The Philosophical Athlete

The Philosophical Athlete

SECOND EDITION

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To my students

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Preface to the Second Edition

The premise of this book is that thoughtful participation in sport can make us better persons.

It is a claim doubted by many because they see so much evidence against it. First of all, famous athletes who are not good people come to mind. The cyclist Lance Armstrong, for example, praised in the first edition of this book, has since been unmasked as a sociopath and fraud. Some social scientific studies have also claimed that participation in competitive sports undermines moral sensibilities.[1] The oft-cited poll among Olympic hopefuls suggesting that they would gladly take a dangerous and illegal drug likely to kill them within ten years as long as it would guarantee a gold medal, showcases the kind of distorted value-system sports seem to foster. In general, there is a perception that the pursuit of athletic victory entails leaving morality behind.

Those of us who connect virtue and victory are considered pie-in-the-sky idealists, to be patted on the head and left on the playgrounds, where we belong. Real success in sport, on this view, requires ruthlessness and is measured in hard cash, not soft ideals.

My response to this is that ideals matter even more than fame and fortune. It is false to claim that those who envision sport—including top-level competition—as a means of personal development somehow miss the "reality" of sport. Those who see sport as a means to profit and glory are still guided by ideals, they are just different ideals from those that guide athletes seeking to improve themselves personally.

1. For example, Stoll and Beller (2000).

The "reality" of cheats like Lance Armstrong, ill-behaved student-athletes, and unscrupulous millionaire champions cannot replace the enduring ideals of sport, which, in Platonic terms, are even more real. The ugly "realities" of sport simply fall short of such ideals; they signal sport's frequent failure to live up to its potential as an edifying human activity. It is "reality" that is failing in these cases, not ideals.

Meanwhile, the enduring ideals of sport quietly guide the participation of many athletes, who do become better persons because of it. The enduring ideals of sport also guide many administrators, organizers, officials, and coaches, whose daily actions make sport itself better.

The disquieting "realities" of modern sport emerge when its ideals are ignored, denied, or exploited as false cover for ulterior motives. The improvement of modern sport as an enriching human activity depends on recognition of its enduring ideals, and this depends on both an individual and a collective understanding of those ideals. I think that sport itself is the best instructor of its own ideals, but athletes need to learn how to listen.

The purpose of this book is to make current and former athletes aware of what sport has already taught them, and to enable them to benefit personally from the practice of sport in the future. It exposes the lessons of the sports experience, starting from the most personal and expanding out to its social and political dimensions. It underlines what sport can teach us about being human and about interacting with other human beings. And it reveals those enduring ideals that enable sport to be a force for human good at the individual, community, and even global levels.

The task of improving sport's "reality" is ultimately up to every athlete willing to practice sport philosophically.

Preface to the First Edition

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 become one of the greatest thinkers of all time. Plato understood philosophical dialogue in terms of wrestling moves and strategies, he set up his school in a gymnasium, and he prescribed athletic contests as preparation for advanced study and community leadership.[1] To him, and to 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 in ancient Greece.[2] Greco-Roman 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, Vir-

1. For a summary, see Reid (2016) "Plato the Gymnasiarch."

2. It may be the origin of science as well, see Reid (2009) "Sport, Religion, and the Scientific Spirit in Ancient Olympia."

ginia, I thought little about such matters—beyond their obvious connection to the Olympic games. For me, being a cyclist 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.

But as I pedaled along, imagining myself atop the Olympic podium, bowing my head to receive a cold disc of gold, my visions were less about the medal than about the "I" capable of winning it. I wasn't imagining how I would look from the outside, but how it would feel on the inside to be an Olympic victor. 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 such a victory might 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-mastery. 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.

Many athletes live for such moments, but rarely talk about them, even among themselves. It is 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 interpreted my emphasis on academics as a lack of athletic commitment. 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 the reasons for their devotion.

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 the desire to please parents, coaches, and peers as their main reasons for playing sport. As the semester progresses, however, they begin 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 philosophical athletes persist because they focus 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 continuously in terms of useful living skills and personal happiness.

This book will try to cultivate the philosophical perspective that empowers sport to enhance our lives. 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.

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