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GO HONORS!

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It comes to me as quite a surprise—and really a great shame—that honors and athletics are, as Sam Schuman describes, "often seen as, if not hostile, certainly wholly disconnected collegiate endeavors." For more than thirty years I have had quite a different experience, which includes congratulating four long-distance runners and one Olympic speed-walker as honors valedictorians. I have always cultivated honors athletes, and coaches have always come to me directly to package athletes with honors scholarships. I may have reaped my rewarding experiences with athletes in part because I teach at a Division II NCAA campus where the coaches encourage players to do well academically; for instance, faculty members must sign all athletes' attendance cards for every class session, and the athletes must attend daily study halls. But my sense that athletes make strong honors students is also a personal vision that comes from years of playing tennis and riding horses—often under the watchful eyes of my tennis- and equestrian-team students.

Let me begin by saying that I do everything I can to discourage competition among my students. Many have already been burdened with grade-related anxiety and stress, so the idea of fighting to get that A is not something I encourage. Oddly enough, the athletes adjust very well to an honors environment that is less about winning than about playing the game, a difference in perspectives that two writers have expressed particularly well. The first is George Orwell, who in 1945 published an article in the *Tribune* entitled "The Sporting Spirit." Considering the climate of nationalism and "savage passions" of the mid-1940s, he entirely undermined the idea of sport as cultivating fair play. Instead, he argued that professional sport is "bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words it is war minus the shooting." While the case may be overstated, it did arouse a wonderful argument among students in my freshman English course—particularly among the athletes. The discussion was led by a basketball player, who argued quite convincingly (especially given his height of 5' 6") that sport is a game played against oneself, to improve and grow as a player. This approach is close to the philosophy of an interesting new book, *Play*, by the second writer, Stuart Brown, psychiatrist and founder of the National Institute for Play. His research indicates that the activity of play "shapes the brain, opens the imagination and

invigorates the soul." It is not Orwell's dark vision of winning that is suitable to honors but rather Brown's elevating spirit of play that we want to encourage in our students. Among his discoveries is that play, like sleep, is "an essential, long-term organizer of brain development and adaptablity" (42). In play, he also finds the basis for experiencing pleasure and thus overcoming propensities to depression. Since both sleep deprivation and depression are chronic problems among college students, it would seem that engaging in play should increase positive attitudes. Indeed, among Brown's most interesting findings is "evidence that play *increases* immune strength" (171).

Having read Brown's study, I went directly to my student athletes to find out what they had to say about balancing the demands of honors with the demands of their team. Interestingly, none of them spoke about winning or about stress that comes from playing sports. Katie, a tennis player, emphasized the way that sports negate the stress that comes from school. "If I have a bad day, I look forward to the three hours of hitting a ball, and then I go back home calm. . . . Of course when I go back home the paperwork hits, and I feel stressed out. As an athlete, I rarely get a chance to work ahead. Playing sports requires good time management." Katie seems to have learned this lesson well since she was the first student to submit her take-home final for my class.

John has been a football player since his second year of high school. For him, school is the chore and sport is what he looks forward to. He trains seven days a week and works a part-time job as well. "I'm more competitive in sport than in academics, but I'm hard on myself in both." This reflection reinforces what we know about honors students—that they push themselves; the fact that they do it in athletics as well as academics should not surprise us but should illustrate the compatibility of honors with sports. Like John, Luke—a baseball player—couldn't go to college without the scholarships coming jointly from the team and from honors. Both are grateful for the friends they have made on the team. Both came to campus to practice long before the other freshmen arrived. By the time classes started, the athletes had already bonded with coaches and teammates, who remained the strongest support system throughout the first term. Luke added, "All my teammates complain about work, so being in honors is not particularly an issue."

Steve, who is also a baseball player, admitted to an interesting role played by his parents. "Baseball has always been a big part of my life. School has always been equally as important in the eyes of my parents. If I didn't get my work done, I knew I wouldn't be able to go to practice or games. So sports in a way drove me to be an honors student. . . . I feel it is challenging balancing college athletics with honors, but it is well worth the reward of knowing that I am succeeding in both fields and fulfilling my roles as a student athlete."

Some honors athletes are essentially "loners." Joseph chose the equestrian team partially for that reason. He had previously played soccer and baseball but dropped both because he didn't have the stamina. His grandfathers had been horsemen, so Joseph decided to try riding. "It's good exercise," he said, "but the horse does all of the work!" He smiled. Joseph likes the fact that the equestrian team does not practice every day, leaving him all the time he needs to attend to his studies. He finds the balance relaxing. Feeling accepted by the team (he is the only young man among women) has also given him a sense of belonging. "I'm more of a loner—riding suits that. I'm alone but working for the benefit of the team." His experience finds sympathy among the long-distance runners and among honors students in general. Many are simply playing their own individual games.

An interesting mix of loners and team players occurs in the NCHC immersion/adventure program Partners in the Parks, which provides "sport" in the broadest sense. The week-long programs involve camping, hiking, sometimes kayaking, canoeing, storytelling, and performance. Students come from honors programs and colleges around the country, from all majors and from the widest possible range of outdoor experiences. Some have never camped or lit a fire, have never hiked, cooked out, or looked at the stars. Others have been eagle scouts who could survive much harsher environments than the friendly campsites in the national parks. Most important is that, in less than a week, everyone gets to build a tent, make a fire, invent creative meals, tell stories, and engage in learning that is essentially play—a pursuit undertaken, as Brown points out, purely for its own sake (18).

Like all sport, Partners adventures take place in the moment, disconnected from electronic communications and obligations back home. Within a matter of days the group organizes into comfort zones. The loners get to go on solo hikes or retreat to their tents to write in their journals. The experienced hikers get to choose the long way around while the novices take a shorter route to test their interest and endurance. On the very first trip to Bryce Canyon, Claire, who had never hiked at all, decided to go on the thirteen-mile overnight just to see if she could do it. Unlike competitive sport—where she would have been sidelined or sent to team B—everyone encouraged her and helped her get through. Claire's triumph was a victory for group dynamics, the kind that I believe honors is intended to foster. Those of us who chose the one-mile "stop and smell the junipers" hike had our own victories. We cooked a marvelous meal at the bottom of the canyon and spent the night in sleeping bags without tents even though it was a brisk twenty-two degrees. For us, the hike down and up the canyon was more than enough to make us feel sufficiently athletic. Like Joseph, the rider, we did it alone and together.

Alone and together is an excellent honors model. The way we work with students, after all, is by encouraging the individual to emerge from the team we call "class." If we look beyond the Partners student/faculty adventure, which I offer as an example of how loners and team players can achieve within the same framework, we would find that honors faculty and directors are—as athletes—of the same mix. Some are team players—at a certain age team spectators more than players! More of my athletic colleagues seem to me attracted to sports that allow them to play their own individual games—perhaps in the same spirit that attracts them to honors! They are runners, hikers, swimmers, bikers, kayakers, golfers and tennis players.

Something about being alone and engaging in the moment, I believe they will agree, is totally liberating. I often write poems while I am hitting tennis balls or walking a horse. (I offer two of them at the end of the article for—I hope—your enjoyment.) In these moments I am learning to let go of the quest for perfection. Sport has taught me to improve by degrees and to slow down. It has also taught me to let up on myself and to look at my students with softer eyes, to guide them with a looser rein. Students have seen me get thrown and get back up. That, too, is a good lesson for honors.

Another good lesson for honors is changing commitments. When I called student athletes to ask for an interview, several came forward who had been competitive athletes until college and then decided to give up their sport. Indeed, many students who include high school teams on their honors application have no intention of playing for a college team. Some have simply used up their interest in sports or have discovered that their dreams of going pro were unrealistic. Two young women who had competed in Western Pleasure horsemanship reached a day when tacking the horses and riding in shows seemed more of a burden than a joy. People change. Students change majors. Learning to face changes in commitment is important.

One of the most moving statements about changing commitments came from a student in my College 101 course in her essay entitled "I Never Made it to the NSL." Nicole had been focused on a career in professional soccer from the time she was four. "The soccer field was where I felt at home"—that is, until the scrimmage in which she tore ligaments in a slide tackle. After three surgeries, it became clear that she would never be able to play soccer again. "It was hard to accept that I had to pursue another dream but I had to be realistic," she wrote. Meeting physicians, nurses, and physical therapists over a long recuperation persuaded her that she wanted to go into a "therapy" profession. "Therefore I'm currently going to school pursuing a speech pathology degree. From being hurt, I learned that . . . I should do my best to help other people climb over their hills and mountains." Thus Nicole's

athletic self has found an alternative goal in her studies. And for that she is training in honors. *Go Honors!*

Excuses

I missed the shot because
the sun got in my eye,
the net's too high,
and wasps that burrow
at the baseline caught
the corner of my eye.

That shot I missed because
I couldn't concentrate,
get in position, anticipate;
the god-damn leaf blower's
grating on my nerves,
besides it's getting late.

I missed that shot because
I saw a chipmunk
scoot behind a maple trunk
in between the serve
and rally down the alley;
he caught me, now I'm sunk.

I missed the shot because
of shadows on the court.
I'm much too short,
the light was bad,
the lob was high—
I can't get too distraught.

Today I missed an easy shot,
I blame my allergies.
The flowering trees
rattled by the gusting breeze
showered their pollen,
and I simply had to sneeze.

It's easy to miss a shot because
men embattled on court four
ignore the sport and plot a war
throwing racquets smashing balls;
I'm driven to complete distraction
by substitute hormonal gore.

But I missed *that* shot because
I lost my grip;
my feet were turned,
I almost tripped,
my tennis elbow
felt a twinge,
my partner poached,
I need new strings,
the ball was dead,
the surface dry,
I didn't bend,
my shoulder's sore,
and—let's face it—

I need to practice more.

Retirement

This morning Snowball told me he was thinking of retirement.
He has had enough of children on his back,
boring after so many years. It was easy for me to sympathize.
I, too, have given retirement some thought,
especially since I have students on my back
a hundred-fold of Snowball's burden.

He expressed the desire to be savoring grass and carrots all day long
free from the expectations of hard labor.
I knew exactly what he meant but reminded him
that I was the one who brought the carrots and took him out
to taste the clover and have a good roll in the luscious field.

It's clear he can't retire so long as I'm at work.
Thus we came to a resolution that—old as we are—
we would carry on working when we were called
and luxuriating in our time together taking long walks,

jumping when we felt fit and tasting homemade oatmeal cookies
that I would bake so long as he enjoys them.

We're a pair, after all, the old pony and the old professor
making our way along the paths that give us peace.

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