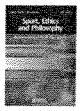

Sport, Ethics and Philosophy
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsep20

Catholic Perspectives on Sports: From Medieval to Modern Times

Robert Deltete[a]

[a] Department of Philosophy, Seattle University, Washington, USA

Published online: 23 Dec 2013.

To cite this article: Robert Deltete (2013) Catholic Perspectives on Sports: From Medieval to Modern Times, Sport, Ethics and Philosophy, 7:4, 467-469, DOI: 10.1080/17511321.2013.846397

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2013.846397

Sport, Ethics and Philosophy, 2013
Vol. 7, No. 4, 467—482

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEWS

Patrick Kelly S.J., *Catholic Perspectives on Sports: From Medieval to Modern Times*, New York: Paulist Press, 2012. Pp. 212. $19.95. ISBN: 978-0-809-14975-3 (pb)

If I were asked to summarize Fr. Pat Kelley's book in a sentence or two (a risky venture), I would say that it presents and defends a philosophical anthropology that affirms the meaning and value of sport (or, more broadly, of games and sports) from a Catholic perspective; in particular, from an Ignatian one. This is a perspective that has deep roots in Catholic thought, and one that, Fr. Kelly thinks, deserves to be reaffirmed in the contemporary context of commercialized and overly competitive athletics, where he thinks that the importance of play—for him the essential, defining element of games and sports—has largely been lost. Allow me to explain.

There is a standard narrative about the place of sports in the Christian understanding of what is and should be important to Christians, and it plays, at best, a minimal role. In this narrative, Christians prior to the Reformation placed a large (sometimes exclusive) emphasis on the soul, in its activity in the spiritual realm, and disregarded or even disdained the body, and its work in the material world. What was overwhelmingly important, on this view, was to get into a proper relationship with God, which had to do with the right orientation of one's soul and was unrelated (as long as it was not sinful) to what someone did with her body. In the view of many scholars who have written on the history of sport (for selected passages from their works, see 63—68), this is the main reason that Christianity has traditionally minimized the value of sport—or even condemned it—as not conducive to the overriding objective of Christian life (24—25, 63, 93, 94, 139, 141).

Fr. Kelly persuasively argues, using a lot of unimpeachable Christian sources (Irenaeus, Augustine, and Aquinas, e.g.), that this is a largely mistaken understanding of the place of games and sports in the early Christian and medieval world. During the medieval period, for example, Catholics regularly participated in games and sports on feast days and depicted such activities in prayer books and on woodcuts and stained glass windows in churches and cathedrals (2, 62, 67, 162). (Fr. Kelly includes some of these images—unfortunately in rather drab black and white—in ch. 2, 29—36.) And that practice continued with many of the Renaissance humanists and the Jesuits, both of whom incorporated sports into their systems of education (37—52).

Why was that? For Catholic writers, at least, it was based on a way of thinking about the world and the place of humans in it. To begin with, Catholics have always embraced the belief that the world, which is God's creation, is good—all of it, including the material world (82, 162, 192n45). As a result, Catholic writers have forcefully criticized sects, such as the Gnostics (68—74) and the Manicheans (74—83), who have thought otherwise; and the Church has declared them heretics (68). There is nothing bad or evil per se in the material. Second, Catholic authors have always emphasized (following Aristotle) that the human person is a unity of soul *and* body, so that the

body is not just a peripheral attachment (77—78, 83—84, 162; cf. 65); it is an essential part of what it means to be human. As such, it deserves to be respected and developed, along with one's spiritual development.

I think that is Fr. Kelly's view (see 143, 161). Indeed, I think that for him bodily development in sports can also be coupled with spiritual development. If so, I agree. And he cites passages from a number of apparently unlikely authors in support —Thomas Aquinas (109—113) and Nicolas of Cusa (113—116). The passages from Aquinas were especially interesting to me, since while Thomas seems to have commented on almost everything, I did not realize that he had also commented on the value of sport. Central to Aquinas' positive evaluation of games and sports is another Aristotelian idea that has been incorporated into Catholic, including Ignatian, moral teaching. This is the belief that a 'flourishing'(from the Greek *eudaimonia*) human life is one of moderation. Moral virtue is a matter of discerning the right balance between excess and deficiency (5, 42, 48, 54, 62, 116, 118, 139 163—164; for the Jesuits on this, see 118—128). So, it was for Aquinas with play and sport. It will probably come as no surprise to learn that Thomas was opposed to excessive attachment to games and sports; but it may come as a surprise, as it did for me, to learn that for him a life deficient in play is not just impoverished but sinful (5, 110, 116, 150). Indeed, Aquinas even compared athletic play to contemplation, which is valuable in itself, independent of its restorative benefit (112—113, 153, 159). Play, and the pleasure that accompanies it, is not just a momentary 'pause that refreshes' (110), but is essential to human well-being (156). I think that Fr. Kelly emphasizes this side of Aquinas's teaching (however little Aquinas himself may have taken it to heart, given his portly figure and obsessive work habits), because the Puritans, who were much more influential than Catholics in the USA throughout the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth centuries, were deeply suspicious of games and sports as diverting Christians from their proper Christian callings, which required a dominant attention to work (3, 14—18, 25, 146—147, 168n13, 201n). An active embrace of the intrinsic value of sport is one reason —there were many others, of course—that American Catholics were often viewed as lax and even sinful as Christians (15, 25, 155).

A lot of the religious resistance to sports was overcome, Fr. Kelly suggests, when they were professionalized and commercialized and became an aspect of the Protestant work ethic. In the process, however, sports at all levels became (and, to a large extent, have remained) overly competitive and combative. The moderation stressed by Aquinas and the Jesuits has been overwhelmed by the desire to win, often at any cost. As a result, the play side of sport—its 'fun' aspect, which Fr. Kelly thinks is its essence—has been pushed to the margin, as athletes are obsessed with winning, because their coaches and mentors are, and not with their formation as good people (147, 150, 153). Fr. Kelly thinks, as do I, that a return to the moderation espoused by (if not only by) early Catholic authors would be a step in the right direction (164—165).

Are there contemporary examples of what he has in mind? There are. Fr. Kelly does not try to survey all the ways in which a Catholic attitude toward sports has played out in our current world, but he does include a couple of nice examples. One (131—133) I already knew about: Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, since I have read David Maraniss' *When Pride Still Mattered* (Simon & Schuster, 1999)—a wonderful book. Lombardi always wanted to win, but note what Fr. Kelly cites (132—133) from Maraniss' book about the profound Jesuit influence on how he sought to do

that—with 'discipline, clarity, faith, [and] subsuming individual ego to a larger good.' The other I did not know of until I read Fr. Kelly's brief but moving description of the Immaculata High School girls basketball team, which won three national championships (133–138: based on Julie Bryne, *O God of Players: The Story of Immaculata Mighty Macs* (Columbia U. Press, 2003)). This was in the late 1970s, when women's sports was still largely unrecognized—just a blip on the radar of college athletics. Fr. Kelly does a nice job of portraying the relation between the Sisters of Immaculata and their students. The sisters always prayed for their students and regularly turned out for their games, usually filling an entire section of the bleachers—all in habits, as was still the custom in the 1970s, but all screaming and shouting support. That must have been pretty intimidating to the opposition! The games could be intense, since the Immaculata girls *did* play to win. Fr. Kelly records a reflection of one of the referees: 'You sometimes had an escort to get you out of the gym as an official,' but she added: 'Usually a nun. Nobody would mess with a nun' (208n36). The girls, in turn, adored their sisterly mentors and regularly returned as adults to be with them in their infirmity. A nice story of Christian bonding and of the fusion of spirituality and sport.

Catholic Perspectives on Sports is a slim volume—only 165 pages of text—but it covers a lot of territory. And it does so in a clear, clean, crisp style. Fr. Kelly writes very well. Some readers may find him a bit too repetitive. I did not. Since he is juggling a number of themes (the goodness of creation, the unity of the human person, the intrinsic value of sport, and the ways in which the values of moderation and fun have been lost), I appreciated the reminders of the book's overall course. Other readers may also think that Fr. Kelly has spent too much time discussing 'ancient' sources instead of addressing contemporary applications of them. Again, I disagree. I liked his attention to early Christian texts as a way of dispelling the long-standing myth that Catholics, and Christians in general, have condemned sports or minimalized their value for leading a spiritual life. As I said at the outset, I think Fr. Kelly offers a philosophical anthropology that defends the meaning and value of sport from an explicitly religious perspective. As such, it is quite unique in the relatively new field of the philosophy of sport. In *A Philosophy of Sport*, for example, Steven Connor defines sports as 'games that tire you' (London: Reaktion Books, 2011, 15), which serves to remind readers of the basic physicality of sport, but which fails to address the playful and potentially spiritual dimensions of the activity. In contrast, Fr. Kelly's book focuses on these dimensions, and I warmly recommend it for that focus.

Robert Deltete © 2013
Department of Philosophy
Seattle University, Washington, USA
rdeltete@seattleu.edu
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2013.846397

Paul David, *A Guide to the World Anti-Doping Code: A Fight for the Spirit of Sport*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. 412. £95 (hb), ISBN: 978-1-107-00346-0

This legal guidebook has been written by a seasoned New Zealand-based sports barrister with a track record in the field of anti-doping. It is a stringent and thorough