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Character is Everything: Promoting Ethical Excellence in Sports

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BOOK REVIEW

CHARACTER IS EVERYTHING: PROMOTING ETHICAL EXCELLENCE IN SPORTS

Russell W. Gough

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Sports ethics. To many people these two words do not belong together.

Sports is seen as a realm far removed from reality with highly paid superstars who are virtually untouchable.

Ethics, on the other hand, is a term that often lacks a consistent meaning. This inconsistency leads to a belief that each person's own personal ethical code is all that matters. Ethical discussions are left for academics or hard cases (abortion, assisted suicide, etc.). Ethics then is seen as something that does not enter into every day decisions which often become automatic.

Character is Everything by Russell W. Gough (Professor of Philosophy and Ethics, Pepperdine University) dispels these misguided notions about ethics and sports. This timely book not only shows that conduct in sports can be improved through a consideration of what is ethical, but also that the sports world is one of the most visible areas where a consideration of what is ethical should become more important. After reading so often about the problems with Dallas Cowboys players like Michael Irvin and Leon Lett, the antics of Dennis Rodman, and the on the field misconduct of Roberto Alomar and Albert Belle, this ethical viewpoint seems more important every day.

Commentators and scholars have noted that sports often acts as a reflection of society. On a smaller scale, sports can point out the problems that often are found in society as a whole, such as racial discrimination in hiring, possible misconduct of celebrities, and the deterioration of many major cities. Professor Gough recognizes this fact early on but presents his analysis from the basic premise that "sports continue to shape character in positive, life-enriching ways." (p. xv).

Professor Gough begins in a manner that many scholars and journalists would avoid. He recognizes the positive effects that sport can have on those involved, or even those merely spectating: sports can teach an

individual the value of cooperation and teamwork, the importance of hard work, and the willpower to succeed. This positive viewpoint is important because it leads to the further discussions that Professor Gough presents regarding ways in which the sports experience can be made even more positive.

At this early premise, Professor Gough also makes clear that he will not be approaching the issue of sports ethics in order to criticize individual athletes or other participants. He recognizes that we often judge athletes as moral individuals based on what we perceive as their lack of character, as shown in their actions on and off the field (i.e. Dennis Rodman's on the court antics and Michael Irvin's off the field problems with the law). Professor Gough recognizes the danger in this type of thinking as it may "force us into seeing only the bad and not the good that still exists in our games, in our athletes and coaches, in ourselves." (p. 4).

It bears noting that although this book is written in an easy-to-understand conversational style, it deals with issues of the utmost importance — ethics, personal character, personal responsibility. The simplicity of this approach belies the seriousness in subject matter. While it would be easy for what some would term a professional "ethicist" to postulate on how things *should be* and how people *should act*, Professor Gough does not do this. He points out his own experiences and shortcomings, and takes a personal approach showing that he too must take responsibility for being more ethical. Unlike many authors in the field of ethics, he should be commended for making himself no better and no worse than anyone else who would read this book. He is able to achieve this through the many personal experiences he shares in the book.

The book itself is separated into six basic sections.

The first section entitled *Sportsmanship: A Reality Check* shows that when it comes to ethics and ethical excellence in sports, one must look no further for improvement than the mirror. Professor Gough shows that, many times, those of us who would complain about the actions of certain individuals in sports, would then go ahead and swear at the referees, or bet on a game, or deride a player who has a bad game. We act in this way while, at the same time, criticizing a player who gets a technical for yelling at a referee, or criticizing a player who complains about his teammates lack of dedication. As Professor Gough explains, ethical considerations must start from within. If one does not have some sense of what is right and wrong and attempts to act on that lack of understanding, how can we legitimately criticize others for their actions?

This analysis also focuses Professor Gough's discussion on ethics itself. In the next section of the book entitled *Sportsmanship and Ethics*:

Two Sides of the Same Coin, Professor Gough keenly explains, that, when many people hear the word ethics they shrink away thinking such talk is only for academics or difficult cases. Therefore, people end up thinking that ethics itself is something left to personal opinion and choice, with no uniformity among individuals. As Professor Gough explains, “the impression that ethics is completely a matter of opinion and controversy is wrong, not to mention potentially dangerous.” (p. 24). This impression is wrong because it would equate ethics with doing what an individual feels is right, and it would relegate actual discussion of ethics to only those instances that classify as controversies. Again, as Professor Gough explains, “[w]e can fall into a trap of focusing so much on our disagreements that we lose sight of just how much we actually agree on when it comes to ethics and sportsmanship.” (p. 25).

Professor Gough defines ethics as involving both “the kind of person someone is — his or her character — and someone’s actions.” (p. 21). Ethics is not only a reflection that someone believes or attempts to act in a certain way, but also that they actually do so. Intuitively, this would include an evaluation of this action next to some sort of standard of ethics that society as a whole would agree upon in some way. And since most people actually do agree on how to act in simple situations (not to steal, or purposefully hurt others, etc.), this is a very advanced conception of ethics which many scholars would not attempt to promote. Yet, it is superior in its practicality. What better ethical tool could there be to evaluate one’s ethical nature than by looking at one’s actions, regardless of one’s mindframe?

This definition of ethics leads directly into the definition of a term that often is synonymous with ethical action in sport — sportsmanship. Professor Gough defines sportsmanship as “a matter of being good (character) and doing right (action) in sports.” (p. 21). This definition obviously flows from the initial definition of ethics. Through this definition Professor Gough has then transformed discussion of ethics in sports, for those who would be scared by the term, into a discussion of sportsmanship in sports, which most individuals involved in sports could understand.

It must be noted that even though the author’s explanation of sportsmanship draws from his definition of ethics, this does not over-emphasize the importance of sports in one’s ethical development. What so often happens in scholarly discussion of sports is that professionals in the field of ethics and philosophy think that the focus on ethics in sports places too much emphasis on sports as a provider of ethical education in society. However, these types of criticisms are nothing more than the

complaints of the unenlightened or the close-minded. Professor Gough's linkage of sportsmanship and ethics does not glorify sports as a bastion of ethics and ethical action. Instead, it merely serves his purpose of showing how sports can be a learning point in ethical development if used in certain ways. It may not be the *best* learning point, but it can be *one* point in one's ethical growth.

The third section entitled *Character: The Heart of the Matter* then moves to a discussion of character. This discussion flows easily from the earlier chapters dealing with ethics, sportsmanship and personal responsibility. As already defined, one's ethical nature involves one's character and one must take personal responsibility for that character. As Professor Gough defines it, this character "will always involve both what we're good at and what we're not good at, our abilities and our inabilities, our strengths and our weaknesses." (p. 35). At first glance this type of definition may seem more to deal with a person's overall abilities (i.e. intelligence, strength, etc.) than one's actual character. However, Professor Gough's discussion of this topic in the following chapters shows what he means by the term.

In Chapter 11, entitled *A Test of Character*, Professor Gough relays the story of a former student. This student was also an athlete who seemed personable, intelligent and a real pleasure to have around. All in all a "good" kid on his way to being a "good" person. Unfortunately, this student-athlete ended up stealing from other students during a break between semesters and was expelled.

This personal example shows that character, as Professor Gough understands it, is more than how you act around others and your talent in the classroom or on the field. It is a combination of these talents and your actions as an individual. It is something beyond physical talents and gifts. As Professor Gough explains, this student-athlete who seemed like a person of strong character and potential failed at being a person of strong ethical character.

This term character is particularly amorphous and understandably so. But, again, by drawing on the earlier definition of ethics as involving one's actions, it becomes easier to evaluate one's personal character. Furthermore, an important part of character is "having the character to do the right thing." (p. 42). This involves the will, guts and courage to act in the ethically correct way. As Professor Gough explains, "[w]hen it comes to doing the right thing, we usually already know what the right thing to do is." (p. 42).

The fourth section deals with role models. Professor Gough begins this section with an example that most readers can relate to — Charles

Barkley's infamous "I am not a role model" commercial. Yet, Professor Gough does not judge Barkley harshly as so many have. Instead, he again shifts the focus to personal responsibility. As he explains, "[p]eople never reveal their character so clearly as when they describe someone else's character." (p. 59). In other words, you must look at yourself first before ever judging someone else.

Professor Gough also explains that athletic role models are not bad choices as role models per se. The main problem is that most people do not have the luxury of actually meeting these individuals in a meaningful enough way to use them as true role models. As he says, "[i]t's not as though we can decide not to be role models . . . We simply can't escape it." (p. 69). In sports and in life, everyone is a role model, and our actions should be tailored to make sure that we are the best role models we can be.

The fifth section is appropriately titled *Ethical Excellence: The Name of the Game is Always My Personal Character*. In this final section Professor Gough provides what may be to him the most important lesson of this book, what he terms the formula for ethical excellence: ACT - HABIT - CHARACTER - DESTINY. (p. 89). This simple formula shows that acting as an ethical sportsman involves not only ones actions, but learning to make such actions habitual, letting this habit of ethical excellence help build one's character, and letting this character which has grown through action lead to a personal destiny.

The final section provides a sportsmanship checklist which can assist sports participants in there everyday participation. This checklist is simple enough for a person of any age or involvement, but it captures the essence of his discussion throughout the book in helping a participant achieve some sort of ethical excellence. It also continues the practical lessons that can be taken from this book by providing a useful list that can be used during sports participation

Character is Everything fills a gap in the literature that often goes unnoticed. Although there are several journals and books which attempt to discuss "sports ethics," they do not do so in an easy to understand practical manner. Professor Gough's book does so without sacrificing any discussion of the reality of ethical decision making, and without losing any of the seriousness of what he is attempting to achieve.

Professor Gough shows that sports is a place where ethical decision making and action is important, not only for participants, but also for the audience. And in starting with one's own personal responsibility and the development of one's personal character, Professor Gough takes an approach that is not often followed.

Although a short work, this book is a tightly written and thorough piece which should be highly recommended to everyone involved or merely slightly interested in sports. What it lacks in length it makes up for in importance. It deals with ethics and character, and the lessons it presents can be helpful for any individual beyond the area of sports participation. Hopefully, this book will lead to further scholarship in this often neglected area.

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