

Professional Sports: A Theater of Moral Drama

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The world of sports bears daily witness to our moral confusion. In the city where I live we nearly called off life altogether in the fall of 1995 as we followed the Seattle Mariners baseball team and their near miraculous string of victories and venture into post-season play for the first time in their nineteen-year history. A couple of months later, in February 1996, we watched as Ken Griffey, Jr., toyed with Mariner management and fans until finally signing a staggering new multimillion dollar contract. It was hard to tell which were louder, shouts of joy or outrage. For a month in the summer of 1995 we followed Cal Ripken's quest for the consecutive game record, rising in standing ovation all across the country to honor Ripken's persistence, decency, and skill. He seemed an embodiment of older, more enduring values. But when winter came the Seattle Seahawks were in court, their training camp padlocked by judge's orders, and their owners fleeing town under cover of darkness like snake oil salesmen. Sports has become a world of heroes and villains, a crucible for many of our society's most vexing moral dilemmas.

Ethicist Jeffrey Stout of Princeton writes, "I figure few things could better prepare my children for the realities of life in our society than being baseball fans. They learn about vicious owners who show no appreciation for the good of the sport. They learn about managers, commissioners, bureaucrats, superstars, agents, markets, racial prejudice, sexist exclusion, the intemperance of drug use, corruption by fame, and insanely unjust salaries.

"Meanwhile they also learn to love the way Don Mattingly swings a bat, to retell stories of moral heroes like Jackie Robinson, to savor the drama of a close game well played, to lose their sense of passing time, and to understand the pleasure that comes from goals sought for their own sake and realized through long and arduous effort."¹

In other words, sports in our society is about good and evil, and is a central theater of moral drama. It is a screen upon which our own moral struggles and dilemmas are projected. My hunch is that sports, for us, plays a role something like that of the theater in classical Greece. Our triumphs, our temptations, our ideals, and our corruption are put on the stage. Put on the stage in such a way that all who care to may look on and comment. What then may be learned about the moral life from watching this drama?

First, that moral life is about a nearly forgotten and little used word, "character." "Character" is the disposition of the moral self acquired through a host of forces and influences. In sports we see character tested, character corrupted, and character which endures despite failure and success. In the drama of the Yankee's Don Mattingly, ice skaters Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding, or the travail of a pitcher like Randy Johnson, we see our own flaws, struggles, and occasional triumphs of character.

During the fall 1995 playoffs between the New York Yankees and the Seattle Mariners we had the chance to observe fans playing the role of the chorus in this moral drama. Each time that Don Mattingly, the Yankee's all-star first baseman, would come to bat the fans would chant, "Don/nee, Base/ball," over and over again. While the taste of fans can be fickle and harsh, this time it seemed they were correctly naming something. When they chanted "Don/nee, Base/ball," they were paying tribute not

only to a good player, even an excellent player, but to one who loved the game *for its own sake* and who bowed to its *internal standards of excellence*. It appeared that Mattingly played not primarily for the rewards of money and fame, but for the love of baseball and to attain excellence according to its rules. Mattingly is not unique or alone in this devotion, this purity of heart, but he has pursued these goals in the shadow of, and to some considerable extent in spite of, the owner of the Yankees, George Steinbrenner.

Of course, the great thing about Steinbrenner, as the Seattle Mariner's announcer, Dave Niehaus, said in a perhaps unguarded moment during the 1995 playoffs is "this is a guy you love to hate." But it's true. No one would ever think to chant "George/ee, Base/ball." Why not? Because, even though Steinbrenner has owned the Yankees for two decades, he has made it clear that his primary commitment is not to the game or its particular forms of excellence. His commitment is to the external goods it may bring—prestige, status, wealth, winning. This crystallizes a moral challenge we see everywhere today. Do we do what we do because it is *good in itself*, intrinsically good, or because of the rewards, the extrinsic goods, it brings?

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Every poet and musician and artist, but for Grace, is drawn away from the love of the thing he tells to the love of telling it, till, down in Deep Hell, they cannot be interested in God at all, but only in what they say about him."² This is a kind of theological parallel to the moral challenge we see in sports, the artists loving their telling more than the God of which they would tell.

Whether we are musicians or preachers or doctors or baseball players, integrity and joy mean the love of thing in itself—be it music, worship, healing, or baseball—more even than my performance of it, or of the rewards it brings.

In his marvelous study, *The Lost City, A Study of the Forgotten Virtues of Community in Chicago in the 1950's*, Alan Ehrenhalt writes, "that there was such a thing as sin, and that it applied to individual people in their everyday lives, was a core belief that the Chicagoans and the Americans of the 1950s largely held, and that we have largely lost.

"The ability to live decently in such a world, to resist the dangers of self-indulgence and the moral shortcuts was summed up in a single word: *character*. People with character not only kept their word to others, but possessed the discipline to choose long-term goods over short-term gratification. Character was something nearly everyone understood. Only in the following generation did it become an obsolete idea."³

By chanting "Don/nee, Base/ball," the fans were recognizing perceived character and one who loved the thing, the game and the skills of baseball and its internal standards of excellence, more even than his playing of it or its financial rewards.

Part of the reason that this drama is so compelling for us is that it is one we live every day. Do we encourage our kids, do the schools encourage our kids, to go for the grade or for the learning? One hopes there is not usually a choice to be made, but more often than we may wish to admit there is. Do I counsel my son to go ahead and take calculus in his senior year of high school, knowing that he, with math aptitude not unlike his father's, will probably do well to get a "C"? Or do I nudge him toward an easier class, without much challenge, but with a sure "A"? Do I, in the practice of ministry, disorder my loves, placing personal success before God?

In the movie, *Philadelphia*, the story of a lawyer who has AIDS, the young

attorney is terminated by his law firm's partners who fear associating the firm with AIDS. They do not, however, wish to say that is why they are terminating him, so they set him up to look incompetent. He brings suit against his former firm to regain his job. On the witness stand he is asked, "why do you want your job with the firm back? After all you have received a generous severance package and you are not well?" With a voice made halting both by emotion and illness he answers "I love the law. I love the law." At some level we know that all the professions rest on a devotion to standards of excellence and to a love of the good that surpassed our love for ourselves or for the extrinsic rewards. Indeed, some would argue that this is what it means to be a professional. It is what Kierkegaard called "purity of heart," which was not a sexual term. It refers to wholeness, to unity of being, to integrity.

In sports we see the drama of character and integrity and of rightly ordered and disordered loves made personal. However much the language of sin and character have fallen into disuse in our society and even in the church, something about this rings true, and may account, at least in part, for the continuing appeal and place of professional sports in our society. Here we can see the moral drama enacted.

There is a second thing we can learn from the world of sports about moral life and moral confusion today. The moral fault line in our society has something to do with the pervasive influence of the market. When Ken Griffey, Jr., signed a new four-year contract for thirty-four million dollars, some members of my family thought it was outrageous. They may well have been right. Yet Griffey got what the market would bear. And there was an interesting mixed message in his behavior and in the negotiation process. Griffey sought and relied upon the counsel of his father, a different sort of figure than an agent. And after the counselling with his father, Griffey opted for loyalty to a franchise and town in which he has played his entire career. To the disgust in our family I defended Griffey saying that he, at least, wasn't playing the game the way that, say, Rickey Henderson has, hiring himself out to the highest bidder and current World Series contender. Griffey's decision struck an interesting balance between two factors often in conflict in today's world, the market and community.

We know this conflict too. We struggle and face moral dilemmas at the intersection of the market and community. Recently I was planning a visit to my father, who has Alzheimer's disease. Before going I suggested to my father and my mother that they might schedule his next appointment with his neurologist to coincide with my visit, so that I might go to the doctor with them. They did that. When the day came and the three of us went to the clinic we were shown, in the usual fashion, into an examining room.

Before coming we had prepared a list of five questions. After the doctor did his exam of my father, I began to ask our questions. After the second it was evident that the doctor was uncomfortable and distracted. He was fidgety, and stole a look at his watch. As I asked our next question, he interrupted and said, "I am sorry, but this appointment was scheduled for only fifteen minutes. If you want to talk much longer, you will need to schedule an additional appointment." Is something wrong with that? This doctor had, no doubt, been told that such efficiencies were necessary. But at the very least, it is clear that market forces are bearing heavily on health care, and almost every other area of life, creating moral challenges for people who experience the institutions they thought would protect them from such pressures often instead being

their source.

The difference, says Alan Ehrenhalt, between the 1950s and the 1990s is to a large extent the difference between a society in which market forces challenged traditional values and a society in which market forces have triumphed over traditional values.⁴

When the Seattle Seahawks threatened to walk out on a lease, or when the Cleveland Browns made plans to leave Cleveland, we were both transfixed and offended by such realities in the world of sports because we expect sports to reflect the values of community, of people more than of the market. That they no longer do, or even pretend to, may be the modern equivalent of the canary who's dead in the coal mine.

And yet sports, and life, continue to hold promise as well. The Jackie Robinson's and the Cal Ripken's promise that ordinary lives can be lives of moral character and integrity, devoted to excellence that transcends the self. Whether the game be baseball, music, medicine, law, teaching, or ministry, it too is a theater for the moral life. A moral life, a life of character, is not easy. But by the grace of God it is yet possible.

Notes

¹ Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 276.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, quoted in the Bulletin of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music (Fall 1995).

³ Alan Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City* (New York: Basic Books), 38-39.

⁴ Ibid., 24-25.