

COMPETITION WITH GRANDMA AND THE SAINTS

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Abstract

Competition often reveals the ugly side of being human. Many athletes seek glory through competition and their competitive behaviors often reflect prideful and dishonorable intentions. Educators should view sport as a context in which valuable lessons for life may be taught. The truly satisfying athletic experience is not achieved through victory alone. It is achieved when individuals skillfully compete while exhibiting humility and honor. It is the responsibility of educators to actively teach more than skills and strategy in sport. They must convey to their charges that competing with honor and humility provides satisfaction in all of life's competitions.

Keywords: Competition, Humility, Honor, Moral Character, Victory, Defeat, Winning, Losing, Athletics, Sport, Educators, Coaches

Competition with Grandma and the Saints

As a collegiate coach, athletic director and former competitive athlete, I have had the opportunity to both witness and participate in countless athletic contests. Often, what I observe and experience causes me to reflect. During two important competitions with conference rivals I observed my athletes to engage in dishonorable and disrespectful behavior as the prospect of defeat closed in and ultimately consumed them. I grieved after the losses, not because we were defeated, but because of the negative and harmful actions I observed. Competition became something ugly, not what it could have been and not what it should have been.

Uncharacteristically the losses bothered me for days. My continued reflection yielded the real cause of my angst. I lamented that the lessons of competition I had learned as a child went undiscovered by the athletes whom I coached and loved. I mourned, for I had failed to actively teach to my athletes what I had learned as a child.

I have been competitive for as long as I can remember. The realization was made as a youth while playing Dominos, Yahtzee, Rummy and a host of other games with my Grandmother at her kitchen table. Win or lose, I looked forward with great anticipation to the next contest. The memories of competitions with Grandma and the lessons learned are indelibly stamped in my mind. Ultimately I learned that competing with honor and humility was the means to a truly satisfying competitive outcome, however, many small lessons contributed to this realization.

Competition with Grandma

During competitions with Grandma, I learned the rules of the various games we played. Without rules, there could be no game. Rules brought shared understanding and

consistency to our contests. I also grew to appreciate that superior strategy was needed to maximize the potential for victory. Strategy used within the context and confines of the rules justly increased the probability for success. Without rules, there could be no contest. Doing what was possible within the confines of the letter and spirit of the rules was deemed appropriate.

It became plain to me that I needed Grandmother, because without her there could be no contest. Victory could not be sought nor could I be tested without an opponent. I found that I could not think about cheating her without breaking into an uncomfortable sweat. The belief that cheating was unethical seemed to be hardwired into my psyche. To cheat would be to do wrong to someone I needed and loved. That it was a silly game did not matter.

Chance entered into the outcome of our contests. At times it made the difference between winning and losing. The outcome of each contest could not be controlled completely by her or by me. Rituals were conducted in hope of increasing the odds of getting the right cards or numbers. Though the rituals were an enjoyable part of the experience, I never believed they actually had any impact upon the outcome of our contests. Blowing air onto the dice grasped within my hand would not guarantee that the desired numbers would appear. I determined that during competitions I was, to some degree, the pawn of chance. Chance could not be controlled, but simply understood and its consequences accepted.

It became apparent that if one were to truly compete, giving up and quitting could never be an option. At times, it would seem that I was so far behind Grandma that defeat was inevitable. Over time, however, I became convinced that if I played with

commitment to the conclusion of the contest, seemingly insurmountable leads could be overcome. It happened once. Why couldn't it happen again? Winning in such a way was indescribably satisfying; in fact, exhilarating. Though defeat often seemed inevitable, hope urged me on. It seemed wrong to give up on hope, to stop trying.

Grandma was knowledgeable and skilled in the games we played. It took a long time and many contests but I was finally able to best her that very first time. With age and experience I was able to defeat her more often. I learned that anyone could be defeated in time, given practice, knowledge of the game, the employment of strategy and happy circumstance. The winner could not really be a winner forever.

Part of the allure our competitions offered was the opportunity to be with her. She was someone I loved. She reciprocated the emotion. When my insignificant victories were achieved, she demonstrated excitement and satisfaction in my successes while at the same time conveying disappointment in her losses. Our celebrations and disappointments were short lived because there would be other games to play. The seeds of sportsmanship took root and grew within me as did the ability to understand and accept the temporal and fleeting nature of victory and defeat.

There was really nothing finite about competition. There was more to life than the games we played. My value and worth as a person was not defined by the successes or failures experienced in our contests. Competitive perspective was gained.

Winning was the goal of every contest, but I appreciated that there was something special about simply playing. Intensity, focus and all of my energies were invested in each event. If I was not to give my all, why bother playing? The contest was the sole focus of my existence for a brief respite offering an escape from boredom, from school,

from chores. The perceived importance of some competitions brought with it butterflies of excitement and a rush of adrenaline. It did not matter that it was simply a game being played at Grandma's table.

Outside of the friendly confines of Grandma's kitchen, it became clear to me that not everyone had the same outlook toward competition as I. They competed differently than I did. Some kids did not put everything into their play and others took games so seriously that they made the competitive environments negative. Some competitors gloated over victories and belittled teammates and opponents while others were compassionate. Some individuals would cheat, lie and steal to win, while others faithfully adhered to the rules. Some people argued for every point and conceivable advantage and cried over losses while others acted as though the competition was meaningless. Some competitors cheerfully told stories of how they intentionally harmed an opponent whereas others avoided any physical contact for fear of causing injury to themselves or their opponents. Those who engaged in dishonorable and prideful behavior I deemed to be quitters, glory hogs, crybabies, punks, or cheaters. Something, I was sure, was wrong with them.

As the years passed, the games I played with Grandmother were less frequent as distance separated us and as life took more of my time. As I competed more often with others and busied myself with the concerns of my existence, Alzheimer's took Grandmother's memory and eventually her life as the sun erases the morning mist on a summer's day. Yet, I recall the lessons of competition learned so long ago. They stayed with me through decades of competitive events. I learned that satisfying competitions should be characterized by the virtues of humility and honor.

Competition with the Saints

The motivation for this essay was a series of losses to the Saints in our conference (St. Mary's University and St. Edward's University) on successive weekends. During the losses to the Saints, my players uncharacteristically yelled and cursed at each other because of errors that were made. Cutting daggers were thrown from evil glances. Blame was placed and not accepted. The decisions of officials were questioned and emotionally denied. In the locker room there was finger pointing. There were accusations of lack of commitment and lack of intensity on the court. There was yelling and there were tears. Dishonorable actions abounded. Arrogance was displayed. I was saddened and literally nauseated by the display.

There have been many losses in my thirty-six year coaching career. The ones that have caused me the most agitation, and what I can only describe as grief, are those in which the team did not compete with what I considered to be a proper perspective. The competitions with the Saints were marred by dishonorable and disrespectful behavior. It seemed that my athletes had an impoverished sense of what it means to compete.

It became clear to me that I had failed as an educator to convey to my athletes what it means to compete and how one should seek satisfaction through the competitive experience. As is true with many educators, the deeper meaning of my subject matter went untaught. The athletes had learned that glory and victory were the real value of sport. I did little to teach them otherwise.

What Does it Mean to Compete?

“Compete” is derived from the Latin *com-petitio*. Literally translated, it means to question together, to strive together (Hyland, 1978). In a contest, opponents seek victory

together. An opponent is needed for competition to occur. I cannot seek in sport without an opponent. You are required for me to seek. I am required for you to seek. We can only seek victory, excellence and satisfaction in sport together. In competitive team sports, those who are members of a team need each other to achieve satisfaction through the competitive experience.

The term “compete” may also bring to mind individuals who are willing to do anything and everything possible to win. Given this orientation toward competition, an impoverished view of sport is evidenced and a diminished sports experience results for all involved in a contest. The true spirit of competition is destroyed (Feezell, 1986). Concern for opponents and for teammates does not exist. The competitive experience and the fellow competitors’ health and state of mind are disregarded. Taken to the extreme, brutalization occurs in sport when the importance of victory is exaggerated (Schmitz, 1979). Humanity is sacrificed upon the altar of victory. Individuals fail to seek together. They seek at the expense of one another.

Those who believe victory will satisfy find that even when it is achieved, hunger still ravages their existence. The appetite for victory is insatiable. To the misguided, victory becomes more important than the humanity they lay asunder and trample upon as they endlessly and hopelessly seek fulfillment, significance, and peace.

Competing with Humility and Honor

Values including teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, perseverance, and work ethic were described as components of *social character* by Rudd (2005). In capitalistic societies, these values and their ensuing behaviors are believed to assist individuals in the achievement of goals such as wealth or success. *Moral character* is exhibited when

values such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, compassion, and respect are evidenced. Unlike values associated with social character, those associated with moral character have an interpersonal focus and are critical to peaceful human relationships (Lumpkin, Stoll & Belier, 1999; Rokeach, 1973).

In competition, an individual's mettle is tested (Delattre, 1975). In the midst of the test provided through competition, sportsmanship (moral character) is exhibited when the athlete performs under pressure, maintains self control, exhibits quiet composure in defeat, and is modest in victory (Keating, 1964). The athlete holding a superior orientation toward competition demonstrates excellence of moral character by engaging in behavior that is both humble and honorable. It is the place of the educator to guide young athletes to this realization.

Following are examples of sport behavior reflective of the humble and the proud, the honorable and dishonorable. Coaches may use the examples to illustrate behavior that leads to either a satisfying or impoverished sport experience.

Humility

“Humility requires an understated though reasonable estimation of one's power and status” (McNamee, 2002, p. 49). Humility allows one to accept the status bestowed upon them by others yet restrains them from inflating their importance, power or position. Athletes possessing a spirit of humility do not seek glory or fame. They do not willingly engage in behavior that violates rules and regulations and fuels conflict.

The proud overestimate their status and power. They exhibit arrogance. The need to validate and/or maintain power and status through sport inclines them to adopt a win at all cost orientation. Justice, fairness and other values associated with moral character are

deemed to be impediments to the achievement of victory. They are disregarded and cast aside.

The humble cannot disparage the performance of team mates, for they realize that they are themselves imperfect. The proud are prone to yell at others who are performing poorly and blame others for experienced defeat. They fail to acknowledge their own performance flaws, thus demonstrating their lack of understanding and inability to recognize truth.

The proud feel entitled to special treatment. Hubris reigns. The sport environment becomes ripe for the germination of dissent. The humble do not expect special treatment, for they believe others *ultimately* to be their equal.

When humility is lacking, it is difficult for many to commit to their designated role on a team. The proud often express dissatisfaction when assigned to a position which does not increase the frequency with which they will be able to demonstrate their superiority and importance. They are disgruntled if they do not play as much as they deem to be appropriate. In a team setting, not everyone can play the most desirable position and if victory is a goal, not all members of a team will be able to assist equally in its achievement. Humility is required to accept and perform one's role on the team.

The proud focus upon their performance and are not concerned with the achievement of their teammates. They complain vociferously if they are not given the ball often enough and believe such malfeasance harms the team's performance. The proud are unable to fathom that their selfishness is often an impediment to the team's success. The humble understand that it is not their right to complain to coaches or team mates about how they are used within a team's competitive game plan.

Within the team concept, athletes should compete *with* each other for positions and playing time, as opposed to *against* each other. This outlook enhances the potential for positive relationships to develop between team mates. Humility is needed for “stars” to push themselves to greater heights and for the substitutes to accept their role as they work toward improvement.

In a closely contested competitive event, chance can have a profound impact upon the outcome. Athletes possessing a humble spirit are able to acknowledge and whimsically accept this fact. The proud foolishly believe they should be able to control chance and doggedly refuse to recognize its impact upon competitive success and failure. Chance torments them and laughs at their folly.

Those who value moral character compete with a spirit of humility. Humility requires athletes to create and accept a realistic assessment of their current abilities and worth to a team. The humble athlete refrains from yelling at and disparaging coaches, officials, teammates or opponents. Humble athletes do not expect special treatment from others and willingly accept their assigned role on the team and within a specific game plan. They work to improve because they realize and accept that they can improve. In doing so, they make good teammates. Finally, the humble athlete understands and accepts that chance affects the outcome of competitions.

Honor

Honor, in conjunction with humility and skilled performance are requisites for the realization of a satisfying athletic experience. For the purposes of the present discussion, honorable behavior is to be thought of as being reflective of moral character. Honorable behavior enhances interpersonal relationships as well as the competitive experience.

Honorable behavior would be considered just, fair, compassionate, responsible and respectful.

The honorable competitor demonstrates respect for opponents, teammates, coaches, and officials. Respectful relationships are honorable relationships. When athletes are disrespectful, their actions cause dissention and strife which pollute the sport environment. Two examples shall serve to illustrate this point. First, in spite of its wide spread use, trash talking can be perceived as disrespectful. When trash talk is considered disrespectful, it can lead to reactive violence. Second, it is not uncommon to see coaches and athletes ejected from contests when they question calls made by officials. Too often, questioning evolves into a challenge of the official's integrity. Foul language and occasional violence erupts. One disrespectful act motivates the next and so on. Disrespectful acts eradicate the promise of goodness sport is capable of cultivating.

Athletes should act justly and fairly in competition. In doing so, they honor their opponent, those who witness the contest, and that which is eternally good and true. When competitors cheat or intentionally harm others in competitive environments, they bring dishonor to their coaches, parents, administrators, fans, and themselves. They act unjustly and unfairly and make the world a crueller place, an uglier place. Competitors cease to seek excellence together. They seek at the expense of others.

Victory in sport should be sought for noble, honorable reasons. When victory in sport is made to be more than a temporal, fleeting event, perspective is lost and the likelihood that one will seek success for selfish and self-serving reasons through dishonorable means is increased. The notoriety, fame and fortune bestowed upon athletes

often lead them to engage in dishonorable behavior in spite of the fact that notoriety and fame are forgotten by others in time. Fortunes do not last forever.

Individuals are known by their actions. The nature of our relationships defines us either positively or negatively in the eyes of others (Hyland, 1978). For how we compete demonstrates who and what we really are (McNamee, 2002). Sport-related actions should enhance an individual's reputation as one who seeks to do good and just deeds in all aspects of life. In a word, they should be honorable. Those who compete with contempt for others will be reviled for their behavior and their reputation will be justifiably sullied.

Athletes honor their opponent when they play to the best of their ability through the conclusion of a contest. Quitting in the midst of a competition is dishonorable. Doing so demonstrates to all that the athlete is concerned only with winning and celebration of the self. At the moment the athlete quits, the opportunity to overcome one's own limitations is lost. The seeking of excellence through competition ceases.

Honor calls for compassion in sport. The compassionate athlete could not intentionally harm an opponent mentally or physically. The dishonorable competitor lacks compassion and can intentionally injure an opponent because victory and personal status is deemed more important than the pain and suffering experienced by the opponent.

In review, the honorable competitor is respectful of others and competes in a just and fair manner. The honorable athlete understands that victory is temporal and fleeting and competes in a way that leads to the creation of a good reputation. This is done not for glory but because it is right to do so. The honorable athlete gives the best effort possible at all times, sees a contest through to its completion and demonstrates compassion.

When athletes compete with a spirit of humility and honor, some of the finest human qualities are illustrated. Hoffman (1999) expounded upon this point superbly:

In spite of what our coaches may tell us, what is highest and finest in our beings is not our capacity to sacrifice and work hard in order to bask in the rewards of long-coveted goals. Rather, our uniqueness as human beings is our capacity to do this and, when the right moment comes, to willingly risk it all to do the right thing. Sport's potential as a civilizing activity – if it ever can be one – is tapped only when we fully immerse ourselves in the fray without yielding to the temptation to gloat when things have gone our way, to seek an eye for an eye, to demean and belittle, to seek social distance between ourselves and those with whom we compete, and in the midst of our victory celebrations not to note of the tears in the eyes of the opponents. (p. 83)

During competition, we find out who we are while in the state of becoming who we shall be (Hyland, 1978). In the heat of competition, what we hold most dear is illuminated for all to see. Competitors demonstrate themselves to be humble and honorable beings or proud and dishonorable beings who value victory above all.

From Grandma to the Saints

Upon reflection, my team's losses to the Saints did not upset me. Losses have been bestowed upon me many times in the past and are sure to be dealt to me in the future. The failure of my team to understand many of the things I learned as a child was the true source of my grief.

My athletes failed to compete as though they were honoring their teammates or the creator to whom they prayed to before the contests. Some played as a means to

glorify themselves and to gratify their egos. Individuals treated teammates disrespectfully in seeking an illusive victory that would be forgotten over time... had it been achieved at all. Though the Saints were on the other side of the net offering us the opportunity to seek excellence together, we chose not to do so. The opportunity lost grieved my spirit.

Over the coming years my athletes and I will experience innumerable contests in life's other arenas. We will compete for jobs, success in business and a host of other ambitions. It is my longing that our performances in life's competitions shall be characterized by excellence in performance and excellence of moral character. It is my supplication that we reflect a spirit of humility and honor as we seek and that we may experience satisfaction through competition in its fullest sense.

Yet I realize that wishes and prayers for goodness and fulfillment in sport are not enough. It is our duty as educators to share with our athletes the keys to a satisfying competitive experience: the virtues of humility and honor. Discussion must be conducted and examples of humble and honorable behavior must be shared. It is our duty as coaches and educators to point out breaches of proper conduct and to discuss both their motivation and undesirable consequences. Goodness and truth will have been served.

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