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Sam Schuman

University of North Carolina at Asheville, sschuman@unca.edu

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College Sports, Honors, Five Liberal Lessons, and Milo of Crotona

SAM SCHUMAN

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA ASHEVILLE

At the very dawn of the sixteenth century, Michelangelo liberated from a large chunk of discarded marble the most famous statue in the history of western art. After a few centuries standing outside the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, today his David resides in the Galleria dell'Accademia, the academic gallery, where he contemplates his victory over Goliath, and daily hundreds of tourists and art lovers contemplate him. This incredible work of sculpture seems today to have two primary functions. The first, alas, is to provide a certain number of giggling philistines with sophomorically smutty postcards and other souvenirs that focus on David's distinctly masculine nudity. The second is to stand as an emblem of the pinnacle of human aspirations in the Renaissance. Michelangelo's David is a model of reason, piety, and athleticism. In our honors programs and colleges, in today's academies, I have come to think that in our eagerness to cultivate the first of these virtues, thoughtful rationality, we have grown to ignore, to our loss, the other two: spiritual depth and serious attention to physical vigor.

I want to say a few words about collegiate athletics from what is increasingly being designated the "30,000 ft." perspective. If your experience at 30,000 ft. is at all like mine, this means we all enter a tiny space that can barely contain us, lugging heavy little suitcases that won't quite fit into the overhead compartments, rather than paying to put our luggage in an actual baggage compartment. Then, an overworked attendant circulates among us, offering to sell us such luxuries as water or coffee, after announcing (as on a recent flight) that three of the four bathrooms to which we have access are unfortunately not working. Maybe the time has come to kill forever that "30,000 ft." metaphor. In any event, my primary subject here is honors and intercollegiate athletics for women and men. By and large, what I say would apply equally to less formal sporting activities—intramural sports and recreation as well as wholly unprogrammed individual and group endeavors. Of course, I would heartily endorse these ventures, too, especially since many honors programs field intramural teams for softball or touch football, and

honors students often engage in pick-up Frisbee or volleyball games. I'm focusing on interscholastic athletics because it is the most extreme form of regular physical activity on college and university campuses, and if the case can be made for athletics, it more or less goes without saying for intramural or casual exercise. Too, I confess, it seems to me more of a challenge to link honors and athletics since these are often seen as, if not hostile, certainly wholly disconnected collegiate endeavors.

Colleges have lots of reasons to develop and support intercollegiate athletics programs, some of which are quite pragmatic, and there are lots of reasons why such development and support should be viewed with suspicion. Sports programs help us with student recruiting, which is certainly a pragmatic, fiscal rationale for maintaining them; at many smaller colleges, as many as half of the students participate in intercollegiate athletics. On the other hand, they can be incredibly costly in lots of ways, including time commitment and raw dollars. Most of us don't really want to know what it costs just to outfit each of our 40–80 football players, much less to coach, transport, feed, and house them.

Our central mission as colleges is not fiscal well-being but education, so I want to ask what it is that young women and men, including honors students, can learn in their athletics careers. Since most honors programs and colleges see their enterprise as *liberal learning*, what sorts of liberating collegiate experiences might we be providing our student athletes that reinforce or complement what they are learning in the classroom, laboratory, library, faculty office, or elsewhere in honors. One caveat: the positive lessons of college sports will occur when the institution has a sensible, balanced, and appropriate perspective on the relationships between athletics and academics and when there is strong, solid collegiate leadership—from presidents and provosts, athletics directors and coaches, and even honors directors/deans—steadily affirming productive links; when institutions lose that good sense and/or when leaders do not seek and reward it, positive results are unlikely, and, as we all know, negative ones can take their place.

Let's start with the two easy links. Everyone knows that participation in sports teaches young people (and older ones, too) the value of team cooperation and hard work. Honors programs should teach these two skill sets, too. But we might want to pause a while and see if perhaps there is a more nuanced way to think about these two kinds of lessons.

TEAMWORK

It is a truism that much of the work of contemporary culture, including intellectual culture and work, is teamwork. Lone scientists hatching astounding discoveries in isolated labs, brilliant corporate executives making millions

on their own, solitary medical practitioners: these are all probably pretty anachronistic. Even we English teachers have to cooperate sometimes (although you might not know it). Athletics teaches individuals how to work in groups. Of course, this quality varies from sport to sport. The teamwork component of a volleyball or basketball team is considerably more ambitious than that of the wrestling or cross-country squads. Note that many honors faculty, across the disciplines, have discovered the value of dividing their classes into small teams and having them work on class activities together. A truism of honors pedagogy is that working in groups, collective participatory learning, is often the best learning. Team sports teach participants to assess realistically their potential contributions to the group, to heed the potential contributions of all the others on the team, when to take the lead, when to defer. All human beings are, finally, prisoners of our solitary consciousnesses, pounding on the walls of our individual cells trying to make connections with each other (as my favorite twentieth-century author, Vladimir Nabokov, reminds us). An honors seminar in history or literature or psychology or evolution helps; so does playing volleyball.

HARD WORK

All of us in honors want our students to understand that easy accomplishments are often cheap, that hard work is necessary to do projects that are truly valuable and important; this seems to me a particularly important lesson of honors work, where our students have often excelled throughout their academic careers without having to work very hard at it. Athletics, too, requires and rewards hard work, a particular kind of work: persistent and consistent labor. No one gets to be a good distance runner by working out once every couple of weeks, no matter how hard. No good pitcher goes very long without throwing the ball. Just as a violinist or a dancer or even a reader has to practice, practice, practice, so too do athletes. For an athlete to show up on the day of the contest unprepared is just as disastrous as for an honors student to realize a week before her thesis is due that she is not where she should be. Here, we should remember the lesson of Milo of Crotona, well known to all college jocks. Milo, you'll recall, was the ancient Greek wrestler who trained for the Olympics by picking up and carrying a baby bull the same distance every day for four years. At the end of the four years, and in time for the next Olympic competition, the bull was huge, and Milo was powerful. Athletics and honors should both teach us that persistence trumps irregular flashes of brilliance or labor.

Three more honors lessons from college sports:

TALENT DIVERSITY

College athletics reminds all of us that very few people are good at everything, and almost everyone is good at something. I taught a fitness class once when I was Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at Guilford, and it was an important revelation to me that students I knew from the classroom as “quick” were sometimes “slow” on the track, and some students who were not very sharp at literary analysis were very smart indeed when it came to physical conditioning. Chaucer writes that “God clepeth folke to him in sundry wise,/And everich hath of God a proper yifte” (God calls folks to him in various ways, and everyone has from God his own gift). Remember, even Michael Jordan wasn’t much of a baseball player. Some of our honors students will excel in one kind of academic work but not in all areas. We should not expect anyone to be good at everything, and we should expect each of our students to bring to our programs some particular, individual excellence.

HUMAN CAPABILITIES—PART 1

Athletics can teach us all, athletes or spectators, the amazing capabilities of the human creature. It can be astonishing and inspirational to witness the strength of a linebacker, the leaping ability of a volleyball spiker, the endurance and speed of a runner. The athlete who is persistent and works hard learns what she is capable of, which is often far more than she would have dared believe. Those of us who watch her grow and improve from year to year are equally awestruck as she reaches higher and higher goals that we might never have imagined possible a few years earlier. We feel the same kind of admiration for the intellectual growth of so many of our honors students throughout their undergraduate careers. Liberal learning should teach us just such admiration of humanity: Shakespeare’s or Austin’s brilliance with character and language; Einstein’s expansion of our understanding of the way the universe works; Beethoven’s music and Michelangelo’s art; Darwin’s and Goodall’s insights into the structure of life. To grasp and understand and revere what women and men are capable of is one of humankind’s joys. Sports and honors programs help.

HUMAN CAPABILITIES—PART 2

And yet, if you’ll permit a literature teacher’s love of ambiguity, perhaps the ultimate lesson of college sports is that all human capabilities are, finally, limited. One of the key lessons of Shakespeare’s most majestic tragedy, *King Lear*, is that, at the end, each of us is only a “poor, bare, forked animal.” Next to British Renaissance drama, athletics may be the very best teacher of this lesson. In this imperfect and broken world, even the best of us are ultimately

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frail and flawed. Here, we are coming close to the place where the spiritual, physical, and rational aspects of a complete collegiate education come together. As we admire Roger Bannister for breaking the four-minute-mile barrier, we realize that nobody will ever run it in three. Nobody is ever going to pitch only no-hitters. Forty-one-year-old Dana Torres was wonderful in the Beijing Olympics, but she probably won't be back in London and certainly not in Chicago. Our college athletes and our honors students test how much they can do, how good they can get, and it is remarkable what they can achieve, but even more important is that they learn the great, tragic, and wonderful liberal lesson of our common flawed humanity. Nothing we can learn in college is more important than our human nature: that we can achieve greatness and that we will always be imperfect. Indeed, I think that only in our recognition of our limits can we push so close to them as to become only a little lower than the angels. I find that recognition and that push in a great college basketball game, in an all-out finish at a cross-country meet, in a wrestling match or a volleyball game where nobody has anything at all left at the end. I find it too in an excellent undergraduate honors thesis or an outstanding performance on a senior oral examination. College sports and the challenges of honors work, like the *Canterbury Tales* and *King Lear*, Milo of Crotona and Michelangelo, teach us what it is to be human: that's enough.

The author may be contacted at
sschuman@unca.edu.

