

## **A Place for Sparta in Athens: A Philosophy of Athletics in Classical Education**

### **Preliminaries**

Although ancient Greece is known both for philosophy and Olympic sports, this does not mean that athletics and classical education have been wedded from antiquity. In fact, athletics have had a place within schools for only the past 200 years. According to *The Classical Tradition*,

Physical exercise (whether or not in a specially constructed building, a gymnasium), had little role in education until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.... F. L. Jahn, a Berlin schoolmaster, introduced gymnastics into education in 1811 for patriotic as well as pedagogical reasons, wishing to encourage healthy recruits for the forthcoming struggle with Napoleon. His example was widely followed both in Germany and elsewhere. In Britain many public and grammar schools in the 19<sup>th</sup> century built large gymnasia as part of their mission to produce hearty and healthy leaders of society. (415)

Two points are noteworthy. First, athletics were originally introduced into schools not to complement education, but to prepare students for war. *The Classical Tradition* elsewhere notes, "Nationalism, militarism, and racist notions of healthiness played a role in this phase in the cultural history of European sports; the historical example of Sparta occupied center stage" (905). This is significant: where classical education emphasizes the pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty which results in service to one's fellow man, war is about overcoming one's fellow man in order to achieve victory. On a far less consequential level, an athletic contest is also about defeating the opponent in order to gain the win. Second, the introduction of athletics into education originally served to declare education subservient to the needs of the state, at odds with classical education's genuine purpose of freeing the individual to recognize truth, goodness and beauty regardless of time, place and national context. This paper does not suggest that this remains the goal of athletics today; however, since athletics are not an inherent part of classical education, care should be taken that its role within a school promote and assist the aims of classical education.

In discussing the cultivation of *virtue* within athletics, it is beneficial to define the term before proceeding. While the cardinal virtues are specifically enumerated (justice, temperance, prudence, fortitude, faith, hope and love), virtue may be defined more generally as "a beneficial quality or power of a thing." Within athletics, speed, strength, height and the like are all considered virtues which are beneficial to the competitor.

### **The Role of Athletics**

Athletics is to be categorized among the servile arts. As an art, a competition is not merely a venue in which virtue is practiced; but, as a painting is an expression of the virtue within the artist, so the competition is a product formed by the virtue within

the competitors. Competitors are to exercise virtue for the purpose of victory. Within that exercise, the various virtues must be rightly ordered: in other words, virtues of size and speed must be subordinate to virtues of character and sportsmanship, which must in turn be built upon cardinal virtues. If virtues are wrongly ordered (e.g., if sportsmanship is made subordinate to ambition), the result might be a statistical win, but an “ugly” victory.

This assists us in determining the role of athletics within classical education: namely, athletics serve as a forum for the test and exercise of virtue in the world. As an intense competition limited in duration, an athletic contest serves as a test of character, mind and body, exposing both weaknesses and strengths. Participation in athletics produces a host of benefits, including physical fitness, emotional health, mental stamina, growth in leadership and teamwork, and improvements in strength and endurance. Still, athletics remains an adiaphoron for education, and other activities might provide a similar arena and benefits; all things considered, athletics appears to be the most effective and expected setting.

A classically-trained student lives in a competitive world that does not normally pursue virtue or sacrifice on behalf of others: therefore, the student must learn how to exercise virtue within a world hostile to the aims of his education. His worldview will be contested: thus Scripture sometimes describes the Christian’s interaction with the world in terms of militant action (e.g., 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 2 Timothy 2:3) or athletic contests (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 2 Timothy 2:5). Within a classical school, athletics provide an opportunity for him to exercise his morality in a competitive world: there, the competitor is to do his best to achieve victory by exercising rightly-ordered virtue. This stands in contrast not only to outright cheating, but also achieving ugly victory by wrongly-ordered virtues.

With rightly-ordered virtue, then, the competitor is to give it his best with the intent of winning, work within given authority (rules, referee, coach and team), and exercise noble character at all times. These goals are not just sought within the contest; but reflecting the need for disciplined living throughout life’s many mundane activities, the athlete should likewise conduct himself at a high level throughout the season in practices, team meetings and even award ceremonies.

Where the cultivation of virtue is upheld in athletics, such programs and contests provide excellent training grounds for potential leaders who will need to navigate a competitive world without sacrificing truth, goodness and beauty.

### **Masculinity and Femininity in Sports**

Given that sports were first included in schools for martial preparation, it’s hardly surprising that athletics have historically been associated with men more than women. More recently, school sports for women have increased in number and participation, in part due to feminist definitions of equality and the passage of Title IX legislation in 1972. Popular cultural arguments often assert that men and women are equal and interchangeable, leading at times even to assertions that this

interchangeability extends—or must be made to extend—onto athletic teams and playing fields.

From the order of creation in Scripture, Christians affirm that men and women are equal before God and complementary in nature to each other: in other words, men and women are different by God's design, and those differences are to be honored and promoted. This has implications for athletic competition.

Participation in sports produces a variety of benefits for both sexes, although those benefits may manifest themselves differently between men and women. With regard to the participation of men and women in sports, this paper offers this observation: in general, athletic offerings at a school should not lead men to sacrifice or deny their masculinity, nor women their femininity.

Beyond that general observation, specifics are difficult and frustrating. To borrow Gilbert Meilaender's description of marriage, differences between the sexes are often not a puzzle to be solved, but a mystery to be enjoyed. It is often the case that one rightly determines something to be masculine or feminine without being able to explain precisely why it is so.

Coaches must have an awareness of sex differences and honor them; and coupled with the rapid changes in emotional and physical maturity within the junior high and high school years, knowing how to coach appropriately is no small feat. Men and women will respond differently to different motivations, and what builds character and determination in one sex may harm it in the other. (For instance, one coach offers anecdotally that junior high boys respond better to yelling and direction to fix what is wrong; while junior high girls respond better to praise for what they have done right, with small doses of instruction on how to improve.)

Within this discussion, there will be distinctions which must be maintained and misunderstandings which hamper clarity. For instance, godly submissiveness on the part of a woman is not the same thing as weakness, and one should not associate being feminine with being feeble. Strength does not contradict femininity: brutishness does. Similarly, if the anecdote in the previous paragraph is correct, then yelling is not necessarily the same thing as verbal abuse or disrespect; and a coach who refrains from yelling appropriately at a boys' team may be failing to foster a masculine toughness within them.

The choice of sports will differ for both men and women; though again, a specific list of sex-appropriate sports is difficult to construct. Contact sports (e.g., football, wrestling, etc.) have a more martial tone and are considered appropriate for men, not women. Non-contact sports (e.g., volleyball, tennis, etc.) are generally regarded as appropriate for either sex. It is to be noted that many sports (e.g., lacrosse, soccer, basketball) take on an entirely different tone when played by men or by women: in this case, the sex of the competitors informs the nature of the game.

This is also true of co-educational sports. Recognized or not, the simultaneous participation of both men and women will alter the nature of the game, as well it should. As a result, co-ed athletics becomes a time for exercise and fun, not excellence and competition. Such contests rarely rise to a level of competition which serves as a significant test of character and virtue.

### **A World within the World**

Discussions leading to the formation of this paper have led to a further necessary distinction for athletic competition: a sports contest is a world within the world, governed by a set of rules made by man. To break a game rule is not a sin: for instance, the basketball player who intentionally fouls an opponent has broken a rule; but he is often to be praised for his quick-wittedness, not called to repentance for his iniquity. Within the game rules are temporal consequences for violations, but these violations do not present themselves before the throne of God for judgment. However, if the same player commits a hard foul with the intent to injure an opponent, this is a sin that necessitates repentance as well as further character development: he has broken not just man's rules, but God's law. While this distinction may seem obvious, it is not necessarily recognized by young Christian competitors; and this can lead to unnecessary discord within a team or even a confusion of faith.

Another application might be that of a pep talk, either from a coach or between players. Unsurprisingly, such motivational speeches often extol the abilities of the team over that of the opponent; but this does not automatically mean that such talk speaks derisively of others and violates God's Word. To purpose to "rip the opponent limb from limb," for example, is not a literal threat of violence and bloodshed, but a metaphor about one's intent to win. To infer otherwise is to do violence to context.

### **Intramural and Interscholastic Athletics**

Regarding the nature of the training ground, options for schools include intramural and interscholastic athletic programs. While intramural athletics can accomplish many of the goals, interscholastic competition is a better option for a number of reasons. Except for those who are naturally competitive, students are less motivated to fully apply themselves in an intramural contest: there is simply less at stake. Further, interscholastic competition is likely to introduce athletes both to better competition and a greater variety of worldviews, thus providing a better test of both athletic skill and character. Finally, interscholastic competition allows athletes to compete in service to the school, with the potential benefit that such representation enhances the school's reputation in the community.

Practically speaking:

- An athletic program is properly not equal to the cultivation of virtue within the classical education classroom, but a servant to it. Schools must therefore be careful to ensure that athletics do not unduly influence the school's philosophy or existence.

- Students should be encouraged to participate in athletic events and physical activities, because such activities encourage self-discipline and perseverance, while warring against sloth and its attendant vices.
- Athletic contests will test a student's self-control, offering opportunity to train personal and public godly behavior in managing winning and losing.
- Where excluding players ("cutting") is necessitated by league regulations or limited school staff, coaches will consider players both on athletic ability and dedication to the virtues espoused by the school.
- The goal of the competitor is a well-fought fight.
- Excellent athletes should be encouraged to excel, but to do so with virtue rightly ordered. A competitor who excels athletically but exhibits poor sportsmanship or support of teammates is thus held on the bench, because of virtue wrongly ordered. A less-talented player who orders virtue correctly is to be preferred.
- The coach does not emphasize "win at all costs," but first effort, nobility and perseverance in the fight.
- Coaches shall exhibit godly character in the execution of their office.
- The coach's primary goal is to assist the players in exercising virtue in correct order, which includes cultivation of character within the athlete and the encouragement of the team toward noble behavior in all the athlete's activity (practice, game, and off-court team activities); and physical training—the preparation of the team to perform in an excellent manner (e.g., effective training, strategy, and practice and game preparation).