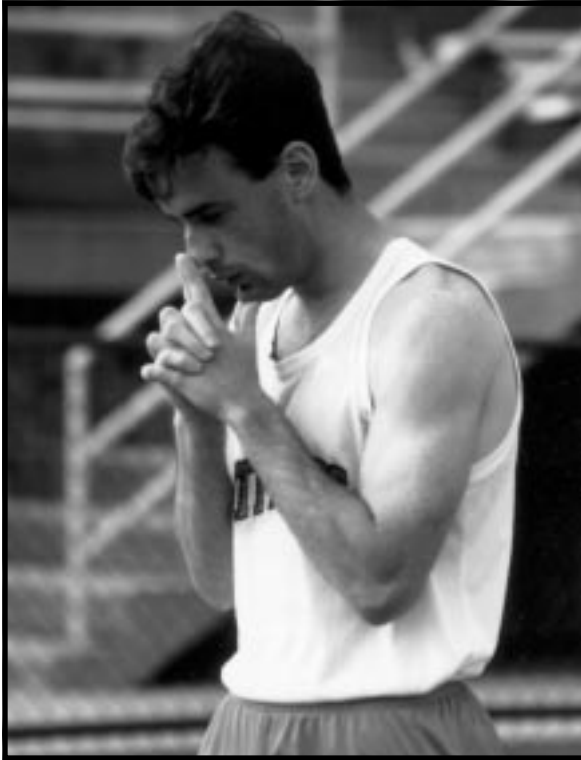


## CHAPTER 6

# Respect for the Game



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To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point. It is thus the achievement, and *a fortiori* the authority, of a tradition which I then confront and from which I have to learn. And for this learning and the relationship to the past which it embodies, the virtues of justice, courage, and truthfulness are prerequisite in precisely the same way and for precisely the same reasons as they are in sustaining present relationships within practices.

—Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*

“You guys need to get together and remember what you’re doing this for,” I said. “You’re *not* doing it for the money. It may seem that way, but that’s just an external reward. You’re doing it for the internal rewards. You’re doing it for each other and the love of the game.”

—Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops*

The 1995 *Sports Illustrated* baseball preview issue reported the results of a survey of scouts, managers, coaches, and players who were asked to name the players who are best at the fundamentals. Cal Ripken was the overwhelming winner of the “best overall fundamental player.” Tom Verducci, the author of the article, spoke reverently of “players like Ripken, who respect the game and play it soundly.” At the other end of the spectrum, as the 1995 NBA playoffs developed, we watched Dennis Rodman (then a member of the San Antonio Spurs) ignore his coach, mug with the fans, and even remove his shoes during a last-minute time-out with the outcome of the game still in doubt—hardly a display of respect for the game. Or, consider the fictional world of that wonderful baseball film, *Bull Durham*. Crash Davis, journeyman catcher and tutor of the talented but erratic young pitcher, Ebby Calvin “Nuke” LaLoosh, is forced to explain why he dislikes his young, undisciplined pupil. Because, Crash explains, “You don’t respect yourself, which is your problem, but you don’t respect the game—and that’s my problem.”

Compared to such basic principles as respect for opponents or respect for officials, “respect for the game” sounds less concrete, too abstract to be helpful in instructing young athletes or guiding appropriate conduct.

Yet, as the examples we've discussed show, respect for the game is an important part of the vocabulary of sports. A college track coach we know even describes the behavior of certain athletes as an "insult to the sport." And there is obviously a close connection between respect for the game and the familiar expression "love of the game." Although respect or love for a sport is difficult to explain, it may be one of the most important things you can convey to your players.

Interesting but anecdotal evidence also suggests that many of today's athletes seem to have little or no sense of the history of their sport. Some people may think that it is trivial or unimportant to know about the details of the historical development of a sport. Does it matter whether Ken Griffey Jr. knows who Curt Flood is? Who cares if an NBA player has ever heard of George Mikan? So what if an all-star guard in college or professional basketball is unaware that Bob Cousy's backcourt creativity revolutionized basketball or that Earl "the Pearl" Monroe's spin move initiated an innovative way for a dribbler to change directions? (This move is now so common that you see high school teams using it in warm-up drills before a game.)

Once again, however, we need to call attention to the significance of proper perspective. Perhaps the details, in themselves, are unimportant, but the historical perspective required to appreciate such details is not. A player may believe that a sport requires only an involvement in the immediacy of the moment; in fact, to play a sport is to become involved in a tradition. Rules are created and changed. Skills and strategies develop. Coaching becomes more sophisticated. Playing a sport necessarily involves making contact with something historically larger than the moment. Honor, prestige, and even money may come to be possessed by individual athletes, but they cannot succeed without benefiting from the past, insofar as the skills and strategies of a sport have evolved, allowing for such success. In an important sense, the goods related to becoming excellent in a given sport are shared; they are common goods made possible by the genius, effort, and triumphs of a sport's innovators and heroes. The attitude associated with an appreciation of a sport as a historical entity requires a breadth of vision that can affect the way players conduct themselves. Look, for example, at Cal Ripken or Nuke LaLoosh. Now we need to explore more fully why people in sport think respect for the game is important, and how the good sport can display such respect.

## WHY RESPECT THE GAME?

If we return to Cal Ripken Jr. as an example of someone who respects his sport, we can begin to understand what this might mean and why it is

important. Ripken grew up around the minor league ballparks where his father coached and managed. He heard the constant instruction in the fundamentals of the game, saw the struggles of the ball players to improve their skills, and recognized that knowledge and intensity were sometimes more important than pure athleticism. His experience generated knowledge and even a kind of wisdom about what the game demanded of its participants. He became aware of its subtleties, complexities, and traditions. “Respect for the game” is the expression we use to describe this kind of encompassing knowledge and appreciation. In a sense, respect for the game includes the full range of respect that makes up the virtue of sportsmanship. Someone who shows disrespect for an opponent, a teammate, a coach, or an official is at the same time showing disrespect for the game; conversely, a genuine respect for the game necessarily includes an understanding of the need for respecting all of its participants as essential to the game.

Underlying all of the principles of sportsmanship we have discussed is the assumption that participation in athletic competition is meaningful, valuable, worthwhile. Why else would we play? One of the reasons we owe respect, even gratitude, to opponents, teammates, coaches, and officials is that they make it possible for us to compete. They make it possible for us to participate in something valuable. The overarching concept that we use to refer to what we are participating in is “the game.” And, of course, the game is more than *a* game. We may have played *a* game Friday night, but by virtue of playing that game you participated in *the* game. And just as a team effort is more than the sum of the individual efforts of the players and coach, the game is more than a particular game played on a particular day, more than a set of rules that determine how you go about trying to win, and even more than the sum of all of the individual efforts of the countless athletes who’ve played the game. No matter what sport we’re talking about, “the game” refers to a historical entity, rich in traditions and stories, greatness and great failure, tragedy and comedy, wisdom and folly. If you pick up the bat, you’re participating in the same game that Babe Ruth played. You’re drawing from his greatness, and you pay tribute to it by your efforts and achievements. There wouldn’t be a game without the efforts and achievements of all the participants, but the game is something greater than each of us, and probably even greater than all of us. You can’t point to the game in the same way you can point to an opponent or teammates. But you can realize that there is such a thing as the game, and that it makes it possible for you to aspire to excellence, to understand something about the human condition, and to develop good character. It is the game in all its complexity that gives us the opportunity to play, and for that reason we owe our respect to the game.

Because respect for the game is less a matter of particular behavior and more a matter of an overarching attitude, the development of that attitude can have a tremendous effect on young athletes. As we have pointed out repeatedly, you must do more than teach your players the skills and strategies of their particular sport. Coaches are also educators of what philosophers once called the “passions” or the “sentiments.” Coaches constantly attempt to motivate players, instill desire, generate intensity, reward effort. Coaches perpetually deal with the feelings, emotions, and basic attitudes of their players. Because the development of good character involves the development of basic attitudes, coaches who take the moral education of young athletes seriously must teach them respect for the game.

## SHOWING RESPECT FOR THE GAME

Respect for the game involves an overall attitude toward the sport you’re participating in, but that attitude manifests itself in a number of ways. To show respect for the game means to show respect for the rules of the game, the spirit of competition and the spirit of play, the traditions and customs that make the game what it is, and the achievements of others who play or who have played the game.

### Respect for Rules

The internal goal of an athletic contest is to win the game. But what counts as winning is determined by the rules of the game. To play a sport is to engage in an activity that is defined in terms of the rules that have been created to make the activity possible. Because a game is essentially a rule-governed activity, the game itself is possible only because of an implicit agreement on the part of each participant to play by the rules. Just as the opponent makes it possible for me to excel, the rules of the game make it possible for me to play. The rules define the very activity we call a sport. Basketball wouldn’t exist without the explicit rules that constitute or create the activity we call “basketball.” Therefore, there is an interesting sense in which it is impossible for me to play the game, and thus to win the game, by breaking the rules, since I wouldn’t be playing if I broke the rules that define the very existence of the game. (We’ll say more about this curious issue later, since the norms that guide behavior in a sport are both explicit rules and unwritten customs.)

To respect a game is to respect its rules and therefore the agreement that underlies participation in the sport. To play a sport is to seek victory when the game is played, but only within the limits of the rules that have been agreed upon by the participants. For example, one of the functions of the meeting between coaches and umpires before a baseball game is

to remind participants of certain rules (e.g., in high school baseball, runners must slide), make explicit agreements if some rules are in doubt (e.g., use of a designated hitter or courtesy runners), and clarify any rules specific to the particular location of the game (e.g., ground rules).

Respect for the game requires an absolute respect for fair play. It rules out cheating, that is, violation of the basic rules that define the sport: how it is to be played, what kind of equipment can be used, who can play, and so on. To cheat is to break the implicit (and sometimes explicit) agreements involved by attempting to gain an unfair advantage over your opponent. Cheating shows a lack of respect for your opponent, but it also shows a lack of respect for your sport, since the cheater seems to acknowledge that what is most important is not playing the sport as well as he or she can, as outlined by its basic rules, but winning—by ignoring those very constraints that make the sport possible. A sport sets up an arena in which an ideal equality reigns: Everyone is equal in relation to the opportunities or possibilities provided by the rules. Cheating disrupts this equality and thus disrupts the underlying conditions of the sport. Hence it is important for a coach to insist that respecting or loving your sport means that a player be committed to the goal of winning, not by any means necessary, but only by those means permitted by the often unimaginably complex possibilities allowed by the rules of the sport.

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## **TIME-OUT** *for Reflection*

- It is often difficult but appropriate to distinguish between breaking rules for strategic reasons (e.g., in basketball intentionally fouling a poor free throw shooter in the final moments of a close game) and cheating, that is, breaking rules in order to gain an unfair advantage over your opponent (e.g., knowingly playing an ineligible player). Examine this distinction by considering a number of examples from your sport. Is this an important distinction?
  - During a head-to-head archery match in a single-elimination bracket, one archer's spotting scope falls over in the high wind and breaks. Since they're shooting at a target 70 meters away, without a scope or binoculars it's impossible to see where the arrows hit the target. Seeing what has happened, the other archer is generous enough to call the location of the opponent's arrows. According to the rules, however, an archer may not give or receive assistance while on the shooting line. Is the archer who gives this assistance or the one who receives it acting in an unsportsmanlike fashion?
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## Respect for the Spirit of Competition

Sport is not mere frolic—it involves a contest. In sport there are winners and losers. Some may think these points are so obvious that they need not be mentioned, but, as we've discussed, there are critics of sport who think that competition is inherently bad. They want the conditions of sport changed at various levels in order to lessen the so-called damaging effects of competitive activities. But many of the positive aspects derived from sport are generated by the inherent struggles and tensions associated with engaging in a contest. Because something is at issue when one plays in sport—namely, winning the game or contest—a respect for the competitive atmosphere of sport demands that players attempt to play as well as they can, with intensity and devotion. A respect for competition means that a player must not give up even under the most undesirable circumstances (e.g., being soundly thrashed by a better player or team), and a superior player or team should never allow the contest to degenerate into disrespectful festivity simply because the score is lopsided.

Respect for the competitive nature of sport is especially important when teams are mismatched and a team or player is winning or losing badly. Players who respect the game or respect their sport must continue to play as well as they can although the conditions of the contest may be imbalanced. Respect for competition might also come into play when a coach is deciding a lineup before a game. For example, a coach who thinks there is no chance of beating a particular team might play the weakest players on the squad as a way of showing that the game doesn't really matter. In this case, the coach fails to respect the sport by denying its basic competitive thrust. To seek victory in sport by playing as well as you can at all times may not be the *only* reason to participate in a sport, but it is surely an essential part for anyone who loves or respects a sport. As we have repeatedly insisted, all of the other reasons you might have for participating require this dedication to the spirit of competition.

Vince Lombardi is often quoted as saying, "Winning isn't everything—it's the only thing." Bart Starr claims that Lombardi actually said, "Winning isn't everything—but making the effort to win is" (Walton, p. 4). Even that remark is a bit of locker-room hyperbole, for, indeed, there are other things that matter in sport besides making an effort to win. But by the very nature of competition, the competitors are obligated to make that effort. Making an effort to win is not everything, but it is an essential part of respect for the game.

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## TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- We have argued that giving your best effort is part of what it means to respect the spirit of competition. What else goes into respect for the spirit of competition? Can you give examples from your experience that demonstrate either respect or disrespect for the spirit of competition?
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### Respect for the Spirit of Play

Although participation in sport sometimes involves hard work, sacrifice, and single-minded commitment, you should never forget that sport is a form of human play. As we have suggested, sport resides in the neighborhood of play. Unlike activities whose value rests primarily in the way they bring about other valuable or useful things, playful activities are intrinsically valuable. In other words, they are valuable in themselves. As philosophers have said, play is *autotelic*—that is, it is an activity whose goal or purpose is internal to itself rather than external or instrumental. We choose to play because of the joy, pleasure, satisfaction, or fun of the activity itself. In contrast, we work because we must, in order to survive or to live well, so we often fill our lives with hours of toil. Most of us would like to be able to devote ourselves to activities that we would choose to engage in if we were freed from the necessity of working (or, perhaps the best of all possible worlds, to find work that we view as intrinsically valuable). On the one hand, as an activity we freely choose to engage in, play is an arena of liberation and, at its best, joy and affirmation. On the other hand, since play is not an instrumental activity, it produces nothing. It is in this sense quite literally useless. Although it may be put in the service of other human values, for example, when it is used as entertainment in professional sports or when it is used to promote nationalism in the Olympic Games, from the standpoint of various worldly matters like economics, politics, and religion, play is trivial.

Coaches usually do not need to be reminded that sport is competitive, but it is crucial to remind some that it is competitive *play*. Sport is by its very nature paradoxical. It demands that we compete as hard and as fairly as we can, yet that we do this while realizing that sport is play, a set of captivating and intrinsically valuable activities that do not matter in the larger scheme of things. I must play my sport as if nothing matters more than swimming or pitching or putting better so I can win, all the while realizing that it doesn't really matter, from



another standpoint, that I succeed. Thus players and coaches must seek to find the proper balance between competitive seriousness and the spirit of play. From the perspective of sportsmanship, understanding the paradoxical nature of sport produces both a sense of fair play and an attitude of generosity and playfulness. If competitiveness is sometimes needed to temper a lack of seriousness or effort on the part of some players, the spirit of play is needed to moderate and guide a sense of competitiveness that may sometimes be too harsh and unrelenting, as if winning by any means necessary is the only purpose of sport participation.

**Coach Skeptical:** I still have trouble saying that sport is play. That makes it sound so childish. Sport is about competition—it's about winning and losing. It's not about tinker toys and dolls.

Undoubtedly, there are different kinds of play, from the spontaneous running and jumping of children to the more formal rule-governed, competitive play of sport. To say that sport is a form of play is not to reduce it to the frolic of children. To stress the playful character of sport is to appreciate the valuable and even joyful possibilities of participating in such activities, regardless of their value in producing other goods, like money, prestige, honor, fame, or even the momentary satisfaction of victory. From the standpoint of play, what's important in sport is the process not the product, the activity, not merely the consequences.

Respect for the playful character of sport should produce an attitude that rules out such behavior as taunting, trash talking, and fighting. Think of situations in which small children's play may degenerate and you must remind them that "It's only a game" and that there's something silly about acting as if it mattered so much. Likewise, when players get older, it's often important to remind participants that they're playing *games*, not fighting enemies. One very successful college baseball coach has argued that the traditional postgame handshake between teams should be postponed (or even eliminated?) because the participants need a "cooling-off period" after intense competition. Respect for the playful character of sport should produce all the cooling off a player or coach might need in order to relate to his opponent generously and gracefully after a victory or a difficult defeat. To repeat, if boxers can embrace each other with genuine enthusiasm at the end of a fight, which they often do spontaneously after a good bout, baseball players can shake hands without a cooling-off period.

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## TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- What are the most significant threats to the spirit of play in sport? Can you distinguish between the threats that come from the very nature of competition and those that come from external sources?
  - As a coach what can you do to instill the spirit of play in your players? Parents? Fans? Administrators?
  - As a coach do you ever set aside some part of your practice for activities that are pure “fun”?
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### Respect for the Game’s Traditions and Customs

One of the most interesting and important aspects of respect for your sport arises because a sport is more than simply a collection of explicit rules laid down at a certain time. A sport is not a static, tightly defined set of behaviors. A sport is a historical entity. It grows and develops. As skills are improved and more is learned, players and coaches develop innovative strategies to respond to opponents. Both teaching and learning your game become more complicated and increasingly sophisticated. Recognizing the deeply historical nature of a sport or game is crucial for sportsmanship, because respect for rules must be understood in the context of both the explicit written rules and the unwritten customs that arise in the development of a sport.

Being a good sport does not require strict, saintly obedience to every written rule. For example, consider this common situation in basketball. In the fourth quarter of a close basketball game, a player steals the ball and goes in for a layup. What should a defensive player do? If she understands the situation and has been well-coached, she fouls the offensive player as hard as is necessary in order to keep her from shooting an uncontested layup. The defensive player forces her opponent to make two free throws instead of allowing her to score easy points. There’s nothing mysterious about this example. Such a foul is not bad sportsmanship, and it calls for no angry response by the players, coaches, or fans of the opponent’s team. Here an explicit rule is violated, but the customs of the sport arising from strategic necessity demand that a player violate the rule. Note, however, that here the rules also allow for the appropriate penalty.

Knowing what is and is not appropriate in the context of the customs of your sport is not always an easy matter. It requires knowledge, experience, and good judgment. To make things even

more difficult, customs change. In baseball at one time it was thought to be “bush league” for a team to attempt to steal bases when it was ahead by four or five runs or more. Now it’s more acceptable to attempt to steal bases when a team is considerably ahead, although there is a point, as a matter of good judgment and respect for the game, at which this becomes inappropriate. In baseball it’s permissible to steal signals, break up a double play hard at second base, throw inside, and quick-pitch; however, it’s contrary to the customs of the sport to squeeze when you’re far ahead, attempt to injure an infielder by sliding with your spikes high, or yell “swing” as the ball crosses the plate during a game. For players and coaches, these matters are directly related to sportsmanship. To say that these actions are contrary to the customs of baseball is to say that it would be *unsportsmanlike* to do them. Only ignorance would excuse a person from being judged this way.

Every sport has its subtleties and nuances. It’s important for you to convey to your players that the game has a historical life of its own, which they must understand and respect in order to be good sports, not just good players. And, of course, participation in anything that has a historical life means that we must learn and conform ourselves to established traditions, while at the same time recognizing—and taking responsibility for—the way in which our decisions, judgments, and actions contribute to an ongoing tradition. How I behave on the playing field today and how I interpret the rules and customs and traditions of the game today will play a role in the creation of the customs and traditions for future players.

Generally speaking, then, respect for the game requires a respect for and adherence to the established customs of the game; but that doesn’t excuse us from the responsibility for the formation of new customs. In fact, in some situations the expression “It’s part of the game” can become an excuse for behavior that is totally contrary to the very concept of a game. Sometimes administrators, coaches, and players need to step back and make the judgment that something has become a part of the game that shouldn’t be. There’s no reason, for example, that regular fist fights should be a part of hockey; no reason shouting insults at chair umpires should be a part of tennis; no reason bench-clearing brawls after every inside pitch should be a part of baseball. Precisely because customs and traditions are so much a part of particular sports, especially for young people learning their games, all the participants need to take seriously their roles in the formation of those customs and traditions for the next generation. That may seem like a confusing catch-22 of a predicament; but if it is, it’s a predicament humans face in virtually everything they do.

The upshot of what we have said about respect for traditions and customs of a game is this: Whenever you hear the phrase, “It’s part of

the game,” or whenever you use it yourself, you must be very careful to relate it to other central aspects of sport and sportsmanship as well as to broader moral norms. For example, showboating and trash talking have, as a matter of fact, become a part of the game in many sports. But that doesn’t justify the behavior. These actions conflict with respect for opponents, the very nature of athletic competition, and, perhaps more importantly, the most common, everyday norms of human decency and respect for others. There’s no reason to leave behind the central concerns of moral character when we play sports. The truth is just the opposite.

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## TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- How do certain forms of behavior become “part of the game”? Who’s to say? How is a tradition established? Can you think of examples?
  - Come up with examples from sports you know well of unacceptable forms of behavior that have become common practice. Then explain why these forms of behavior should not be part of the game and why young players ought to be taught not to behave in these ways. Then come up with traditions and customs in the same sports that properly guide players’ actions and are therefore appropriate parts of the game.
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## Respect for Achievement and Excellence

One final aspect of respect for your game or sport arises both from its historical nature and from the fact that it is a competitive activity with standards of excellence. When kids begin to play a sport, it’s not long before they realize that some players are better than others. Coaches, of course, attempt to teach their players how to become better. It is also important and often humbling for players to learn to recognize real quality in the way their sport is played and to make accurate, that is, realistic judgments about their own abilities and the abilities of others. Such judgments are important not simply because they produce humility and realistic expectations, they are also significant because they generate the desire to develop skills in response to weaknesses in various abilities. But they are also crucial in response to competition with opponents, because accurate judgments about who plays well and who doesn’t, about who is *good*, generate an appreciation of excellence.

As any player knows, losing is difficult. It is often difficult to face our own weaknesses, so we make excuses. We rationalize and we blame. Our opponent was lucky. The officiating was poor. We had an off-day. The excuses proliferate. However, a proper respect for achievement

requires that I give credit where it is due. When I am beaten by a superior opponent, I should not make excuses and I should not whine. Respect for excellence means that I must accept responsibility for defeat when it is in fact caused by an opponent who played better or *was* better—at least at that time. To respect my game or sport requires admiration (even grudging admiration!) for the present achievements of participants.

Finally, insofar as a sport also has a history of past achievements, respect for the game involves respect for those who have played it best. This is the right place for heroes, in sport as elsewhere. Heroes are noteworthy not because of their income, celebrity status, or awards. Instead we should admire them as exemplars of excellence. Appreciation of heroes is appreciation of excellence. They show us what is possible in some area of human endeavor. Recall that we mentioned earlier that coaches are more than simply physical educators: They are also educators of attitudes and desires. Respect for past achievements as embodied in heroes involves opening yourself to the breadth of possibilities in your sport. George Will has an insightful comment in regard to this concept:

*It requires a certain largeness of spirit to give generous appreciation to large achievements. 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 its capacity for excellence diminishes. (p. 329)*

Respect for the game involves the “largeness of spirit” that Will speaks of. We need our heroes in an age of cynicism, and we need to teach our children to admire the good, not merely the rich and famous. Coaches can play a useful role here by stressing respect, admiration, warm appreciation, and other positive attitudes in response to the present and past achievements of players.

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## TIME-OUT *for Reflection*

- When we speak of the great heroes of a sport—say, Babe Ruth in baseball—is that the same thing as talking about role models? What is it we admire—or that we should admire—about the all-time great players of a game?
  - After a game do you discuss the things your opponents did well when you’re talking to your players?
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## WRAP-UP

The players who embody a genuine respect for the game exhibit the “largeness of spirit” that George Will talks about. Respect for rules, the spirit of competition and the spirit of play, the traditions and customs of the game, the achievements of others—seeing ourselves as participants in something greater than each of us individually could achieve, even greater than the sum of our individual achievements, enlarges us. Restricting the ego sometimes means enlarging the spirit.