

## *College Sports; Five Liberal lessons; and Milo of Crotona*

The core of our presentation today is going to be to talk about the valuable information being gathered on Division III athletics and academic performance by the College Sports Project. Audaciously, the CSP is trying to approach this topic from the perspective of reality not myth. What do the data show to be the relationship between sports and our central function of student learning? Before my four fellow panelists move us towards this important attempt at grounding an often untethered conversation, my mission, both more modest and more grandiose, is to try to say a few words from what is increasingly often being designated the “30,000 ft.” perspective. If your experience at 30,000 ft. is at all like mine, that means we should all have come into a much smaller room, one which could barely contain us, lugging heavy little suitcases, which won’t quite fit into the overhead compartments, rather than paying to put our luggage in an actual baggage compartment. Then, an overworked attendant would circulate among us, offering to sell us such luxuries as water or coffee, after announcing (as on a recent flight) that three of the four bathrooms to which we have access are unfortunately not working. Maybe it is time to kill forever that “30,000 ft.” metaphor...

There are lots of reasons for colleges like ours to develop and support intercollegiate athletics programs, some of which are quite pragmatic. And, there are lots of reasons why such development and support should be viewed with suspicion. So, for example, at Division III schools, often 1/4<sup>th</sup> to 1/2 of the student body is engaged in competitive athletics, as compared to percentages more in the 1 in 15 student athlete ratio at major Division I powers. Consequently, sports programs help us with student recruiting, which is certainly a pragmatic, fiscal rationale for maintaining them. On the other hand, they can be incredibly costly, in lots of ways, including in time commitment and raw dollars: one of those things most of us don’t really want to know is what it costs just to outfit each of our 40-80 football players – much less coach them, transport them, feed and house them. But our central mission as colleges is not fiscal well-being, it is education. So I want to ask today what it is that young women and men learn in their athletics careers, especially at Division III schools. Since many of our schools see their enterprise as

*liberal learning*, what sorts of liberating collegiate experiences might we be providing our student athletes, which reinforce or complement the learning which goes on in the classroom, laboratory, library, faculty office or elsewhere in the extracurriculum. One caveat: the positive lessons of college sports will occur when there is a sensible, balanced and appropriate institutional perspective on the relationships between athletics and academics, and where there is strong, solid collegiate leadership, from presidents and provosts, athletics directors and coaches, steadily affirming that productive link: when institutions lose that good sense, and/or leaders do not seek and reward it, positive results are unlikely, and, as we all know, negative ones can take their place.

Let's start with the two easy ones. Everyone declares that participation in sports teaches young people (and older ones, too) the value of teamwork and the value of hard work. Who would not agree with this declaration? I certainly do. But we might want to pause a while, and see if perhaps there is a slightly more nuanced way to think about these two kinds of lessons.

**Teamwork.** It is a truism that much of the work of contemporary culture is teamwork. Lone scientists hatching astounding discoveries in isolated labs, brilliant corporate executives making millions on their own, solitary medical practitioners, these are all probably pretty anachronistic. Even we English teachers have to cooperate on some things, some times (although you might not know it). Athletics teaches individuals how to work in groups. Of course, this quality varies from sport to sport. The teamwork component of a volleyball or basketball team is more than a little more ambitious than that of a wrestler or cross-country runner. Note that many faculty, across the disciplines, have discovered that it is valuable to divide their classes sometimes into small groups, and have them work on class activities together. All human beings are, finally, prisoners of our solitary consciousnesses, pounding on the walls of our individual cells trying to make connections with each other (as my favorite 20<sup>th</sup> century author Vladimir Nabokov reminds us). Studying history or literature or psychology or evolution helps; so does playing volleyball.

**Hard work.** All of us want our students to understand that easy accomplishments are often cheap; that hard work is often necessary to do things that are truly valuable and important. Athletics certainly requires and rewards working hard. And, it is a particular kind of work: persistent and consistent labor. No one gets to be a good distance runner by working out once every couple of weeks, no matter how hard. No good pitcher goes very long without throwing the ball. Just as a violinist or a dancer or even a reader has to practice, practice, practice, so too do athletes. Here, we should remember the lesson of Milo of Crotona, well known to all college jocks. Milo, you'll recall, was the ancient Greek wrestler who trained for the Olympics by picking up and carrying a baby bull every day for the same distance, for four years. At the end of the four years, and in time for the next Olympic competition, the bull was huge, and Milo was powerful. Athletics teaches that persistence trumps irregular flashes of brilliance or labor.

Three more lessons from college sports.

**Talent diversity.** College athletics reminds all of us that very few people are good at everything, and almost everyone is good at something. I taught a fitness class once, when I was Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at Guilford, and it was an important revelation to me that students I knew from the classroom as "quick" were sometimes "slow" on the track, and some students who were not very sharp at literary analysis were very smart indeed when it came to physical conditioning. Chaucer writes that "God clepeth folke to him in sundry wise, and everich hath of God a proper yifte." (God calls folks to him in various ways, and everyone has from god his own gift.) Remember, even Michael Jordan wasn't much of a baseball player.

**Human Capabilities - Part 1.** Athletics can teach us all – athletes or spectators, the amazing capabilities of the human creature. It can be astonishing and inspirational to witness the strength of a linebacker, the leaping ability of a volleyball spiker, the endurance and speed of a runner. The athlete who is willing to work hard and persistently learns what she is capable of, and it is often far more than she would have dared believe. Those of us who watch her grow and improve from year to year are

equally awestruck as she reaches higher and higher goals, which we might never have imagined possible a few years ago. Liberal learning should teach us admiration of humanity. Shakespeare or Austin's brilliance with character and language; Einstein's expansion of our understanding of the way the universe works; Beethoven's music and Michelangelo's art; Darwin's and Goodall's insights into the structure of life – to grasp and understand and revere what women and men are capable of is one of humankind's joys. Sports helps.

**Human Capabilities – Part 2.** And yet, if you'll permit a literature teacher's love of ambiguity, perhaps the ultimate lesson of college sports is that all human capabilities are, finally, limited. One of the key lessons of Shakespeare's most majestic tragedy, King Lear, is that, at the end, each of us is only a "poor, bare, forked animal." Next to British Renaissance drama, athletics is the very best teacher of this lesson. In this imperfect and broken world, even the best of us are ultimately frail and flawed. As we admire Roger Bannister for breaking the four minute mile barrier, we realize that nobody will ever run it in three. Nobody is ever going to pitch nothing but no hitters. It was wonderful to see 41 year old Dana Torres in the Beijing Olympics, but she won't be back in London, or certainly not in Chicago. Our college athletes test how much they can do, how good they can get, and it is remarkable what they can achieve. But it is even more important that they learn the great, tragic and wonderful liberal lesson of our common flawed humanity. There is nothing we can learn in college more important than our human nature: that we can achieve great things, and that we will always be imperfect. Indeed, I think it is only in our recognition of our limits that we can push so close to them as to become only a little lower than the angels. I find that recognition and that push in a great college basketball game, in an all-out finish at a cross-country meet, in a wrestling match or a volleyball game where nobody has anything at all left at the end. College sports, like the Canterbury Tales and King Lear teach us what we are: that's enough.

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