PART THREE

Thinking About Sport and Life

CHAPTER 8

Beyond Sport

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> So, Callicles, I have been convinced by these accounts; it has become my concern how I may present to the judge my soul in its healthiest condition. I relinquish, therefore, the honors that most men pursue and shall endeavor, by cultivating the truth, to be as good as I may during my life and, when I come to die, in my dying. And insofar as I am able I urge all other men (and you in particular I summon, thus countering your former summons to me) to such a life and such a contest as this, which I affirm to be worth all the contests here on earth put together.
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> —Plato, *The Gorgias (Helmbold translation)*

At the beginning of part I of the book we invited you to become more reflective about your own experience. But becoming more reflective about your own experience inevitably means going beyond your own experience in order to gain perspective on it. In this case, that means thinking about the nature of athletic competition in a more theoretical way than you ordinarily do in the day-to-day activities of an athletic coach. You ought to embody an understanding of the nature of athletic competition when you make split-second decisions during a game or a practice, but you won't be consciously reflecting on it. In order to embody that understanding, however, you do have to think about it, reflect on it, pay attention to what others have thought and said about it. As an educator you do need to set aside time to become more reflective about what you do—and you will do a better job at what you do if you become more reflective about it.

In this part of the book, we invite you to think back on some of the broader themes that we've repeatedly touched on throughout the book and to relate those themes to some of the broader ethical and philosophical issues that we have not dealt with. We invite you to think about the relation between sport and life, or, rather, sport and life as a whole. As we intimated in chapter 2, underlying the two extreme views of sport are equally extreme views about what life is all about. Thinking about sport, just like thinking about any serious human endeavor, leads us inevitably to think about the relation between that endeavor and life as a whole.

What we've said so far makes a lot of sense without these connections, but we'd like to leave you with some final thoughts on the relation between sport and life. In "Putting Sport in Perspective,"

we'll reiterate one of the recurring themes of the book, the need to recognize that sport is not the whole of life; in "Reconnecting Sport and Life," we'll make some suggestions for understanding how sport is, nonetheless, connected to the whole of life—and even how sport is very much "about" life.

We won't provide a series of answers, but we will try to leave you with a sense of the abiding question of human existence: How ought I to live my life? Becoming reflective about sport ultimately means becoming reflective about life.

We think that parts I and II by themselves can help you understand the principles of sportsmanship that you should embody and teach in your coaching, but here we invite you to go one step further and think about how what you do is related to the most basic human questions.

PUTTING SPORT IN PERSPECTIVE

One of the most important themes that we have developed in this book concerns perspective. Of course, in one obvious sense the only way we can see things is from where we are. But it is a remarkable fact of human experience that we have the capacity to see things so differently *from where we are.* We inevitably use spatial metaphors here. We can see things "narrowly" or "broadly"; we can be "closed-minded" or we can "enlarge" our vision; our point of view can be "cramped" and "limited," but we even have the capacity to consider how things might look from God's perspective, *sub specie aeternitatis.* We are finite beings, spatially and temporally, but our minds roam over infinity. In one context, we think of our true selves as what's "inside"—especially when we talk about feelings and emotions. But, in another context, we lose track of any sense of the "inside," and we focus our attention on something "outside" ourselves—the catcher's mitt, a beautiful mountain, another person. In fact, when we describe our *experience*, it's not at all clear that the concepts of inside and outside make sense at all.

Our perspective on the world is always limited, but it's often broader than we give ourselves credit for; and often it could become broader than our egos would have us believe. Often the only way to understand and appreciate what is closest to us is to cast our glance away from it in order to see it against a wider background. And when we do this, something happens to us. Because we see more broadly, we see more. We compare, we inevitably make judgments, and when we return to the object of our original attention, our focus has been reshaped.

As we have suggested, good sportsmanship requires understanding and practice. When we appreciate the wonderful complexity of

sports participation, including the essential roles played by opponents, teammates, coaches, and officials, as well as the rich traditions and customs of the various games, our attitudes are changed, *our spirit is enlarged*. The limited desires of the egoistic self are transformed into the respectful concerns of a more substantial self whose character has developed and whose actions attest to this. By seeing ourselves as part of a greater whole, we are enriched by it. But if it is important to turn our respectful gaze toward our fellow participants *within* the world of sport, it is perhaps even more important, from the standpoint of our fundamental attitudes and the development of character, to turn our reflective attention away from sport to the whole of life. We need perspective on sport itself.

"It's Only a Game"

As we have argued, coaches are moral educators, if not by explicit instruction then at least by the habits they instill and the examples they set. The game, however, has the power not only to uplift and encourage, it can also depress and ultimately destroy—if it is not kept in perspective. Consider the sad case of a former major league pitcher, whose life spiraled downward badly and ended in suicide after he gave up the Big Homer in the playoffs. There is a monumental difference between playing the game *as if* it were the only thing in the world that mattered and truly believing it *is* the only thing in the world that matters. Coaches have a tremendous responsibility in this regard. As motivators they must get their players to play as if each game, each inning, each pitch were indeed the only thing in the universe that mattered; as educators in the broad sense they must figure out how to do this in such a way that they never let their players forget that no pitch, no inning, no game, is—pardon the sports metaphor—the whole ball game. Or, to use the standard expression, "It's only a game."

Perhaps it's a cliché or such an obvious truism that its outward expression seems unneeded, but sometimes wisdom is nothing other than internalizing and living the truth of the truism. And that requires that we think about the truism, for the truth of a truism is not the simple fact that it states, but the perspective it calls for. Truisms ask us to see things in light of something so obvious we often ignore it. "Man cannot live by bread alone," "Everyone must die" . . . "It's only a game." Everybody knows it's only a game, but we need to state the obvious because it's easy to become so absorbed in the game that we forget the obvious. To live the truth of the truism that it's only a game is to come to appreciate how sport fits into the whole of life, where the true value of sport resides, and how to integrate the love of the game

and the pursuit of athletic excellence into a life lived well. It means putting sport within the proper perspective and maintaining the proper balance of seriousness and playfulness that a broader perspective calls for. As a coach and an educator you must communicate this truism—not by mindlessly stating it or posting it on the locker-room wall—but with all your actions and all your words.

As we write, and as coaches all over America tell young athletes that winning this game is the only thing that matters, there are children who are living and dying in such abysmal circumstances that they have never had the opportunity to play an organized game of any kind. In a world in which hunger, disease, suffering, and violence confront us daily, the value of devoting our attention to playing athletic games should be affirmed with some degree of modesty. The internal goals of sports—throwing a slow curve ball well, shooting an arrow into the 10 ring at 90 meters in a strong crosswind, hitting a perfect touch volley—seem trivial by comparison. Athletic games can be exuberant, intensely absorbing, joyful, but, at its best, sport is *splendid triviality*. To say that sport is splendid triviality is to acknowledge its modest place in the scale of significant human concerns. Nor is sport the only human practice that offers so much to its participants and fans. Certainly there are other practices—music, art, mathematics—that can be just as demanding, as rich, as educational, and, in their own way, as joyful as sport. Turning our attention away from our immediate concern with sport and toward the whole of life should produce another kind of humility, one which wisely recognizes the smallness of our athletic concerns in the face of the largeness of life. Coaches need to remind players how lucky they are to be able to *play*, to be able to pursue this unique kind of excellence for at least a small part of their lives.

Winners and Losers in Life?

From the standpoint of this broader perspective, some of the facile analogies between sport and life that tend to blow up the athletic arena until it encompasses everything lose their legitimacy. Yes, life is like a baseball game (or, as one of our friends more ironically put it, life is a metaphor for baseball)—but in what respects? Too often the sport-life analogy develops a life of its own, and becomes an answer to every question, a cure for every ill. If we situate sport within the context of the whole of life, we might well "live the truth of the truisms" about sport and life, but there is a corresponding danger that we will let the endless slogans, clichés, and analogies do our thinking for us. Some truisms state the obvious in order to give us perspective; some slogans

and analogies overstate the case to make a point; and some slogans and analogies, because of their rhetorical punch, trick us into accepting a view of sport and life that we might otherwise see through.

Two examples: "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing" and "Show me a good loser and I'll show you a loser." As rhetorical devices designed to get players to walk on the field in order to play *as if* this game is the only thing that matters, to help them avoid the trap of walking on the field prepared to lose, these slogans may serve a legitimate purpose. But all too often we take them, or even consciously intend for them, to mean that, literally, sport and life are about winning and nothing else. Then we end up with school board members claiming that a losing season teaches the players to be "losers in life" or a winning season teaches them to be "winners in life," a claim that misconstrues both the nature of sport and the nature of life. There are indeed winners in sport, but is there really such a thing as a winner in life? If one side wins in sport, the other side necessarily loses. If I am a winner in life, would I then cause someone else to be a loser? That analogy might make sense in the business world—if I make a lot of money, someone else will make less—but if I live the best life I am capable of living, if I am the best person I am capable of being, do I cause others to live worse lives, to be worse human beings? On the contrary, as we have already discussed, my living well—that is, living ethically well—will enhance the lives of those around me.

Of course, when we thought more deeply about the nature of competitive sport, we found that sport, in the end, is not about winning either, but about the mutual striving for excellence. Interestingly enough, John Wooden even resorted to the metaphorical use of winning to say what he thought was truly important in sport: "I believe we have 'won'—that is, accomplished all we're capable of accomplishing—when we've *lost* games," he said (Walton, p. 67). Wooden, having thought deeply about sport and about life, kept the metaphor in its proper place by quickly explaining what he really meant by the word "won." In other words, it isn't really the winning in sport that ought to serve as a model for life, but the excellence we achieve in doing our best to win. The athletic experience can no more be reduced to the winning-is-everything cliché than life can be reduced to looking out for number one in a dog-eat-dog world. Life is about being tough enough to stand up to enemies when we ought to stand up to them, tough enough to walk away when we ought to walk away, and tough enough to cultivate friendships, to contribute to the excellence of others, even occasionally to make friends of enemies. Some have even argued that life requires the moral courage to love our enemies.

RECONNECTING SPORT AND LIFE

Even if sport isn't everything, it's surely something, and if we're right about what we've said in this book, it can be an important thing at that. Sport is separate from the rest of life—it takes place in special places marked off from the rest of the world. But these special places and the games we play in them have more to do with the rest of our lives than this separation might suggest.

The Virtue of Sportsmanship and the Virtues of a Life Lived Well

As we have argued, sport provides an arena in which good character can be developed and practiced. Sport is surely not the only arena in which young people can learn to be persistent, determined, respectful, trustworthy, courageous, responsible, fair, and honest. If young people devote themselves to any practices in which there are standards of excellence, traditions, and learned teachers, such virtues can be developed. Young violinists as well as young gymnasts have an opportunity to practice virtue. But sport is important and pervasive in our lives. In sport we have ample opportunities to help young people become the kind of people who will not only be successful and respected in the world of sport, but in life as well. And even the more mature members of the sport world—coaches, administrators, and parents—will have significant and unique moral challenges to confront as they respond to the tensions and dramatic resonances of competitive athletics. Sport may not be everything, but it can have real existential bite.

Sport and life are connected, not because there are winners and losers in life, but because good character matters in both. Aristotle described the goal of a human life this way: "We reach the conclusion that the good of man is an activity of the soul in conformity with excellence or virtue, and if there are several virtues, with the best and most complete" (Aristotle, p. 17). In that sense, moral education in athletics—that is, education in excellence of character—can prepare young people for life. Courage, discipline, fairness—simply put, these are good things.

Sport and the Virtues of the Mind

Our extended comments on sport and character in this book have hardly exhausted the subject. We have articulated and defended various principles of sportsmanship, but our comments have also served to raise important questions. We are convinced that questions

about sport and character should be raised by all coaches, in order to promote reflection on the part of the players. To make the right choices in light of principles of sportsmanship requires experience and good judgment. It may be obvious to most thoughtful people that sport can promote the growth of certain character traits. In particular, sport can emphasize virtues of character like courage and responsibility. But what about the traits that will come into play when athletes—and especially coaches and administrators—have to address fundamental questions about what they are doing, how they are to act, and how they stand in relation to life as a whole? It's not at all clear that sport, in and of itself, promotes the intellectual virtues of critical thinking. Sport is competitive *physical* play. Yet moral education in the full sense of the word is not mindless moral indoctrination or even the unreflective inculcation of values. Moral wisdom requires experience, deliberation, and good judgment. Moral education in its full sense requires the development of good thinking along with good character, a good head along with a good heart.

So why shouldn't you ask questions and invite players to *reflect*, not simply to be obedient? Why shouldn't you challenge players to question themselves? Why shouldn't you show players that it is important to thoughtfully engage in sport? As participating athletes we all yearn for the "unconsciousness" of a great streak, but as full human beings, we should aspire to the kind of thoughtful reflection that enables us to *understand* why the experience of a streak is so uplifting, what it means to say it is "unconscious," and why this sort of experience has to be situated within a whole life lived well. Socratic questioning is generally inappropriate in the middle of a basketball game (although Socratic irony might sometimes be advisable in disagreeing with an official), but there is no reason that coaches and teachers can't teach student athletes to reflect—at least after the game is over—about the meaning of their experiences on the court or playing field. In other words, in order to make the connection between sport and life meaningful, we may need to cultivate virtues of the mind that athletic experience itself may not naturally promote.

Sport: Escape or Revelation?

When we start to *think* about sport, we recognize that character development does not exhaust the meaning that sport has for us. We have repeatedly referred to the exhilaration, the beauty, of the game. Indeed, there may be a further relation between sport and life that bears some thought. Or is there? Some critics, and even some defenders, claim that sport is an escape from the realities of everyday life. The critics say it is a delusionary escape from real life; the defenders say it

takes us away from the injustice and toil of the work world, that it creates an ideal space in which the good triumph and the bad lose. There's probably some truth in both of these views: Sport does create a separate world, take us out of the everyday, the ordinary, the workaday. It has a beauty all its own. The exhilaration, then, seems to come, not from a connection between sport and life, but from their separateness.

But the separateness of our fields of dreams, like the separateness of our actual dreams, can be misleading. One doesn't have to accept the full-blown apparatus of Freudian psychoanalysis to recognize that dreams often reflect the deeper concerns of our waking lives. Perhaps a better analogy—one which is not commonly made—might be between sport and art. We speak of the art world much as we speak of the sports world—the world of art is a world of its own, and the works of art produced in it create their own worlds. Works of art are creations out of nothing, fictions, products of the imagination. In fact, many philosophers have identified art as a form of play.

But this characterization can be misleading. For great art, and even not-so-great art, takes us out of the everyday, the ordinary, creates a separate world of its own—but ultimately reflects back upon the whole of life. We come away from an inspired performance of a Bach concerto, a made-up arrangement of sounds, with a sense of transcendence, a sense of how the harmony of seemingly discordant strands is at the heart of all things. We come away from Faulkner's fictitious Yoknapatawpha County with a sense of the power of past and place, a deeper sense of what it means to be human. We come away from van Gogh's swirling distortions in *Starry Night* with a deeper understanding of the emotions we all feel in the face of the swirling vastness of the universe. The separateness of an artwork opens up a special space in which we come to see things about ourselves and the world that we could not otherwise see. On one level, art appears to be an escape from reality; on another, it reveals it, reflects it, even enriches it. The purpose of dramatic "playing," says Hamlet, "both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (III. ii).

We suggest that sport, like art, holds so much meaning for us because, at some deeper level that is difficult to articulate, it too reflects back on the whole of life. If we're thoughtful in how we teach particular sports, if we're dedicated and conscientious, and if we're graced with good luck, we may have experiences in sport that put us in touch with some of the deeper realities of life. Sport, like art, may appear to be a mere escape from reality—and, let's be honest, it very

often does function as just that—but it can provide a special mirror for it, a stage for its presentation, an open space in which some very important things can show themselves.

From this perspective, it may well be possible to raise again the notion that life is a kind of game, or at least a form of play. As an invitation to pursue some of these questions and to use athletic experience as a springboard for this reflection, we'll mention a few of the thoughts on this subject that we've developed more fully elsewhere. The view you hold of life—for example, do you think of life as fundamentally a matter of work or play?—will affect the view you have of sport. If life is fundamentally work, then play isn't an opportunity for revelation, but rather a mere escape from the reality of work. But, by the same token, the experiences we have in playing seriously may well reflect on how we view life. The anthropologist Johan Huizinga suggests that humans are essentially *playing* creatures, and more than one philosopher has suggested that life might well be understood as dead-serious play. It's reasonable to say that life ought to be lived as if it mattered absolutely, even though in some ultimate sense none of us knows if it really matters. Of course, the *as-if* quality of a ball game comes in part from the fact that we know there will be other games and other experiences in life, whereas we have only one life to live. The as-if quality of the play of life, then, has a different character. On the one hand, when we say that someone treats life as a game, or is playing at life, we mean to say that this person doesn't take it seriously enough. On the other hand, we often need to remind others or ourselves to lighten up, to keep a sense of humor, to appreciate the ironic character of life. Is the balance of playfulness and seriousness we articulated in our discussion of sport the same balance we ought to seek in life?

It's worth mentioning here that thinking about the nature of play has even led some philosophers and theologians not merely beyond the ballpark and the art gallery, but even beyond the questions about the place of play in a human life. We can and often do draw facile, self-serving analogies between sport and life, and as we broaden the spheres of play, the possibility of making connections too quickly and too easily increases. Nonetheless, if we think about sport as a form of play, that is, as an activity that has no purpose beyond itself, we might well come to wonder not just whether human life is in some fundamental sense a matter of play, but whether reality in general doesn't have something of this character. Friedrich Schlegel wrote: "All the sacred games of art are only remote imitations of the infinite play of the world, the eternally self-creating work of art" (Gadamer, p. 101). Isn't it possible to ask the same question about the sacred games of sport?

If play is a purely human phenomenon, something we make up, then all of the other references we make to play—the play of waves in the ocean, the wind playing tricks with us, the play of light on the water, the "infinite play of the world"—would be metaphorical. Those things don't *really*, literally play—we simply see them in light of human experience. Some thinkers, however, have suggested that the self-renewal of nature, its effortless playing of itself without any purpose beyond itself, might well be the "literal" sense of play. That play feels so "natural" to us might well come from deeper sources in us than we realize. Play, then, far from being an escape from reality may be an expression of it. Of course, we don't ordinarily think about these things as we are playing sports, but it may well be that it is precisely because of these deeper connections that we feel, in a way that's difficult to articulate, most "real" when we play.

WRAP-UP

While all of the other chapters of this book achieve some kind of closure, we mean for this chapter to open out into, to point to, what we haven't fully discussed. Underlying the closure of the previous chapters is an arena and a tradition of philosophical reflection that we have only touched upon here, and we hope that these musings might serve as an invitation to spend more time in this "arena." The charge of juvenile escapism has been leveled at philosophy as well—and sometimes with good reason—but we contend that the step back of good thinking, like the seeming artificiality of art and sport, can ultimately put us in touch with the things that truly matter. And when Socrates said the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being, he did not exclude coaches or athletes.