Athletes and the "Positive Coaching Alliance"

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Intercollegiate Athletics on a Jesuit Campus

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What role does intercollegiate athletics play on the campus of a Jesuit University?

The Jesuit educational model seeks excellence in all pursuits. The athletic programs at Jesuit universities should help fortify a well-rounded education where these educational ideals are translated into everyday real life out of classroom encounters. Successful Jesuit-educated graduates will embody the ideals that are fostered during their collegiate days. They will distinguish themselves within their communities as compassionate leaders and ethical voices, and they will be willing to serve others above themselves. This is our institutional identity. The more successful an institution is at nurturing these ideals the better off it will be.

As we look at what athletic programs contribute to a campus, we must first look at how true the program is to the mission of the individual institution. This will clearly identify the Jesuit presence within the program. The more mainstream and ingrained a program is the more likely a Jesuit presence will be found. An athletic program that operates with leadership that fosters and nurtures Jesuit values does a great service for all student-athletes.

Real and tangible student experiences must be a part of a Jesuit experience. The clear function of being a member of a team serves to support a classic Jesuit ideal, that of serving others. We find this in the case of team members helping other team members accomplish a specific task or goal. This teamwork is applicable to any one of a number of real life situations. Participation on a team also strengthens the ability of an individual to be more disciplined. This discipline may take the form of attending practice each day and working hard. Such discipline will clearly be a virtue sought by prospective employers.

The athletic arena also strengthens confidence and self-esteem. This is seen with the participation of female athletes and the attributes that they have attained through athletic participation. Many athletic teams will set goals and incorporate measurements to monitor their success during the course of a season. Again, this goal-setting and tracking have real life applications and would serve the student athletes very well as they seek employment. But as we look at discipline, confidence, self-esteem, goal-setting and measurements, none of these virtues seems to be particularly Jesuit. In order to distinguish just any athletic experience from a Jesuit athletic experience, we need the most important element in this comparison, faith.

The distinguishing characteristics of each Jesuit institution should be the faith of that institution. A strong faith community is vital for success. How faith is shared and the extent to which it is part of campus life is paramount in understanding that institution. Two characteristics of Jesuit education that are directly linked to our athletic program at Loyola University Chicago are the following:

At Loyola, religious experience is vital and must be integrated into the educational process so that a student has the opportunity to grow in both knowledge and faith. Faith in God is not an obstacle to learning; indeed belief can often sharpen and focus one’s intellectual search.

At Loyola, Jesuit education is person-centered. No matter how large or complex the institution, each individual is important and is given as much personal attention as humanly possible, both in and out of the classroom. The reason for this specific care for the individual is that, for so many faculty and staff at Loyola

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University and in our sister institutions, teaching is much more than a job — indeed more than a profession. It is a way of life.

The extent to which these ideals are present within an athletic department will determine the extent to which the student athletes experience them. Currently we have an extensive chaplain program where each team has a chaplain assigned to aid the athletes in their spiritual foundation and growth. Our teams further develop their faith with retreats in which faith, team-building and individual growth can be experienced.

Many teams will have a Mass followed by a dinner to further build team unity. We have had teams hold reflective prayer services after successful years, where they use the liturgy to give thanks for their success. This type of faith-based action does not evolve unless individuals understand and believe the core values of the Jesuit tradition. Religious experience and person-centered care are felt with the day-to-day operations of our athletic departments. This can be seen in the personal attention that our athletes receive from our medical training staff and from our University Medical Center's Sports Medicine team of physicians. The care for the individual is quite evident.

The athletic department also has incorporated a liturgy into the annual awards banquet. The liturgy is planned and staffed by student athletes. In addition, this year teams attended the Mass of the Holy Spirit in a group. The numerous opportunities to enrich and grow in faith are present on most Jesuit campuses. The students who choose to take advantage of what is presented are the fortunate ones. In life, as in athletic competition, you get out what you put in. This also is true with religious growth.

In today’s instant gratification society, where material gain and monetary success are used as benchmarks, some may identify the world of intercollegiate athletics as exploitation of athletes. But the athletic department must be seen as more than a potential source of revenue for the university. Jesuit universities that attain revenues from athletics realize that they still have to be accountable for providing each student with a Jesuit education, one in which graduation should be the goal of each student enrolled. The dual responsibility of providing the institution with a
quality athletic program while at the same time not compromising the academic integrity of the school must be maintained. This is not to suggest that all student-athletes will have a greater understanding of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, but it does mean that those students wanting to experience a deepening of their faith at Loyola will be in a situation where they can explore their faith more deeply.

Recent articles have suggested strategies for compensating (with cash payments) student athletes for their athletic participation. When athlete exploitation is mentioned, rarely is the fact stressed that a Jesuit education in some regions may cost more than $100,000 and that this is what an athlete is getting in compensation rather than some stipend. In real economic terms, while very few athletes will make significant money from athletics, it is important to remember that many more will be able to enter the workforce knowing they have a Jesuit education that has trained them for life.

The Positive Coaching Alliance

Looking at the subject from a wider perspective, we see that the values that athletics can teach young people are being lost in the United States amid a culture where a win-at-all-costs model filters down from professional and collegiate sports. In an effort to battle this culture, an organizational effort spearheaded by Jim Thompson has been formed. This organization, aptly named the Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA), is trying to transform youth sports so sports can transform youth. This Alliance is based in the Department of Athletics at Stanford University. This concept has been embraced by the Loyola University Chicago athletic department, and Loyola will be part of the PCA as the national program’s Midwest partner.

Ray O’Connell, Head Soccer Coach at Loyola for the last 20 years, was so impressed with this value-based organization that he will be the first Senior Local Coordinator for the Loyola partnership. The PCA will become a cornerstone in the development of youth coaches. In this development process it is hoped that Loyola University Chicago’s athletic department will become a focal point for the educational opportunity that this partnership
represents. Loyola will be the direct connection to an organization that puts youth athletic participation in proper perspective. In addition, the PCA's philosophy is so sound that it can also be used by intercollegiate coaches.

Some basic tenets of the PCA fit well within the framework of Jesuit values. The PCA utilizes moral courage to foster a positive culture. Simply put, this means that if something that is morally wrong is going on, (abusive coaches, fans or players), this environment will not tolerate such behavior. The PCA also redefines the term "winner." It is not limited to the scoreboard definition of who scored more runs or points but is focused on the following actions: making maximum effort; continuing to learn and improve; refusing to let mistakes stop a competitor.

These simple techniques speak volumes about youth athletics, but when examined more closely, they make a great statement about intercollegiate athletics as well. The PCA wants to develop a system of honoring the game within youth sports. The program wants to instill in all participants a respect for: rules of the games, opponents, officials, teammates, and tradition.

Intercollegiate athletic administrators struggle with how to instill sportsmanship in athletic competition. With a grass-roots movement like the PCA, it is hoped that athletes would arrive on campuses with a proper perspective on participation. Athletes would have greater respect for the privilege of playing instead of what may now be perceived as a right to play.

The PCA also realizes that a very evident fact of youth sports is that participation numbers go down over time, and this fact has to be addressed in order to keep youths participating. Many studies show that the more involved young people are, the less likely they are to have social problems such as substance abuse or academic difficulties. Participation levels are heavily dependent on how much fun an athlete has while participating. The coach controls the element of fun. The manner in which a coach relates to players will determine if the experience is positive or negative.

The PCA requires coaches to fill the emotional tank of their players. Producing a portable home court
advantage for teams is within the grasp of coaches who want to monitor their praise to criticism ratio. The effective PCA participant will have a 5:1 Plus/Minus Ratio (praise to criticism). Coaches who observe this ratio will have players who are cheerful, optimistic, and better able to deal with adversity. This model has direct application and implications for coaches at all levels and definitely can impact intercollegiate coaches. These methods may be viewed as oversimplified, but their simplicity makes them easy to apply to a wide variety of coaching situations.

In some circles the ideals of the PCA may seem like trivial talk aimed at coaches or institutions that are not interested in winning or don’t have a component of revenue-generation in their budgets. The PCA program would be too easy to dismiss on such a surface level. The PCA clearly states that coaches should be double-goal coaches. Winning is important, but unlike what Lombardi said, it's not "the only thing."

As all Jesuit schools know, the success of a graduating athlete is not measured in touchdowns, baskets and homeruns but in the difference that person can make in society. It is hoped that this difference is seen in a life of service for others, with a strong passion for justice and a base of strong Catholic Christian morality. Coaches who have an eye on lifetime effects rather than seasonal ones will provide a great service to their schools and athletes. The most successful coach will be the one who knows and recognizes the importance of winning, but will balance such an attitude with a view of life's bigger picture. Striving to achieve this balance should be an on-going mission of all coaches with ardent support from administration and staff.

The distinction of having an athletic program in NCAA Division I athletics is very important to prospective athletes and students at large. This distinction at times can be looked at by some in a negative light. The on-going media emphasis on negative stories may be justified; however, a great majority of student athletes, especially those involved in sports other than men's basketball and football, are truly student athletes. These students lead typical existences on campus, participating in the sport that they love. Their primary intention is putting their
education to use upon graduation.

According to annual NCAA graduation rates, student athletes nationally graduate at a higher rate than non-athletes do. The institutions that have surrendered the academic balance of a university for scoreboard results do so with the complicit approval of coaches and administrators up to and including the president of the university. Once control of the athletic department is placed anywhere outside of the direct control or monitoring of the president, it is very difficult to regain. It is imperative that a president take as active a role in steering the athletic department as he would the School of Education, in order to make sure that the athletic department fosters the educational mission of the institution.

Academic integrity must never be compromised. No amount of money attained through deceptive practices is worth the reputation of a whole institution. Among faith-based institutions it is necessary to set the moral tone in intercollegiate athletics. Surely if Jesuit institutions do not abide by the rules of fair-play, honesty and integrity, who can society look to for a sound moral example? Excellence in all pursuits is a Jesuit educational ideal, and it certainly can be applied to the manner in which institutions abide by the rules of a governing body like the NCAA.

Loyola University of Chicago will continue to utilize the strong tenets of Jesuit education, supplemented by the components of the PCA, to move the athletic department forward with an eye on producing faith-centered individuals who have balance and perspective in their lives. Athletic departments at Jesuit institutions should foster an environment in which Jesuit ideals are seamlessly embodied in every student-athlete’s experience. In the year 2002 we, as educators, should continue to expect excellence and not approve of mediocrity.
And a Few Closing Comments:

The National Seminar on Jesuit Jesuit Higher Education had a lively time thinking through this issue's theme: the role of sports in Jesuit higher education, and we're grateful to the contributors for making this issue an informative and inspiring one.

But the topic proved to be broader and deeper than we first imagined. Indeed, as we read the final copy for this issue -- during an October 2001 meeting at Creighton University

-- numerous questions for a follow-up treatment of "It's How You Play the Game" came from around the table. We'd like to share these questions with you, questions that represent "unfinished business" on the question of sports at Jesuit colleges and universities.

(1) We need more numbers here. When we read allusions to the money generated or not generated by NCAA-level sports programs, we kept stopping and asking "well, how much?" "where does it come from?" "where does it go?" and, most importantly, 'how much 'bang' is really generated by these 'bucks,' and who's doing the accounting?" One question that must be faced: are athletics being subsidized by other university departments? Or are they just outsized in comparison, and should they be subsidizing other departments?

And, what effect would the kind of financial disclosure called for by the Drake Group have on campus morale? Not unrelated to the financial question are the issues of the impact of athletics on recruiting and the just distribution of financial aid.

(2) Fr. Loughran raises a key question, one which would make an interesting topic for an AJCU poll: what percentage of students on your campus regularly attend home games or meets? Has this changed in the last five years? The last ten? What is the trend? If, as is implied in Fr. Loughran's article, student attendance at these events is down, what role do sports really serve in promoting campus spirit? Would suggestions about re-integrating athletes into the student body, as posed by the Drake Group, re-position the role of sports on the campus, making them less a performance that "they" put on (echoes here of the grumbling that we are creating a "gladiator class") and more an event that has a claim on the student body as "ours"? Could a broad reading of Mark Bandsuch's presentation of the Athletic Spirituality Program be one catalyst for change?

(3) And then there's the culture of sports, to conflate both issues of Conversations from this year [Issue # 20 examined Campus Cultures]. One of our members gently suggested that Fr. Neenan's perspective on campus culture as enhanced by NCAA sports was "macho, sexist, and tribal." Could this be why Dianne Nolan's highly successful program continues to be stymied by a lack of campus energy for women's basketball, now decades after Title IX? Might this be related to our country's larger -- and somewhat problematic - love affair with sports? Those imbued with an Ignatian worldview concerned with ends and means may well question the time Americans spend on spectator sports, the salaries professional athletes command, the rampant commercialism pervading the sports world on all levels, the importance given to winning rather than just playing the game, etc. Are Jesuit colleges and universities called to be leaven for this culture ... or just cheerleaders?