



Patrick Kelly's class at U-D Mercy is one of the few in this area on the subject.

RICHARD LEE/Detroit Free Press

The soul of sports

Millions of Americans already pursue sports with what seems like holy zeal, but a Jesuit scholar at the University of Detroit Mercy believes there really is a spiritual side to the sporting world.

At their best, well-trained athletes can attain a kind of spiritual transcendence through sports. On the other hand, if jocks ignore their souls, they can become so obsessed with their bodies that they wind up in trouble when their competitive days are over.

Those are the conclusions Patrick Kelly draws in a popular new university course and in a textbook on the spirituality of sports that he hopes to finish writing this summer.

"Most people don't realize there is any connection between spirituality and sports," says Todd Otten, 20, a long jumper and sprinter on the Titans' track team who is taking Kelly's course this term. "This class has helped me to realize some of the gifts God has given us in sports."

The total focus of an athlete's mind and body during a peak performance is remarkably like an experience of deep meditation, Donald Bellemore has discovered in Kelly's class. Bellemore, 40, was a semiprofessional hockey player, and he's now finishing his bachelor's degree.

**Detroit
Jesuit
teaches
the
spiritual
dimension
of
athletics**

BY DAVID CRUMM
Free Press Religion Writer

"It just hit me while taking this class," Bellemore says. "It can be a spiritual experience after you have practiced and practiced until all of your actions become automatic. Then, in a game, you become so focused that you don't even think about the thousands of people in the stands. It's just this sense of fluidity of movement all around you."

"It doesn't matter whether you win the game. You've won as a player just by attaining that state."

But Kelly also stresses the spiritually darker side of sports in which athletes ignore their souls and find themselves devastated when their bodies are injured.

"I can appreciate what he's saying," says Richana Davis, 19, whose whole life once seemed focused on running dashes and relays for her Belleville High School track team. "In my junior year, I got shin splints and it just hurt me to sit on the bench. It was so hard."

When U-D Mercy listed Kelly's course in its catalog for this term, the class quickly filled with 37 students, despite its dull-as-dirt official name: "Religion, Education and Sport 257." Many other students were turned away.

"Concerns about spirituality and the human body are hot topics

See SPORTS, Page 3E