

# SPORT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MARY

## Fostering Excellence in Keeping with Our Ideals

### INTRODUCTION

#### **The Purpose of this Article**

As part of the coaching staff at Mary, all of us are committed to these two propositions: (1) We want to be very good coaches who run high quality and successful sports programs; and (2) we want our student athletes to thrive as people, and our athletic programs to be an integral part of the educational vision of Mary, fitting into and furthering Mary's Christian, Catholic, Benedictine mission. The question this paper addresses, simply put, is this: Are these two goals genuinely compatible? Can they be understood to be running in the same direction, or will we be forced to sacrifice one or the other, or maybe end up between two stools, finding ourselves running programs that are not as successful as we wish, and not as integrated into Mary's vision as we might want?

My contention is that these two goals are not incompatible, and that in fact they naturally go together. But in order for these goals to be pursued successfully, we need a clear understanding of the nature and purpose of sport in a Christian university, what might be called a philosophy of sport. This paper is an attempt to articulate some key aspects of such a philosophy. It is a task that is sorely needed, because if it is true that sport is a worthy endeavor, it is also true that in our current culture, sport is out of balance and lacking a clear self-understanding, and as a result is often in serious trouble. My hope is that this paper will spark further discussion and deeper exploration into these important questions as we continue to work on our culture of sport at UMary.

#### **The Current Coaching Dilemma: Win at all costs? Or...**

"Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing."

One of the greatest athletic coaches in history, Vince Lombardi, used this quote regularly during his career. In just seven words, Lombardi articulates the single-minded pursuit of victory that allowed him to reach the pinnacle of success.

When I spent over a decade as a college football coach, these words haunted me. I recognized in them a central tension in the culture of sport: the right understanding of winning.

Every coach and every athlete—myself included—is driven to win. Inherently we recognize that there is something true and good in the striving and relentless pursuit of competitive excellence. Our hearts are roused as we consider the fight and the ultimate thrill of victory. Lombardi speaks of this too, in words memorialized in picture frames hanging in coaches' offices across the country: "I firmly believe that any man's finest hour, the greatest fulfillment of all that he holds dear, is that moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle – victorious." For every competitor

who has experienced such a moment, the quote brings back the memory, with coals still hot to the touch and ready to burst into flame.

Yet there is something in this other famous phrase, that winning “is the only thing,” that unsettled me. For it seemed to justify a “win-at-all-costs” philosophy that many wanted to associate with the passionate and growly Lombardi. Certainly Coach Lombardi might be rightly described as a tough coach, “old-school” in modern terms, driven to succeed and known for pushing players to the limits of their abilities. Yet what I knew of Lombardi’s life and character made me question whether he would actually advocate a philosophy of pursuing winning without any other considerations. I had to believe that he would sharply criticize, for example, the modern doping scandals that are rocking professional athletics. Most coaches believe that such actions by athletes disgrace the game, and I felt certain that Lombardi would have shared that position.

It wasn’t until late in my coaching career, just as I was about to move out of the profession, that I discovered something interesting about Coach Lombardi. Just before he died, succumbing to colon cancer in his fifties, he told a reporter about the “winning is the only thing” quote: “I wish to hell I’d never said the damned thing. I meant the effort . . . I meant having a goal. . . . I sure as hell didn’t mean for people to crush human values and morality.” I was encouraged to discover that Coach Lombardi deeply regretted the conclusion that some had drawn from his words, that the pursuit of wins could justify immoral actions.

Coach Lombardi provides for us a case study of the challenge facing athletic coaches, even today. We know in our bones the value of pursuing victory, but we struggle with the vocabulary, with the framework or philosophy, to place the correct boundaries on our pursuit of competitive excellence. In fact, it seems that some of the legendary coaches of old—who seemed to have an inherent ability to coach with integrity—now have their words about winning distorted. We look for the modern John Wooden, a coach who exemplifies both success and integrity, and feel that something is missing in the modern understanding of the purpose of sport.

Further complicating the dilemma is that a deeply confused section of society demonizes winning altogether. They have watched aghast at some of the most objectionable aspects of organized sport, from helicopter parents and entitled kids to professional athletes immersed in doping scandals and spousal abuse cases. The conclusion drawn from this noisy and growing minority is that the pursuit of winning itself should be diminished if not eliminated from athletic pursuits. Coaches rightly lament this overreaction, which is anything but compelling, imagining participation ribbons after a contest where no one keeps score. While this argument proposes that the importance of sport lies not in winning or losing, but rather in having fun and taking part, it is obvious that in doing so, they have eliminated the passion, the drive, the very heart of the game.

The vast majority of coaches, then, lie somewhere in the middle of the two extremes: “win at all costs” and “participation ribbons for all.” From youth sports to the professional ranks, these coaches strive to thread the needle, to place the proper importance on winning while simultaneously developing character and looking out for their athletes’ overall good. Most create for themselves a piecemeal coaching philosophy, pulling inspirational quotes about the centrality of winning from greats like Lombardi and balancing them with others that speak to character development. They mix them together, and may even establish some core principles, but the whole thing remains disjointed, never a cohesive whole.

After careful reflection, and in an honest moment, most coaches—with sufficient humility to do so—find that they are paying lip service to character development while truly worshipping the almighty win. When we reflect on what drives us, on where we actually spend our time and effort, we find that it is rarely how

to instill more character in our athletes; it is how we can get a few more wins. That extra hour of game film, the time spent on “x’s and o’s,” the travel to a coaching clinic, the detour to add a recruitment stop into our family vacation: it is all driven by a determination to win. These internal attitudes are then strengthened by the whole success apparatus of the coaching world. Whatever lip service may be given to other goals, if the win column is not looking good, the coach knows that his job is on the line.

The coach sacrifices a great deal for this determination to win, and the sacrifice can bring with it a sharp prick of guilt; because that hour of film is a choice, time spent on pursuit of competitive excellence rather than something else, such as going home and putting your daughter to bed, or helping your spouse with the dishes. We justify the choice by convincing ourselves that we are a better coach since we put in that extra time, sacrificing more for our athletes, and that somehow that makes us deserve the win a bit more.

The result is that we can come to feel like Vince Lombardi near the end of his life, distressed and discouraged as he spoke to that reporter. We know we need to win, and so we pursue it relentlessly. But we have sold out to winning “as the only thing,” the one thing worth pursuing, and find ourselves worshipping an idol. Then we find ourselves apologizing for it or justifying it.

### **The Effect of this Dilemma on the Student Athlete**

If there is a gap in the coaching profession, in the ability to clearly articulate the true role of winning in sport, this void leaves the most important individuals of all—the athletes themselves—in a vulnerable position. The athletes watch their coaches waffling back and forth, stumbling through a confused and contradictory message about what is truly important. They observe that the actions and statements of the coach are not consistent and often don’t match the platitudes. The result is that the athletes do not know what to believe; they usually develop some ill-formed understanding of winning and character development that mimics the confusion of the coaches themselves.

For the athletes, the result is often a discouraging acceptance of various dead ends—things such as glory, wealth, fame, power, sensual pleasure, and even health or wellness—pursuits that are proven again and again to be empty promises that don’t lead to enduring happiness. Some athletes find their identity in the pursuit of athletic excellence, attributing to competitive excellence their very self-worth, only to be disappointed when they fall short of their grand expectations, or when a brilliant sporting career ultimately ends. Others fall prey to the pursuit of prestige or glory, and at the highest levels, to financial gain. Yet even once they have attained their goal, they find themselves unfulfilled. At the end of all of these pursuits, what is left is a jar of memories, but laced with a hollow emptiness.

### **The Need: Conversion of Sport**

Both coaches and athletes are being cheated out of the full beauty of athletics, because sport is in the midst of an identity crisis. We need to clarify the true purpose of athletics, to find a new way of understanding its purpose that properly situates the importance of winning. We need a paradigm shift, or, to put it another way, sport needs a time of conversion. There is a critical need for a new philosophy of sport that offers the path to navigate these central questions. Why do we play sports? What is the nature of competition? What is the purpose of sport? How does one morally justify a drive to win, without allowing that drive to go too far? Some might be surprised that a compelling answer to these questions comes from the Christian faith and tradition, along with the ancient philosophical tradition that Christians embraced. What follows are some key elements in arriving at a renewed philosophy and culture of sport.

## TOWARD A RENEWED PHILOSOPHY OF SPORT

### A Key Distinction: The Purpose of Sport and the Objective of Sport

Distinguishing between the purpose and the objective of sport will greatly help in developing a healthy philosophy of sport. What do I mean here by “purpose” and by “objective” in the context of sport?

The purpose of sport refers to the ultimate point of the activity: why we do it and why it is good to do. The objective of sport deals with the immediate goals of the activity: what constitutes a good and successful sporting endeavor. Given these explanations we could say: the main *objective* of sport (there is no doubt more than one, but the primary one) is to win the sporting event. Everyone who competes is attempting to gain that objective. The *purpose* of sport, on the other hand, is to train the athlete in human virtues, virtues that are necessary not only for excellence in sport, but for excellence in life: for filling out and completing the character given us by God.

An analogy might prove helpful in making this point more clearly. The world of private enterprise, particularly in our competitive, capitalist economy of the United States, can provide a comparison to the competitive environment of athletics. From a Christian point of view, the *objective* of setting up a business is to yield a profit. But the *purpose* of a business is different: it is to help those who work in the business more deeply fulfill their humanity. It is to provide income so that they can live; to provide goods and services that people need or want; to generate funds that can be used generously for good causes; to contribute to the common good of society.

What we can notice in the business analogy is that, even though making a profit is not the ultimate purpose of a business, it is a necessary aspect of a business. If the company makes no money, then none of the deeper purposes of the company can be achieved: no one is provided for, nothing is produced, and there is no contribution of any kind. This means that those who are serious about the *purpose* of business will also be serious about its *objective*: they will work hard to be profitable. But they won't allow the push for profit to subvert the real point of the business, which is to help people thrive. They won't drive their employees so hard that they have no time for God and family; they won't give them unfair wages; they won't pass off inferior goods to their customers. To do so would be to fail as businessmen. As many studies have shown, businesses that keep their ultimate purpose clear tend also to be profitable. This is not a zero sum game.

Similarly in sport: the ultimate purpose of sport is not winning; but anyone who is interested in pursuing the deeper purpose of sport will do so by attempting to win, since it is precisely in that attempt, and in going after all that the attempt requires, that the deeper purposes of sport are achieved.

Keeping clear about the difference between purpose and objective can help to avoid some of the greatest dangers that afflict us. When business people think that profit is the very purpose of business, the whole activity gets off balance. Money becomes “the only thing” and anything else is justified if it increases the profit margin (think ENRON). When coaches and athletes think that the very purpose of sport is winning, then everything else gets sacrificed to the almighty win. To do this is to put the wrong thing in the wrong place, a kind of idolatry.

## The Place of Winning in Sport

Modern athletes and coaches often believe that it is not possible to be a serious Christian without compromising in some way their competitive spirit in athletic pursuits. The Christian athlete or coach will often deemphasize winning and will instead focus on other lessons of the game such as teamwork, sacrifice, and determination. There is obviously an important point to this; but the result is that winning is treated only at a distance, as if it is a dangerous ingredient that might taint the purity of sport. Thus, we believe that the drive to win, the striving toward greatness, must be driven out of the Christian.

But this is a misunderstanding. The objective of sport, any sport, is to win. Yet one must separate the objective of the game from its purpose. **While the objective of the game is to win, the purpose of the game is to become what we were created to be**, to help us achieve the greatness intended for us when God knit us together. Put another way, and in a phrase that athletes might more readily grasp, the purpose of athletics is to become the best version of yourself. In the language of the Christian, the purpose of sport is to grow in virtue.

It is also the case that if the genuine purpose of the sport is kept in view, the objective is more easily gained; and if the objective is rightly pursued, the purpose can be fulfilled. On the one hand, athletes who are rightly formed in character tend to do better athletically, whereas many otherwise highly gifted athletes and talented teams have come to grief due to failure of character. And on the other hand, unless winning is pursued with a certain intensity and drive, the virtues that sport is meant to impart are not gained. This means that the objective and the purpose of sport are not fundamentally at odds with each other. The serious pursuit of virtue and the desire to have successful athletes and winning teams are goals that support each other and can be accomplished together. Keeping these two categories clear can also provide a good benchmark for determining how best to pursue a winning performance or season. If the way we go after the win is destroying or subverting the deeper purposes of sport and harming the growth in virtue of the athletes, then we know we are running down the wrong path.

While the majority of coaches would agree in principle with this articulated “purpose,” many would also need to admit that a very subtle shift occurs too often in our philosophy. The temptation—to flip the two priorities and invert the “objective” of winning with the higher “purpose” of virtue—applies a steady and unrelenting pressure upon even the most disciplined athletic coach. Too many coaches cave into this pressure, justifying to themselves that they can chase wins and assume that virtue will naturally follow. Yet this notion is a myth. **Participation in athletics is no guarantee of virtue.** For if virtue came naturally from competitive athletics, those competing at the elite levels—professional or Olympic athletes—would be exemplars of virtue. However, while there are certainly fine men and women of shining character throughout the elite levels of athletics, they are no more common in that rarified air than in any other walk of life. Perhaps, one might contend, they are even rarer there. If character does not come automatically when going after wins, this means that coaches must intentionally instill virtue as their purpose, and work with their athletes to form the virtues in them. Without heroic vigilance, the coach will conform to the wider world’s understanding of athletics, and the athlete will once again experience a disjointed, confused—and therefore un compelling—message.

No coach should feel powerless to resist this temptation, this pressure, from the current world of sport. We should recognize that our misgivings about the profession are justified. If and when we identify that we are motivated by a fear of failure, we should name it as a problem and recognize that this is the place where we’ve inverted the objective of sport with its purpose. When we cannot celebrate a win properly because we are so quick to look ahead to the next opponent, when we feel the desperate agony of a loss and question whether it was all worth it, these are the moments where we have allowed winning and

virtue to trade places, and have let a disordered philosophy of sport to control our lives. To maintain a proper order of objective and purpose allows coaches to be set free to coach with integrity and joy.

### **Sport and Growth in Virtue**

If what I have been saying so far is true, then a critical component of any coach's ability to maintain an ordered view of athletics is to develop a more complete understanding of its true purpose, virtue, including a vocabulary and framework to employ. Philosophers from Aristotle to Aquinas and many modern authors can provide that context, and the application need not become laboriously academic. Most coaches use the word "excellence" with regularity, and are familiar with the term. Yet excellence and virtue cannot be constrained to mean only competitive excellence in a particular athletic context. According to Aristotle, the correct understanding of excellence—that which leads to happiness and flourishing—is excellence that encompasses the entirety of the human person, not just a narrow sliver of their activities.

And it is important to note: Aristotle used the word excellence synonymously with virtue. Furthermore, he clarified that excellence "is not an act but a habit," and thus can be practiced and improved over time, with disciplined attention and effort. Athletics provides an arena to practice and build virtue through focused effort. In fact, there may be few places more conducive to the development of virtue, as the athlete can exercise his/her entire self—mind, body, and soul—to reach the limits of their ability. Yet one must focus on virtue in order to achieve it. Intentional practice in challenging circumstances is critical, and so one must be clear about purpose as opposed to more immediate goals or objectives.

This distinction—to separate the objective of sport from its purpose and an emphasis on virtue—provides coaches the key with which to navigate the central tension surrounding winning. One can even read anew words by legendary coaches such as Vince Lombardi, who along with the quotes we've already considered, also famously said, "The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor." In these words, one can see that Coach Lombardi understood the preeminence of virtue or excellence for achieving "quality" and joy in life. However, Lombardi did struggle to communicate these ideas clearly with those who did not share his convictions, likely because he had not been given the vocabulary to do so. Had Lombardi been armed with a fully prepared defense of the hierarchy of objective and purpose, he might have been able to prevent the confusion that followed from his "winning is the only thing" quotation.

### **A Short Scheme of the Virtues**

Should a coach desire to place proper emphasis on virtue, she/he will need to become familiar with some basic truths developed over the centuries. Among these truths are that a number of identifiable "virtues" or "excellences" exist. Yet a flourishing life, says Aristotle and all who come after him, is not the result of attainment of simply one virtue, but rather of all of them working in harmony to form a virtuous personality. Furthermore, each virtue itself holds a tension between two extremes; each virtue is a "golden mean" between what can be called the excess and the defect of the given excellence.

Any discussion of virtue rightly begins with the four virtues called the cardinal virtues—so named because they are the virtues upon which all the rest "hinge." Those four are prudence, justice, courage, and temperance. When found in harmony, these four virtues give a kind of image of the excellent human being.

The first, prudence, sometimes called practical wisdom, is defined as the habit of choosing what is good and true, not only abstractly but in specific situations with all their unique complexities. It comes first, because the other three virtues all depend on prudence to be virtues at all: we can only be just, or courageous, or temperate, if we are first prudent, if we have first determined what is really the good thing to do. Next comes justice, the steady habit of giving every person—including God—his or her due. Justice allows for peaceful relationships in any human grouping. To say that a person is both prudent and just is to say that they are being truly and fully human.

The second pair of hinge virtues, courage and temperance, are habits that enable a person to be prudent and just in the face of hardship or the temptation to pleasure. Courage is the habit of conquering difficulty in order to do what is right and just. When an individual faces fear, despair, or pain, and overcomes those emotions to do the right thing, they are exercising courage. The last cardinal virtue is temperance, the habitual mastery of our desire for comfort and ease, whether eating and drinking, or sex, or relaxation and sleep, that can get in the way of doing what is just and good.

A full exploration of these and other virtues can best be done elsewhere; but even with this cursory explanation most coaches will be able to see that each of them could be applied readily to numerous situations that arise in athletic endeavors.

### **Magnanimity and Humility: Twin Virtues for Sport**

Two lesser known virtues can provide an important lesson for addressing the tension we have identified surrounding sport. The first is magnanimity. The virtue of magnanimity is defined as the yearning of the soul for greatness, which translates readily to the desire for competitive excellence. Through magnanimity, we can see that even the desire to win itself can be a virtue. The human person was created for greatness, and our Creator expects nothing less of us. But this desire for greatness must be properly balanced, for as noted above all virtues represent a balance between extremes. These extremes on either side of the virtue have commonly been termed vices, one of defect and one of excess. In the case of magnanimity, a deficiency produces smallness of soul, or pusillanimity, while an excess inflates the ego, producing megalomania. The magnanimous person strives for the greatness that is rightly theirs, without settling for too little or attempting too much according to their individual capacity.

Critically, for magnanimity – greatness of soul – to come into its own, it must be paired with another virtue, that of humility. Humility may be the most misunderstood virtue. We tend to think of a humble person as one who tends to undervalue self, maybe something of a wallflower, probably not a strong character or a leader. In athletics we might think of a humble person as someone who lacks drive or who is untalented in comparison to others. Athletes who are attempting to be humble may find themselves apologizing for their gifts, or suggesting that they are not really so talented after all. Yet a right understanding of humility does not lead to dismissing one's own giftedness, which would actually be a sin of excess humility, degradation. Rather, humility is the true understanding of self. Crucial, then, to humility is acknowledging with honesty those gifts which we possess, but also immediately acknowledging from Whom those gifts come. For each gift is a blessing from our Creator. To give oneself the credit for them is pride, but to deny that we have been blessed is equally problematic.

Magnanimity and humility – the virtue of striving after greatness tempered by the virtue of recognizing the proper limits of that greatness and how much we owe to God – between them they go far to fill out the spirit of the kind of sports program whose purpose and objective is clear. These virtues are necessary not only for sport, but for engaging effectively the adventure of life. We all need the virtues of prudence and

courage, justice and temperance, for our work, our families, our tasks of citizenship, and our service to God. When sport is doing its job properly, it is helping those who participate to gain these vitally important habits for the whole of their lives.

## **CONCLUSION: THE POSSIBILITIES BEFORE US**

The virtues and even the principles described here are not necessarily novel; they represent knowledge compiled from many existing sources. *But an athletic program ordered to the gaining of these virtues will be a novel enterprise.* Both the possibilities and the challenges of such an enterprise are great. Even if a coach accepts and believes the difference between the goal and purpose of the game, and then receives intellectual formation regarding the virtues, she/he will still find great challenge in executing the philosophy. The well-worn paths of a lifetime of athletics will pull them toward old habits, pursuing wins first and allowing virtue (one hopes) to follow. The magnetic center of modern sport will prove difficult to resist.

As a result, it will take champions of virtue—a community of convinced and dedicated coaches—to make such a cultural transformation work. Success will require that coaches, athletes, and administrators support one another in the effort, offering encouragement and correcting the course when needed. If this community is to have sufficient impact on the culture of sport, then it needs a platform of sufficient prominence. Yet despite these challenges, in the right setting, in a unique place that had the appropriate level of support and formation, such a philosophy of sport could not only find a place, but could thrive. Together, a community of like-minded coaches could execute a paradigm shift that would have the potential of touching all of sport.

One cannot help but think what an impact such a properly ordered athletic department might have upon the current culture. For our world is drunk with sport, fully enamored with it at every level, from enrolling our three-year olds in soccer leagues to buying expensive tickets to elite professional athletic events. Such a cultural phenomenon needs serious re-adjustment, but it also has the capacity to provide deep and meaningful instruction as people are drawn into a healthy culture of sport that moves them to virtue and to greater happiness.

There are not many venues for developing this type of sport environment. Such a venue would require a commitment to competitive excellence in athletics that is hard to come by outside the upper divisions of the NCAA. The administration of the institution would need to demonstrate profound commitment and resolve to see the transformation through. Moreover, the whole community would need to be attuned to and collectively comfortable with virtue. This is a rare combination of elements.

There is one community that possesses all of these requirements, and that also has the courage to set out on this ambitious goal: the University of Mary. In Vision 2030, Mary set about on a path to produce a “Center of Excellence” in its athletic programs. Our athletic department would be distinctive, we said, by presenting “the heart of athletics in a whole new way,” with coaches who “order their programs firstly toward virtue.”

The University of Mary is uniquely positioned to accomplish this work because of our history of athletic success and the prominence of our NCAA Division II platform. Moreover, we have been given a clear sense of our purpose by our founders and sponsors. Our work at Mary is to identify and meet the religious, cultural, and academic needs of our time and place, and one important expression of this is the need for a new and integrated approach to intercollegiate athletics.

Now is the time to take the legacy of Coach Vince Lombardi and position it rightly. Lombardi himself, a devoted Catholic Christian who attended Mass every day before going to his work with the Green Bay Packers, knew that he had been created for greatness and that he had been blessed with the gifts to attain it. In him, we can recognize that his comment that “winning is the only thing” was an effort to inspire others to magnanimity. His words were an admonishment to avoid small-mindedness, the vice of pusillanimity; they were a sharp critique of the shadows of men he saw in the world around him. Yet Lombardi knew implicitly from his Christian faith that this drive must be paired with the humility of knowing that greatness was only made possible through the gifts of a loving Creator, and that humility was necessary to pursue excellence in its full definition.

The time has come for our athletic department at the University of Mary to be visionary leaders in the world of sport. With God’s grace, may we at Mary inspire a new generation of athletes and coaches to pursue virtue in sport, and to chase the greatness for which they were made.

**Adopted by the University of Mary President’s Council, 21 March 2018**



There exists an abundance of literature on the virtues, including works by some of the most brilliant thinkers of human history. For the purposes of sport, we may synthesize the scholarship into a simple explanation followed by a series of practical applications. The wealth of the tradition remains for those who desire to investigate more thoroughly, but this summation should provide sufficient understanding for a coach to begin.

1. The goal of the virtues is excellence and human flourishing. Each individual virtue represents a particular aspect of “excellence,” but a person has not achieved the goal until he/she achieves a mastery of them all.
2. Each virtue is a “golden mean,” a correct balance between excess and deficiency of the quality involved. The excess and deficiency of a virtue are its corresponding “vices.” As an example: the virtue of liberality is the habit of being generous with one’s time, money, and energy. The defect of liberality is stinginess; the excess is sometimes called prodigality, giving away more than the occasion requires or more than the person actually has to give. The same pattern of excess and deficiency repeats itself for all the virtues.

## THE VIRTUES

— *Distilled for Sport* —

3. The individual virtues are habits, and thus are achieved through conscious and deliberate effort. The analogy with sports skills can make this clear. A basketball player may make an amazing shot, a golfer might hit a tremendous drive, a tennis player may place the ball almost miraculously – once. But we don’t call a person a good athlete unless there is an ability to perform with skill steadily and habitually. So it is with the virtues. Not just a good action, but a habitual ability to act rightly, is the essence of virtue.
4. While there are all kinds of virtues, we have identified six virtues of particular importance for athletics. Four of these are the so-called “cardinal” virtues (prudence, justice, courage, and temperance), stemming from a root word indicating “to hinge.” Philosophers have long noted that these four virtues represent those from which all other virtues depend — upon which all other virtues “hinge”. The other two are magnanimity and humility, two virtues that help define the proper scope of human striving and achievement.

# A Quick Description of the Six Virtues

## FOOLISHNESS

(Deficiency)

Prudence may be defined as sound reason, or proper judgment. It is the habit of doing the right act, at the right time, in the right way, and for the right reason. In athletics, the need for prudence shows up constantly. For starters, prudence is needed in the determining the proper workout regimen and the right care of one's body: not going too hard and wearing oneself out; not going too easy or peaking at the wrong time. Then in many team sports the need for prudence is essential. In a team sport like basketball, for example, the player must first understand the immediate game situation. If the team is well ahead as the game nears a conclusion, then the player should not be quick to force up a difficult shot, but rather try to hold the possession to eliminate as much time as possible. A dizzying number of additional factors influence decisions in competition: the skills and talents of the opposing team's players, the strategy currently employed by the opposing team, the momentum of the game, and the confidence of individual players at that point in time are just a few representative examples. A good athlete must learn and weigh these factors quickly to make a sound judgment. Sometimes this is referred to as sports IQ. Because prudence is gained over time through experience, whenever we hear the comment "rookie mistake," we can be sure that there has been a failure of prudence.

## PRUDENCE

(Golden Mean)

### ATHLETICS

"I try to do the right thing at the right time. They may just be little things, but usually they make the difference between winning and losing." — Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

"Integrity is what you do when no one is watching; it's doing the right thing all the time, even when it may work to your disadvantage." — Tony Dungy

"Do the right thing, when you're supposed to do it, and do it that way every time." — Mike Van Diest, Head Football Coach, Carroll College

"Wisdom is always an overmatch for strength." — Phil Jackson

### SCRIPTURE

"Go to the ant, O sluggard, study her ways and learn wisdom; for though she has no chief, no commander or ruler, she procures her food in the summer, stores up her provisions in the harvest." (Prov 6:6-8)

"In everything a prudent man acts with knowledge, but a fool flaunts his folly." (Prov 13:6)

"Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil." (1 Thes 5:21-2)

## CUNNING

(Excess)

## INJUSTICE

(Deficiency)

Justice is the habit of giving others, including God, their due. This involves offering proper respect to others according to their relationship with us; gratitude to those who have helped us; fair rendering of judgments about people and circumstances; awarding each what that person has rightfully gained. In sport this virtue is needed all the time. There is hardly a more common phrase in sport than "fair play." Going by the rules, not cheating, giving praise where it is deserved, acknowledging both victory and defeat without either gloating or being sullen, not playing dirty, being respectful of umpires and referees and judges, these and a hundred other situations demand the virtue of justice. Think of the post-game handshake. Our players often have no context for it, no real understanding of what it means or why it is done. Too often, it becomes an opportunity to gloat or build up a store of resentment for revenge later. When it is understood as an act of justice, it means honoring your opponent for their effort, and acknowledging that they deserve respect, in justice, whether they won or lost.

## JUSTICE

(Golden Mean)

### ATHLETICS

"Leave it all on the field." — numerous sources

"I was taught you never, ever disrespect your opponent or your teammates or your organization or your manager and never, ever your uniform." — Ryne Sandberg

### SCRIPTURE

"Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land which the LORD your God gives you." (Deut 16:20)

"Blessed are they who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times!" (Ps 106:3)

"It is not good to be partial to a wicked man, or to deprive a righteous man of justice." (Prov 18:5)

"Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." (Rom 13:7)

## ENABLEMENT

(Excess)

— ..... COWARDICE

(Deficiency)

Courage is habit of carrying through toward good things even when it is difficult to do. It means conquering fear, pushing through discouragement, and pressing on in the face of serious obstacles. It is this virtue that athletic competition is most suited to train. In order to enter the arena at all and compete against another person, the athlete needs to act with courage. There are lots of fears to overcome, including fear of failure, fear of injury, fear of embarrassment, and fear of letting others down. To take on an opponent who seems stronger or more skillful, to keep going when the chips are down, to get up after a defeat and stay the course, to push the body to the limits of its capacity; all are acts of courage.

**ATHLETICS**

“I’ve missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. 26 times I’ve been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over in my life. And that is why I succeed.” — Michael Jordan  
“Don’t give up. Don’t ever give up.” — Jim Valvano

**COURAGE** ..... +

(Golden Mean)

“People say to me all the time, ‘You have no fear.’ I tell them, ‘That’s not true. I’m scared all the time. You have to have fear in order to have courage. I’m a courageous person because I’m a scared person.” — Ronda Rousey

“Persistence can change failure into extraordinary achievement.”  
– Marv Levy

**SCRIPTURE**

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” (Josh 1:9)

“And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart.” (Gal 6:9)

“And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.” (Rev 12:11)

“Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.” (1 Cor 13:16)

RECKLESSNESS

(Excess)

— ..... LICENTIOUSNESS

(Deficiency)

Temperance can be defined as self-control, especially of the desire for pleasure and comfort, and also of emotions and drives. For athletes, the simple prospect of staying in good shape is an exercise of temperance. The willingness to get up early and work out, to avoid certain foods, to push through levels of pain, all demand a temperate habit. “No pain, no gain” is an athlete’s way of remembering temperance. The need to control the urge to anger or the desire to flaunt also falls under this virtue. Anyone can think of examples where an athlete’s lack of temperance has spilled over into problems, whether fighting, technical fouls, or penalties that harm the team’s athletic effort. Sometimes an athlete will foster violent anger toward an opponent, an example of subverting the purpose of sport in order to gain an immediate objective.

**TEMPERANCE** ..... +

(Golden Mean)

**ATHLETICS**

“More enduringly than any other sport, wrestling teaches self-control and pride.” — Dan Gable

**SCRIPTURE**

“Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one.” (1 Corinthians 9:25)

“Do not follow your base desires, but restrain your appetites.” (Sir 18:30)

LEGALISM

(Excess)

(Deficiency)

(Golden Mean)

(Excess)

Magnanimity is the striving of the soul toward greatness. It presumes that we were made for a great purpose, and that greatness will not simply come to us without the habitual pursuit of it. Magnanimity is connected to reality: it doesn't mean the pursuit of any greatness whatever; it means the proper pursuit of the greatness that is meant for us. Athletics provides a good potential training ground for magnanimity. The athlete has to pursue a high goal, and to keep it in view without settling for less. At the same time, that goal needs to be reasonable, in touch with what is really possible.

**ATHLETICS**

"I've worked too hard and too long to let anything stand in the way of my goals. I will not let my teammates down, and I will not let myself down." — Mia Hamm

**SCRIPTURE**

"Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Phil 4:8)

"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph 4:1)

"Christian, remember your dignity, and now that you share in God's own nature, do not return by sin to your former base condition. Bear in mind who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Do not forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of God's kingdom."

— Pope Leo the Great

(Deficiency)

(Golden Mean)

(Excess)

Humility is knowing the truth about one's own gifts and limitations. A humble person understands where he/she has unique skills, and so knows best how to serve others by putting them into practice. Moreover, the humble person knows their own deficiencies, and admits to them, asking for assistance where appropriate. Most importantly, though, humility compels us to recognize from Whom our gifts come. Most successful athletes have fallen prey, at least in some form, to self-congratulatory vanity, giving themselves the credit for developing their skills through hard work. Yet this perspective is flawed, as it fails to acknowledge their genetic athleticism, their situation in life that allowed them to pursue athletics, even the experiences and people that helped shape them. In fact, even the drive to achieve at all is a blessing from God; at best, we use well the gifts we've received.

**ATHLETICS**

"To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift." — Steve Prefontaine

**SCRIPTURE**

"Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited." (Rom 12:16)

"When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but with the humble is wisdom." (Prov 11:2)

"The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself; so you will find favor in the sight of the Lord." (Sir 3:18)

"To despise the gifts that God has given is not due to humility, but to ingratitude." — St. Thomas Aquinas