

Three Cheers for Sports!

Commentaries and Reflections

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by **Fr. Mark Sietsema**

I don't follow soccer, at all. In fact, just watching it makes me dizzy. But the 2010 World Cup tournament—and the level of interest it generated in our country—got me thinking about the tremendous importance of sports in the lives of our youth. I would like to take a moment of your time to ask you to consider all the benefits that athletics give our children, and why sports is such a worthy commitment of their time and energy.

Three cheers for sports! We all know the most obvious benefit of sports for our kids: sports build character. This truth should be self-evident, but in case there are any holdouts among us, let's consider the validity of this idea. All those hours of practice and training, of sweating and straining—these mold not only the body, but also the soul with self-discipline and the drive to excel in all of life.

Just look at the top athletes in all the sports. Who would not want their son to grow up to be a fine young man like Kobe Bryant or Jose Canseco or Michael Vick or Tiger Woods or Pete Rose or ...

Wait, wait ... forget that I mentioned them. Sports really must build character most of the time. I mean, if all the hard work of high-level competitive sports didn't build character, well, then, all that aggression would start working itself out in other ways. Like bullying. And we know that doesn't happen in our schools.

OK, sure, it did happen at Columbine. It was the "cult of the athlete" there that drove two young, bullied men to their killing spree in 1999. And, yes, bullying (by athletes especially) is a chronic problem across the country: an epidemic, one might say. (We now have the new word *bullycide* as a label for suicide caused by bullying.)

And, yes, school officials turn a blind eye to the misdeeds of top athletes, for fear that their talents be lost on the playing field, and with them the victories.

Because, after all, as Vince Lombardi said, "If winning isn't everything, then why do they keep score?" And if that isn't a statement about character, I don't know what is! (I leave it to you to decide if it reflects good character or bad character.) Maybe UCLA coach John Wooden had it right: "Sports don't build character, they reveal it." And they reveal it in both the players and the boosters.

Even so, still let's say: Two cheers for sports! We know that American kids are increasingly sedentary, and that more exercise is what all of them need, and organized sports provide that exercise. Plain and simple: sports participation is good for young and growing bodies, and it begins an ongoing habit of physical activity, as all the research shows.

Although ... some of it doesn't. Actually, a lot of it doesn't. In fact, research actually shows that we are in the middle of yet another epidemic: teenage sports injuries. Chief among these problems are concussions, ruined knees, and neck and shoulder trauma—all conditions that can have lifelong effects and create early-onset arthritis. But hey, it's worth walking with a cane at age 40 in order to have the one shining moment of glory when you're 17 that everyone will remember until...

Well, actually they'll forget it pretty much by the next season. If we didn't forget, how could we—in good conscience—push our kids into activities that produce stress fractures and repetitive usage injuries at younger and younger ages? Doctors are seeing problems in teenage kids that they used to see only in middle-aged adults (including steroid use). And it's not just in boys' sports or in the contact sports like football and hockey. (If you think tennis is a bodyfriendly sport, read Andre Agassi's autobiography.)

But at least the kids are picking up pastimes that will motivate them to exercise for the rest of their lives, right? I mean, a guy who plays football in high school will still be playing it regularly as a form of exercise into his forties and fifties, won't he? I myself have never seen it, but it must happen ... otherwise we would be fooling ourselves about what a great lifetime of fitness is prepared for kids by playing in organized sports.

Well, putting that issue aside, at least I can say with confidence: One cheer for sports! By participating in sports, kids learn teamwork, they develop perseverance, they make friends, they gain self-confidence, they see the connection between hard work and achievement, and they are less likely to use illegal substances. (I will not mention Michael Phelps).

Of course, your kids can get pretty much the same benefits from singing in a chorus, playing in a band, working on the yearbook, acting in the school play, joining the Scouts ... or coming regularly to church and participating in the life of the community—Sunday school, choir, cleanup days, fundraisers, potlucks, camps, etc. Granted, all these other activities will cost less than sports participation in terms of equipment, auto mileage, medical bills, and wear and tear on the family schedule and nerves.

They also interfere less with academics. But sports is definitely the investment that offers the biggest payoffs in the long run, just in case your child becomes that one in 500,000 that scores a million-dollar contract.

And isn't that chance alone is worth giving up the family's weekly commitment to church in the coming school year?

Sunday morning practices and tournaments that preempt church—all this is accepted by parents nowadays because otherwise children wouldn't get to participate in organized sports programs. They would miss out. And in missing out they would have to learn how to stand apart from the crowd, how to be their own person, how to stick to their principles, how to manage priorities. (Now that would be an exercise in character-building!)

In past generations, letting a young person skip church in favor of sports would have been seen as a shocking collapse of parental priorities—as a form of child abuse even—detrimental to

their moral and spiritual development. We don't see it that way anymore. I can't exactly say why ...

I only ask, though, that before parents agree to another year of putting sports ahead of church, they answer one question. When I go up to the Metropolis of Detroit Summer Camp in Rose City every summer, I hear dozens upon dozens of camper confessions. These give me a good sense of the challenges that face our young people ... including those who are active in sports. Chief among them are: hurtful romances, temptations to drink and smoke pot, internet pornography, premarital sex, dealing with divorced / alcoholic / abusive parents, bullying, depression and thoughts of suicide. Your child will face one or more of these problems in the years ahead.

It is inevitable.

I know what the church has to offer our young people ... and they always seem deeply grateful for the spiritual help. I doubt I would have the repeat business in the confessional, summer after summer, if the gratitude were not genuine.

My question for you is: what do your children's Sunday morning sports offer to them in the face of these challenges that lie ahead?

St. Paul knew the answer: "Bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that is now and of that which is to come" (1 Timothy 4:8). Everyone on "Team Jesus" is a champion in the end, if they train dili-gently. Three cheers for parents—from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—if they keep their eyes on the prize and their kids in church, faithfully, in season and out of season, Sunday after Sunday.

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