

Detroit Jesuit teaches the spiritual side of the sports world

SPORTS, from Page 1E

today, and they're both right at the heart of sports," says Kelly. "People are really yearning today to know that there's a deeper dimension to their lives."

Recently, Chicago Bulls coach Phil Jackson published his own account of how Buddhist principles of selflessness and compassion helped him to fuse the Bulls' volatile star players into a unified, winning team. Called "Sacred Hoops," Jackson's memoir claims that spirituality was at the heart of the Bulls' three national championships between 1991 and 1993.

Kelly's students are reading "Sacred Hoops" as one of their texts.

The spirit-sport connection may be a hot topic, but most universities have been slow to respond to the subject. Spokespeople for the University of Michigan, Michigan State University and Wayne State University all say their schools offer nothing similar to Kelly's class.

Competition has pitfalls

Eastern Michigan University offers related classes on sports, morality and values, taught by Jennifer Beller, one of the nation's top authorities on the moral development of athletes.

In May, Kelly and Beller will speak at a conference called "Sports, Spirituality and Character Formation" in

Mundelein, Ill., cosponsored by several universities and the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago.

"We're both trying to help kids come into better touch with who they are as persons," Beller says. "Pat is teaching at a Catholic university and is coming at it from a spiritual perspective on sports. I'm teaching at a public institution, and I'm coming at it through the perspective of values and ethics."

In eight years of national research, Beller has studied 25,000 American athletes of all ages using psychological tests to analyze their moral development.

Her basic conclusion: "We do teach loyalty, dedication and sacrifice through athletics, and these are important qualities. . . . But these things become so important that kids who compete in sports build up a moral callousness to some other important concepts: honesty, responsibility, justice and respect."

Winning becomes everything, Beller says. "It translates into: You do what you've got to do to win. And: It's only cheating if you get caught."

An Eastern dimension

Beller believes that schools with sporting programs also should offer classes that help athletes develop their moral reasoning.

These connections are centuries

old in Eastern religious traditions, such as yoga or t'ai chi, which teach that learning to control the body's movement is an important part of a person's moral and spiritual development.

But Western culture and the Christian faith threw up many barriers to studying these links. Many theologians regarded the human body as dangerously sinful. And until the 1960s, most Christian churches flatly condemned Eastern religions.

"Forty years ago, I could not have taught this class or asked my students to reflect about what they can learn from Buddhism," Kelly says. "The church would not have allowed it."

Kelly, 35, has been a Jesuit for five years. He earned a doctorate in theology from Harvard Divinity School and is about two years from his ordination as a priest.

His unusual insights into theology stem from his years as a star athlete at Bishop Borgess High School in the late 1970s.

As a freshman, he played varsity basketball and, as a sophomore, he started on the varsity football team. In his junior season as a tailback, he gained 1,000 yards.

Then, in the fall of his senior year, he broke his ankle in a team practice and missed "what was going to be the biggest year of my life."

"It was a very difficult year," Kelly now tells his students. His whole iden-

tity had been defined by sports, "and my injury highlighted the precariousness of that."

Kelly's experiences click with his students, most of whom are athletes or have competed.

"Injury is a big fear," says Otten, who says it always lingers in the back of his mind as he prepares for a track event. "An injury could take away everything you know in your life."

Then, he added: "But, if you incorporate spirituality in your life, it could help to pull you through it."

That's what Kelly hopes his students are learning: Sports are good and can produce an incredible spiritual high, but athletes also need to develop their souls as well as their bodies.

Drawing from the Christian gospels in a recent class, Kelly described how Jesus' friends started arguing one day about who was the greatest among the 12 disciples. "And Jesus said, 'If anyone wishes to be first, then he should be the last among you,'" Kelly said.

"If you're still caught up in wondering if you're going to be the greatest star in the world, then you're missing the point of being human."

Christianity and Buddhism stress the value of giving up individual desires for the greater good, Kelly concluded. "Jesus said, 'What profit is there for one to gain the whole world, if he loses himself in the process?'"