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## Sport and the Spirit of Jesuit Education

Campus Experiences, Jesuit Traditions

BY PATRICK KELLY, SJ

In the most recent issue of *Conversations* (Fall 2015, No. 48), I wrote about how the emergence of the market society in the United States was negatively impacting intercollegiate athletics because it was “crowding out non-market values worth caring about.” Some of these non-market values are obvious. Most fundamentally, human beings are more important than markets. In the Jesuit tradition of education, we should excel in *cura personalis*, or care of the person, which is directed toward the integral development of our students. The most basic, non-market value in intercollegiate athletics, then, has to do with the growth of our students and their education as whole persons.

One of the most helpful resources for understanding how sport participation leads to the personal and even spiritual growth of our students is the flow theory of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Early in his career, the Hungarian-born psychologist studied painters who were not likely to make money or become famous as a result of painting. And yet these painters immersed themselves fully in their craft and loved to talk about its subtle details. He realized that what he was observing was *enjoyment*. In subsequent studies of people involved in sports and other challenging activities that require skills, he learned that people experience enjoyment when they put the whole of themselves into an activity, and push the envelope or go beyond where they were before the activity. When people are engaged in such activities they grow and flourish.

He came to call these enjoyable experiences “flow.” Some characteristics of flow experiences are: one-pointedness of mind, egolessness, effortlessness, union with one’s surroundings, and an altered sense of time. The one-pointedness of mind refers to being fully present to what one is doing. During such experiences, what one is doing and what one is thinking about are the same thing. While fully immersed in an activity, the person does not have psychic attention available to be explicitly focused on *himself*. The self-consciousness that can be so much a part of daily life disappears as the person is concentrating only on the task at hand.

When a point guard is dribbling the ball up the court near the end of a tie game, for example, he has to be concentrating on what play his coach has called, who the hot shooter is, how much time is left on the clock, what defense the other team is playing, and so on. He doesn’t have attention to explicitly focus on *himself*, asking such questions as “What do they think of me?” or “How am I doing?”

As this example suggests, in team sports the experience of egolessness is concomitant with an experience of being a part of something larger than oneself. A student at Seattle University described how egolessness was related to being a member of his crew team: “What I was doing was not about me or what I wanted, but about perfecting the activity itself and working with my teammates. In a boat, if one person is out of sync then the whole boat gets offset. During a race it is crucial that everyone remain focused on every movement being the same.”

While people are not thinking about themselves during a flow experience, afterwards they have the sense that they have grown. “When not preoccupied with ourselves,” Csikszentmihalyi writes, “we actually have a chance to expand the concept of who we are. Loss of self-consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward.” Flow experiences also seem effortless. But such effortlessness is preceded by disciplined attention and practice. Finally, a person experiences time differently during flow. When a person is in flow during a soccer game, a few hours can go by in what seems like ten minutes.

One reason flow theory is potentially so important has to do with the analogies between the dynamics of flow experiences and the way spiritual writers have described the dynamics of the spiritual life. There are analogies between flow and what Ignatius called spiritual consolation, for example. For Ignatius, spiritual consolation is an experience of genuine happiness and spiritual joy. It feels effortless, as though obstacles are being removed, or one is coming into one’s own house through an open door. But this effortlessness is preceded by disciplined attention to Jesus’ life as recorded in the scriptures and prayer and meditation. For Ignatius, ego is the primary obstacle to spiritual progress and so the spiritual life is an ongoing process of purification of self-centered motivations. Most importantly, like flow experiences, spiritual consolation is associated with the growth of the person, or a movement “from good to better.”

I have taught the flow theory in interdisciplinary courses about sport and in workshops with coaches for several years now. Student athletes and coaches in our universities appreciate learning about flow, because it gives a language to what it is they have been experiencing during their participation in sport throughout their lives. It helps them to identify the human significance of sport, which opens out onto the transcendent dimension of life. Coaches enjoy having the opportunity to talk about how they can provide a context to make it more likely for their players to experience flow and hence personal and even spiritual growth.

Some student athletes, of course, come to the university with an individualistic mindset that is related to the wider culture’s tendency to think about sport in instrumental or market terms, typically as a means to a college scholarship. Such players have difficulty experiencing the egolessness associated with flow, or to understand themselves as part of a team. The educational task in such cases is to help the students move from a self-centered orientation to an awareness that they are part of something larger than themselves.

Flow experiences are so rewarding that they can take on too important a role in a young person’s life and in a culture. They can even become addictive. As faculty members are well aware, it is possible for some young people to become so focused on athletics that they neglect academics. This problem is exacerbated by the extent of media coverage of sports in our culture, especially at the Division 1 level.

The world of student athletes should be *expanded* while studying at a Jesuit university, not *narrowed*. Faculty members play the crucial role in this regard. They widen the students’ worldview by introducing them to history, the arts, natural and social sciences, philosophy and theology in the core curriculum as well as deeper inquiry in their respective disciplines. They help students discover their passion and identify talents they have in addition to their talents in sport. In this way, they help them to *pivot* from intercollegiate athletic participation to meaningful lives of work and service.

To summarize: There are many “non-market values” present in participation in intercollegiate athletics. Most importantly, athletic participation can lead to the personal growth of our students. When engaged in the challenges of their sport they experience enjoyment, and begin to appreciate its intrinsic rewards. In team sports students experience self-transcendence as they set aside ego and learn how to work with others in pursuit of a common goal. In the process they make many friendships, some of which will last for the rest of their lives. Some young people describe their experience of self-transcendence as an encounter with the Transcendent, or with God.

There are also non-market values experienced by those who watch our student athletes play. At the most basic level, students, faculty, alumni and members of the wider community will attend games and watch our student athletes play because they enjoy it, because it is fun. Also, at the moment few other activities bring together the various Jesuit university constituencies the way athletic contests do. In other words, they are opportunities for members of the university to experience community.

It is important that university leaders and members of Boards of Trustees not regard intercollegiate athletics merely in instrumental terms, as a means to external goods such as money and recognition. Such thinking undermines the educational value of sport in our universities. It is also perilously close to regarding our students in an instrumental way. Human values are at stake in these activities that need to be protected and encouraged. If our universities are not places that can identify and protect such human values, what institutions in our culture will be able to do so?

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