The Philosophical Athlete
The Philosophical Athlete

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CAROLINA ACADEMIC PRESS
Durham, North Carolina
To My Students
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Preface

What Is a Philosophical Athlete?

The concept of a philosophical athlete goes back to ancient Greece and a young wrestler named Plato who would go on to be counted among the greatest thinkers of all time. Plato liked to describe philosophical dialogue in terms of wrestling moves and strategies.\(^1\) To him, and many others in ancient Greece, the philosophical struggle for truth was absolutely akin to the athletic struggle for victory. Sport and philosophy were for Plato, as they are for this book, the twin pillars of education.

So it’s not merely coincidence that western philosophy and competitive athletics have a common origin. Ancient Greek society provides a real-world model for how the synthesis of sport and philosophy can fuel the pursuit of personal excellence (aretē) and the dynamic, thriving happiness the Greeks called eudaimonia. Education was for them, as it is for us, aimed at achieving a good and happy life. The problem is that in modern society we’ve retained our athletic programs but lost sight of the connection between education, excellence, and happiness.

Of course, few modern athletes are more than vaguely aware of their connection to Plato and the ideals of ancient Greece. As a collegiate cyclist churning out lonely miles in the hill country around Charlottesville, Virginia, I thought little about such matters—beyond their obvious connection to the Olympic games. For me, cycling was more than an escape from the books and lecture halls of the university, it provided a formidable challenge—a set of tangible standards by which I could test my personal mettle.

I dreamt, like so many others, of an Olympic medal.

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1. See, for example, Euthydemus 277d.
But as I pedaled along, imagining myself atop the Olympic podium, head bowed to receive a cold disc of gold, my visions were less about the medal than about the “I” capable of winning it. The real task was to create the Olympian self, to cultivate the virtues—the discipline, the courage, the self-knowledge—I believed all Olympians had.

Somehow I sensed that happiness would come not from the wealth or adoration victories can bring, but from being the kind of person who is capable of winning in the first place. On those long painful climbs or the cold wet mornings when I knew others stayed in bed, I hoped ultimately to become the kind of person who deserved a medal—this much more than the medal itself.

Now, as a middle-aged college professor who never did stand upon that Olympic podium, I can nevertheless say that sport brought me a long way toward being the kind of self I hoped would win a medal. Looking back at my early athletic career through the lens of my academic training, I now see the connections to Platonic ideals, Aristotelian virtue-ethics, and Stoic self-creation. I can say I was a philosophical athlete before I understood Plato, or the Greek conceptions of excellence, education, and happiness.

I can also say that, at the time, I felt alone as a philosophical athlete. People understand the goal of an Olympic medal, college scholarship, or professional career, but no one seemed to fathom the sheer beauty of conquering a challenge and experiencing, if only for a moment, the dynamic perfection we so doggedly seek.

Even athletes avoid talking about such moments among themselves. It’s easier not to deviate publicly from what one is expected to say. So I kept my personal thoughts about sport and the intoxicating struggle for excellence to myself. Professors couldn’t understand my devotion to sport and coaches derided my emphasis on academics. I felt like I was the only person in the world who saw the connection.

It wasn’t until I began teaching a course in the subject that I realized I was far from alone in my philosophical approach to sport. Reflected in my students’ eyes (many of whom are active athletes harboring the same lofty goals I once did) I see the desire for personal excellence shine through the frustration of being asked to articulate their reasons for participating.

Initial responses to the question ‘Why sport?’ cluster around extrinsic rewards such as wealth or admiration from others. Students cite their scholarships, hopes for professional careers, or desire to please parents, coaches, and peers as their reasons for playing sport. As the
class wears on, however, they talk more freely about such intrinsic rewards as self-knowledge, individual accomplishment through hard work, and personal confidence.

Obviously not every student who takes my class ends up a philosophical athlete, but nearly all gain a healthy perspective on the practice to which they devote so much of their time and energy.

I am writing this book in the hope that many more can benefit from taking a philosophical approach to sport. After taking my class, students often end their post high school hiatus from sport. Others persist past collegiate team-sports to begin individual athletic activities such as running, swimming, or cycling.

Misguided motivations such as wealth, fame, or pleasing Mom and Dad sputter in the high school and college years as our childhood dreams fade and the reality of adulthood sets in. But a philosophical athlete focuses on the intrinsic rewards of sport such as self-knowledge, ethical virtue, and learning to work with others as a team. These rewards pay off endlessly in terms of useful living skills and personal happiness.

This book will try to cultivate the philosophical perspective that empowers sport to enhance life. The philosophical athlete knows that the greatest opponent is the self, the greatest challenge personal excellence, and the greatest reward true happiness. By taking a philosophical approach to sport, athletes of all ages, shapes, and sizes can reclaim the educational value of athletics as it was championed in ancient Greece by such great thinkers as Plato, the wrestler.
Acknowledgments

I can only mention a few of the many who have helped me with this book. Thanks, first of all, to my advisor Gareth B. Matthews, who encouraged me to develop my first course on philosophy and sport, and kudos to the students in those courses who worked with me to develop, and challenged me to communicate, these concepts. Thanks also to Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa, for providing the support necessary to complete the manuscript, and to my students and colleagues there who offered their criticism and expertise. In addition to Matthews, I am grateful to R. Scott Kretchmar, Lillian J. López, Bruce Forbes, and Jan Hodge, for their helpful comments on the manuscript. I am also indebted to Lynn Kogelmann for her caring assistance through the entire project. Finally, special thanks go to my husband, Larry Theobald, for his generosity, patience, and support.