

2010

## Honors and Athletics: The “Sound Body” Thing

James S. Ruebel

*Ball State University, jruebel@bsu.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

---

Ruebel, James S., "Honors and Athletics: The “Sound Body” Thing" (2010). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 288.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/288>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# Honors and Athletics: The “Sound Body” Thing

JAMES S. RUEBEL

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

I have always hesitated at the aphorism *mens sana in corpore sano*. When Juvenal originally wrote in his tenth Satire that “we should pray for a sound mind in a sound body” (*orandum est ut sit mens sana in corpore sano*), he was not exalting physical and mental perfection; he meant only that our health is more important than the false benefits of greed and vanity (*Sat.* 10.356). In the modern Olympic environment, *corpus sanum* is clearly exalted above *mens sana*, and the ancient Olympics were, if anything, worse; David C. Young has written a sobering account of the rather disreputable origin and history of amateurism and its relationship to Olympic competition. The modern participant spends hours per day, days per month, and months per year for year after year perfecting a physical skill and adapting her perceptual skills to enhance it. The NCAA, a defender of modern amateurism, limits student-athletes to twenty hours a week of required athletics-related activity during the season of competition. Does anyone think that an Olympic figure-skater or gymnast or sprinter practices only twenty hours a week for only part of the year? While elite athletes are physically magnificent, they appear to be valued for this magnificence out of proportion to its importance. The Greek poet Xenophanes 2500 years ago wrote:

Now, supposing a man were to win the prize for the footrace  
at Olympia, there where the precinct of Zeus stands beside  
the river, at Pisa: or if he wins the pentathlon, or the wrestling,  
or if he endures the pain of boxing and wins, or that new  
and terrible game they call the *pankration*, contest of all holds:  
why, such a man will obtain honor, in the citizens' sight,  
and be given a front seat and be on display at all civic occasions,  
and he would be given his meals all at the public expense,  
and be given a gift from the city to take and store for safekeeping.  
If he won with the chariot, too, all this would be granted to him,  
and yet he would not deserve it, as I do. Better than brute strength  
of men, or horses either, is the wisdom that is mine.  
But custom is careless in all these matters and there is no justice  
in putting strength on a level above wisdom which is sound.

Nevertheless, in an abstract sort of way, the ideal of physical and mental excellence is hard to argue with, and this ideal reflects the goals of athletes in honors.

Two or three times a year I am asked to talk with school children about the Ball State University Honors College and the value of excellence in education. With this young audience, the wonders of student-driven or experiential learning are unlikely to have the same resonance that they might with high school juniors or seniors. Usually, part of my solution to the danger of death-by-lecture is to begin by asking how many of them are athletes or members of bands (at the higher levels, marching band competition is very big in Indiana); invariably most of their hands go up. I then ask them to think about excellence and what you need to do in order to be good, or excellent, in sports or band. The answers tend to echo notions (differently expressed, to be sure) stressed by coaches and band leaders of “dedication, discipline, and desire”—talent, yes if possible, but hard work and attitude often compensate for deficiencies in raw talent. I go on to tell them that, if they understand this principle, they already know what it takes to succeed academically and that an honors college is a way for them eventually to make all that dedication, discipline, and desire pay off in the classroom.

It has seemed to me, in short, that there is a real conceptual connection between athletics and honors and probably among all pursuits of excellence. Anecdotally, I have reason to believe that the web is woven very closely indeed. One of the several hats I wear, besides classics professor and honors dean, reflects my role as institutional faculty representative to the NCAA and Mid-American Conference. In this role I interact regularly with coaches and athletes in many sports and with a wide range of academic backgrounds and abilities. My experience with athletes, even those with rather low GPAs, is that they are mainly hard-working students who mainly want to graduate and, as the NCAA puts it, “go pro in something other than sports.” At Ball State, the graduation rate for athletes exceeds that of the general population by over 15%, and honors athletes graduate and also persist through the honors diploma at the same rate as other honors students. Granted, I have found Division I athletes at Ball State to be a genre unto themselves, but honors athletes are another matter.

I invited two dozen athletes at Ball State who are active members of our honors college to come and talk, in exchange for pizza and wit, on a Wednesday evening. Twelve athletes came for this conversation, representing ten sports, from football to gymnastics, and a fairly typical range of majors. A similarly wide spread exists among majors for all athletes at Ball State (I check this every term) although it is unsurprising to find significant pockets of physically active, goal-oriented students majoring in exercise science or

business. My question to the honors athletes was a simple prompt: “How, if at all, do honors and athletics mix? And what’s in it for you to do both?” The “mix” part of the prompt was intended to evoke discussion of time conflicts; the benefits part looked toward why they are active in both, especially since honors is optional but athletics mandatory for some scholarships and for some the other way around.

Some of the answers met my expectations, and others didn’t. The students began by talking about the problems they face, mainly having to do with their majors (“the most stress I have comes from my double-major and trying to make that work with competitions”) and time management (“the bus-ride is a great way to read and think, but it’s not easy”; “my major is so focused on itself that I have less and less flexibility”). The frustrations include especially and perhaps surprisingly the mandatory study table; everyone is required to attend for a certain number of hours, and some students find it frustrating because “none of my stuff is there; I need to do work in the studio [or lab], not in a room full of people studying basic English or getting math help” or “sometimes we just sit there, or decide to dress up in formal or silly clothes.” Social pressures also arise from participation in sports; a lot of people, including faculty, “have a stereotype about us, the dumb jock” or “don’t much care about our sport themselves so can’t understand why we spend all this time on it.” But the conversation quickly left these issues behind. As far as honors is concerned, “Honors isn’t the problem.” The stress they feel comes from their majors or from social pressure or from faculty who don’t know they are honors students.

At approximately this point, the conversation turned. Following a pause, one honors athlete said, “You know, I think we get the same benefit from the honors college that everyone else gets.” The student meant that they appreciate the small classes and the interactions in them, where they have a “better relationship with faculty” and “understand more”; they enjoy having to figure things out rather than listen to lectures; they are grateful for the scheduling flexibility and the variety of choices available to them through the honors college; honors is “more flexible,” the professors are “more accessible,” and “we have a lot more freedom in our honors courses.” They enjoy the social mix among honors students, and, while they find the closeness of their teammates rewarding, they are glad not to spend all their time just with other athletes. They even enjoy having lots of reading, which “breaks up the day.”

When I asked them for a summarizing idea that we could take away from the conversation, they described themselves: “We hate to be idle; we’ve never been idle. This is not new for us; we have always been involved in everything. In high school we took AP classes and played three sports and were on the Quiz Bowl team and were members of the school orchestra or thespian

society.” They are, in short, used to difficult time management; they are over-achievers and always have been, both athletically and academically; and they are “used to sacrificing some things for other things.” Combining Division I athletics with their school work is hard, but “you still get results from working for what you want.”

Other university pursuits also make similar demands. For example, students in the College of Fine Arts (Theater, Music, Art) and a few other majors face requirements that occupy fully two thirds of the minimum credits for graduation. They practice or work in a studio on a schedule not much, if at all, less burdensome than an athlete’s. They sacrifice some opportunities in favor of this one and in favor of remaining in the honors college; many of the roughly two hundred honors students in the fine arts, most studying for a B.F.A, are involved in physical, performance-based forms of excellence. Even if their motivations are not precisely physical, they are competitive to a degree that can sometimes be worrisome; but in some ways, they have a real advantage over athletes. Their heavy requirements are built into their degree program, and they *can* (and expect to) “go pro” in their area of excellence. Also, our culture tends to value their contributions and appreciate their hard work in a way that we often do not when we think of athletes. Is it that we think one form of excellence is better than another, is more socially redeeming than another? Evidently, just like Xenophanes, we do.

The men and women with whom I spoke on a Wednesday evening amid pizza and wit are not just elite athletes; they are also elite students. They seek and achieve excellence in more than one endeavor among others who are excellent. They are conscious of the implications of choosing to do both, and they have integrated that choice into their daily lives; the consequences of this choice include sacrificing other options and accepting a degree of distance from some of their friends. In our conversation, the honors athletes reflected, I think, the idealized version of *mens sana in corpore sano* in intentional ways that go well beyond the standard notion of walking for health and studying hard. Moreover, unlike ancient Olympic athletes and to a more socially redeemable extent than their nineteenth-century forebears (again see Young), they are in fact amateurs.

My little seminar for schoolkids addresses the right issues to this extent: the connection between competitive excellence physically and intellectually is real. The connection is not for everyone, but honors athletes emerge as leaders in our program in the same proportion and to the same degree as honors actors or members of the jazz band or painters. We don’t recruit student-athletes specifically to the honors college whereas we do recruit fine arts majors—in fact, we recruit the student-athletes in the context of their majors rather than their sports—but the Ball State University Honors College

JAMES S. RUEBEL

provides a place for honors athletes that is otherwise not available, a place where they can express themselves and grow individually in at least two of the ways that have been most important to them for the previous years of their lives.

## REFERENCES

Young, David C. "How the Amateurs Won the Olympics." *The Archaeology of the Olympics*. Ed. Wendy J. Raschke. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988. 55–75.

Xenophanes. Poem 2 (Diehl). *Greek Lyrics*. Trans. R. Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960. 25.

\*\*\*\*\*

The author may be contacted at

[jruebel@bsu.edu](mailto:jruebel@bsu.edu).

