WHY WINNING MATTERS

Michael W. Austin

> *Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing.*
>
> Vince Lombardi (quoting Red Sanders)

> *The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered, but to have fought well.*
>
> The Olympic Creed

These two statements reflect two very different approaches to sport. The Lombardi quote reflects the view that we should take a win-at-all-costs approach. By contrast, the Olympic Creed includes the idea that there is something more important in sport than victory. Perhaps the Olympic Creed is correct, and Lombardi mistaken. Perhaps the value of winning is found primarily in its potential to foster both athletic and moral excellence, while the overvaluing of victory for its own sake suffers from several deficiencies as an approach to sport (and to life).

The Downside of the Pursuit of Victory

First, a win-at-all costs mentality is not conducive to a flourishing human life. Former National Basketball Association Hall of Fame player and coach Bob Cousy talks about this when recounting his own experiences in sport. In his book, *The Killer Instinct*, Cousy states that

> In any competition I had almost an uncontrollable need to win. This killer instinct had brought me success as a player and coach, but it also tempted

doi:10.1017/S147717561000028X © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2010
Think 26, Vol. 9 (Autumn 2010)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717561000028X Published online by Cambridge University Press

> me to run over people, to break rules, to neglect my family, to neglect myself to the point where I was on the edge of physical and emotional breakdown.

Not only is it unhealthy, but this extreme attitude towards winning can lead to an end justifies the means mentality [see Raymond Belliotti, in *Football and Philosophy* 2008, pp. 5–17]. When an athlete or coach pursues victory above all else, then it no longer matters *how* she wins, just *that* she wins. This can lead to making choices which sacrifice moral values such as fairness and respect for opponents, it can lead to outright cheating, and may motivate some to risk their health and compromise their integrity by using certain performance-enhancing drugs.

Another problem for the win-at-all-costs approach is the fact that winning is not all that matters. There is such a thing in sport as a hollow victory. For example, consider the 2009 United States Open Tennis Women's Semi-final between American Serena Williams and Belgian Kim Clijsters. After getting called for a foot-fault at a crucial point in the match, Williams lost her temper and shouted at the line judge who made the call. Williams ended up getting penalized for her outburst, which resulted in a double-fault and a victory for Clijsters. Though Clijsters went on to win the tournament, and was the first mom to do so since 1980, she had this to say after her match with Williams:

> The normal feelings of winning a match weren't quite there. But I think afterwards, when everything kind of sunk in a little bit and got explained to me about what happened, yeah, you kind of have to put it all in place, and then it becomes a little bit easier to understand and to kind of not celebrate, but at least have a little bit of joy after a match like that.

As a fan watching the match, it was also disappointing to see it end in this way. It would have been much more

https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717561000028X Published online by Cambridge University Press

satisfying to see one of these athletes win through tennis skill, rather than being penalized for behaviour. It is not that such behaviour should be tolerated, but rather that winning is more satisfying when it reflects an excellent athletic performance. If Clijsters had won in this way, she would likely have felt more satisfied and joyful in victory. If winning is the only thing, then there would be no such thing as a hollow victory, which Clijster's was to a degree, by her own admission.

Even if winning is not the only thing of value in sport, it is still possible that it has some value, perhaps even a significant amount. Many believe that sport builds character, but would be surprised that no less of a philosopher than Plato believed this as well. In Book III of the *Republic*, Socrates claims that the purpose of sport (and music) in the ideal city is moral development. Sport is established for the sake of the soul, which for Plato has three parts. The spirited part loves honor, the appetitive part loves pleasure, and the rational part loves wisdom. In the virtuous or healthy soul, the part that loves wisdom, the rational part, rules the other parts. In this way, reason keeps appetite and the desire for honor in check.

How does sport foster moral development? Participation in sport can help train the soul to operate in a rational manner because sport requires *rational control* (H. Reid, 'Sport and Moral Education in Plato's *Republic*', *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, vol. 34 (2007), pp. 160–175). For example, it is sometimes very difficult to keep one's head in the intense and high-pressure moments that happen in sports when the game or match is on the line. It can be difficult to keep one's head when a teammate lets one down, an opponent displays a lack of respect, or an official fails to make the correct call. However, when an athlete is able to maintain rational control in such situations, she is training herself to let reason rule even when appetite or spirit are strongly vying for control. It appears that Plato's idea is that the ability to let reason rule in sporting contexts will better enable it to rule in other contexts.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717561000028X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Competition plays a role in all of this because it spurs the pursuit of excellence, of developing athletic talents and skills. It also can foster the development and strengthening of moral virtues like perseverance, courage, self-sacrifice, discipline, and humility. Winning is not an end in itself, but is quite valuable as a means to these other more valuable ends. Winning matters, then, because by seeking to win the athlete is better able to cultivate both athletic and (especially) moral excellence.

However, given that sport is often characterized by ego, selfishness, disrespect, and unfairness, one might question whether the pursuit of victory can also foster moral excellence. In order for the potential of sport for moral education and growth to be realized, we must see and approach sport as a moral practice. Sport is not merely a moral practice, as it can also be fun, and promote health as well as a variety of other ends. Sport is a human creation. It is up to athletes, coaches, parents, fans, and the rest of us to do what we can to make sport what it can be, to use the pursuit of victory as a means to pursue something greater, the prize of moral goodness.

Those who would eschew morality in favor of victory would do well to consider something else that Vince Lombardi told a journalist near the end of his life about the infamous 'winning isn't everything, it's the only thing' quote: 'I wished I'd never said the thing…I meant the effort. I meant having a goal. I sure didn't mean for people to crush human values and morality.'

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717561000028X Published online by Cambridge University Press