

Running to Choose: Thoughts on the Ethics of Sport

By Scott Tinley

Runners think football players are stupid. Swimmers are boring, victims of hypnotized black line fever. Lacrosse players have replaced computer-nerds on the geek-of-the-week list. Cyclists are snobs. White men can't jump, hockey dudes have no teeth and rugby players eat their dead. And baseball players? Well, everyone knows they've been on steroids since little league tryouts for the pee-wees.

These jest-full sporting clichés and stereotypes begin as mostly-in-fun interpretations by a collective of players and fans. And even though more than a few of these trait assignments are created as *smack-talk* on the playing fields of sport participation, a place where machismo and ego-propping are rampant, there's a perception of truth hidden in the dark humor. Always is.

Play becomes games which become sport. Competition changes everything. But at the root is always a sense of play, regardless if it's the Olympic Games or the 5K Walk-4-Breath. Sometimes we forget that.

But sport is like that—sometimes straight up, other times confusing and dichotomous. It is serious but fun, rewarding but costly, intrinsic, extrinsic, all about the team and all about the individual. And how we relate to sport is part of how we relate to ourselves.

Maybe that's why we are so good at creating labels in sport—it's one way we relate to our own fears and insecurities—by projecting mostly false and derogatory claims onto another individual or group that we don't understand, don't like or cannot find a way to become a part of. It sucks to be picked last in dodge ball. And so we move to another playground and start funny but damaging rumors about the other kids.

Homophobic? Yep, all pro women golfers are gay. Running hurts too much? It's a mindless sport, too linear, doesn't take any skill at all.

Triathlons? Over-achieving, obsessive-compulsive preeners. What other men would shave their entire bodies and go on national TV in a bikini?

Weight lifters? You call that a sport? It's just a thick-off of oily tanning-salonites. Sure, we can have fun with athlete stereotyping...until we begin to believe them.

Part of the appeal of sport is that it cuts across all boundaries of race, social class, gender, and age barriers. And even though that statement is contested by sport sociologists and researchers armed with supportive data,

for the most part, sport has done far more than many other societal institutions to bring people together, to earn the label of the Great Equalizer. In some ways, the off-handed and colorful ribbing of other competitors has become a part of the culture itself, sometimes a competitive tactic, other times plain old fun. I certainly laughed when a peer said I ran like a girl. Now I wish my times were fast enough to make the Jr. High CIF Finals...for girls.

As sport has become a greater economic force in our society (\$350Billion/year), and levels of participation have risen beyond anyone's wildest dream, so too have the inherent questions and difficulties in determining the effect of sport on the people. If we believe that the benefits far outweigh the costs—and I think as athletes and positive moral beings we must—then how do we react when our stereotypes and preconceived notions come true? What do we do when the reflection of ourselves and our sport in society could use a weekend at the spa, some glitter and rouge to hide the scars? More importantly, how do we begin to understand the increasing ethical dilemmas that correlate to a sports-mad world?

Maybe the easiest way is to accept the fact that sports not only mirror society, but society reflects back on what happens in the stadium and the dirt sandlots of America. They've become inseparable, like government and economic systems of commerce, family and education or any true institution that is deeply entrenched in our way of life and enables our development of values.

When we say we have a problem with childhood obesity in America, we look to sports for a positive solution. When we discover that steroid abuse is rampant in professional athletics and the leagues cannot control their own players, the problem gets kicked upstairs to congress. Mass media looks for programming that will hold our narrowing attention span. And sport becomes one of the last forms of public entertainment where the ending is not known. Sport has taken its place in the realm of Big Brother. And we need to make sure he doesn't become a bully.

So, to study the problem of drug abuse in our schools is to study drug abuse in our locker rooms. To read the headlines and see that corporate giants such as Enron and WorldCom were victims of personal corporate greed is to wonder if there is a comparison to future pro players, kids really, holding out for eight figure contracts. Racial oppression, sexism, violence in sport, cheating...go ahead, pick an issue and try and separate the sport part from the society part from the ethics part. It's nearly impossible, far better to let them overlap like a Venn diagram and look for areas that compliment and support the middle ground.

Decisions of a Sporting Nature

Since the very foundational ideologies in this country have much to do with individualism and self-reliance (you know, Plymouth Rock and Lewis and Clark and all that adventure stuff), when considering ethical decision making, it is hard *not* to look toward the Self, the essence of our being as a guiding force. Individual-sport athletes know this, even if you have to tell them. And though we are social beings that require contact with other humans and are highly influenced by each other, many of our decisions that involve moral judgment begin and end with our understanding of what we believe, how we should act and ultimately, who we are.

It follows then, if we believe that humans are inherently moral people, and that the more we understand ourselves through a never-ending string of experiences and education, the better the chances are that we will reach a certain standard of what is good and right. You would think, anyway.

Those long and lonely runs that we did in preparation for a marathon weren't just good for our endurance base. We might've come home hungry, tired and ready for a nap but we brought back something else—some understanding of things. Maybe it was the decision of whether or not to buy the smaller car or go out with the new office manager. Or maybe you returned knowing that you wanted to go back to school, to be a great painter or to tell your mother you loved her more often. Something clicked and though you tried to put it off to “increased blood flow to the head,” or “time away from the damn phone,” I believe it must have to do with the Self, that ambiguous but omnipotent term, showing itself to you saying, “Here I am, this is us. Now, here's what I think about your indecision.” It's what Dr. Edward Shea, a long time university professor and Master's swimming world record holder calls, “self-realization as the seat of the soul.”

But what happens when one part of our Self comes up against another part? What's at stake when the opportunity to fudge our golf scores, for instance, because *everyone else is doing it, it's only in fun and the others will think higher of me if I achieve a lower score*? The Self desires camaraderie and a sense of belonging. If we perceive that a little white lie about a little white ball will earn us a tall dark reward, we can justify it through relativism—the idea that all truths are relative and that nothing, including an ethical basis for morality, can be absolute. It's to be expected, like two dogs pulling in opposite directions on the same leash. So, are we expected to keep running until the answer comes around, until we meet

Forrest Gump on a long stretch of empty highway in Hastings, Nebraska, wait for his bearded-nod in our direction and know that all is right with the world? Or should we find a Buddhist monastery in Tibet, sit on top of a mountain? And wait, hoping for a bolt of lightening-style revelation because you seem to be missing quite a bit of training while you sit cross-legged?

I don't know. I don't have the answer and am not about to do either.

But I know that sport, maybe more than my parents, teachers, books and pet rocks has given me the opportunity to know who I am. In turn I can link many of my decisions of consequence and moral judgment directly to that self-realization that might've come at the twenty mile mark of a major event or limping home from an easy three miler.

It does help to open the pathways in our minds; to know that humans are mostly a good and morally-acting species of life, especially when we consider the consequences of our actions in some utilitarian notion. Cheating on our weekend golf score will not get us banned from the course forever or damned to hell for eternity (maybe I'm wrong here and that's why I refuse to keep score). But it's a violation of the rules which makes it cheating, regardless of the impact on others. Some players won't stand for it. The Absolutist, you could call them. They believe that there is never a time or acceptable condition for failing to be true to the game and its written dogma. The relativist will say that it was only in fun, that he was going to come clean as soon as the highest scoring player had paid for the first round of beers at the 19th hole.

In between is you, the athlete, who has to make up your mind what you believe because that's part of who you are. And even though we are all molded by our backgrounds and experiences, if our basis for moral reasoning is impartial, consistent and reflective of all that we know, then we stand a better chance of reducing the irrationality that comes with internal conflict.

Common Sense and a 10K

Thinking about sport and society, ethical decisions and all this stuff about the Self can send any regular athlete running for cover, not to find answers but to get away from all these questions. Heaven knows there is enough flippant, new-age health-guru types spouting the cure for (enter disease here). All for a low, low price—operators are standing by. What is a sensible weekend jock to do? Their goal is a sub-forty 10k, not the meaning of life.

Nothing, really. Just let things happen—don't over-train, under-train or close your heart to all the good that may come by keeping an open mind. It's like trying to coach a world class athlete—you don't need to tell them what to do so much as you need to remind them what not to do. Of course, they know better. That's one of the reasons they're so good—that intuitive feel for how to prepare their body has always been there. But as their career evolves, so too does their wants, needs, desires and sense of Self. There are external pressures that come from coaches, sponsors, media and their Aunt Mabel. This is the two dogs running in opposite directions. The coach becomes the conscience, an external Self reminding the athlete what they are *supposed* to be doing. And it works better if the coach knows the athlete as a person.

The individual trying to run 6.2 miles for the first time has a coach named common sense. And if he's listened to that coach and allowed them to train him with a degree of intuition and feedback based on every run, every night of aching legs and every time he has to make a decision that affects more than just his own 10k-world, he too will stand a better chance of making the right decision.

Besides, it's not the cheating golfers who give the sport a bad name, it's those shelf-belly'd, lime-green-pants-and-white-shoes-wearing-duffers who take five hours to play a round that ruin what could be a perfectly worthless game. If I was forced to play golf I'd probably cheat on my taxes as well.

Golf courses: those well-groomed fairways just right for a tempo run and you have to dodge the white balls, white lies and marshals in quiet white carts that can sneak up on you. What's so fair about that way? That's really what this is all about, what's at the core of our society's problems—runners should be allowed on golf courses. It's entirely unethical to ban them. I'd even go against my true nature and wear lime green running shorts if I could do sprints on the 14th hole at Pebble Beach. I know this because I run. C'mon guys. I'd replace my divots. It's the moral thing to do.

And if not, I'm not above the occasional trespass. Is that unethical, justified in my mind by relativism and the temptations of an early morning empty stretch of long green grass? No doubt.

I learned this from being a runner.

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