

ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT

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The spirit and meaning of sports

• Karl Lindholm
• Sports Column

Editor's note: This spring Karl Lindholm was privileged to speak to Middlebury College athletes just prior to their graduation. Here are those remarks excerpted.

My favorite team is not the Red Sox or the Celtics — my favorite team is the Panthers of Middlebury College, or the Tigers of Middlebury Union High School.

When I hear from someone of their disillusionment with sports — with all the commercial excess and the misbehavior of entitled athletes — I tell them, “You’re not going to enough games: you need to get yourself to a Panthers’ contest where the athletes are competing for the love of the game, and one another.”

That’s the antidote for the sports blues. When you’re sick of sports, go to a game.

At their core, sports are an enterprise of the spirit, an enterprise of the spirit in which we are challenged to be better than we are, an enterprise of the spirit where our best selves are expressed.

Some argue that the purpose of life is to find God, however defined. Now I cannot tell you who or what God is. I myself believe in no dogma. God is Buddha. God is truth. God is love, peace or kindness. God is beauty, God is knowledge. God is sacrifice. God is effort.

What is religion? Religion is the appreciation of that which is sacred, that which has to do with the soul, the cultivation of the spirit. Sports are a kind of religion. Maybe we can find God in sports, in competition, in teamwork, in loyalty, in being a good teammate, in playing in “the zone” — what is the zone but some state of heightened awareness, a state of grace when all we have learned and practiced come together in perfection.

For those who believe I play too loosely with God here, I apologize. By God, I mean the aspiration in myself to be my best, to serve others, to be a good teammate in the largest sense of the term.

Novelist Norman Mailer declared that there are three activities that produce an unmatched adrenaline high — war, sex and sports. Soldier Phillip Caputo in "The Rumor of War" described "the manic ecstasy of contact" in combat. Thank God sports are not about war. However, sports ultimately are about ecstasy and exhilaration. When we play sports we experience joy. We make a joyful noise in the world.

Poet James Dickey said that sports give our lives the "illusion of significance."

So-called trash-talking is blasphemy. It is not sporting. Sadaharu Oh, in the magnificent opening chapter of his autobiography, described his last at-bat, a home run. The rival team stood on the third base line and congratulated him as he ran home for the last time:

My opponents lifted my spirits and, in doing so, reminded me of something I had spent 22 years learning: that opponents and I were really one. My strength and skills were only half the equation. The other half was theirs.

Love your adversaries.

Oh didn't need artificial means to psych himself up with negative emotions. The spirit of competition was sufficient, the desire to excel, the passion to win, was enough motivation. You must desire to be the best teammate you can be for that is the essence of sacrifice and cooperation and love. What is a team but a family, a community, a brotherhood or sisterhood, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The best thing in sports is winning; the second best thing in sports is losing. In sports we get to compete, we get to live in the moment, our lives momentarily have great significance. Sports are exciting. Life is the long haul. Sports are decisive; sports offer an immediate outcome. Sports are self-contained moments of high drama and adventure.

Wins and losses, ultimately, and essentially, do not matter. Every game starts 0-0. Every game is a chance to live anew. Every game is a whole season. Every game has a beginning, a middle, and an end — it is the narrative of a lifetime. Don't ever be afraid of losing if it means taking a stand, applying your best efforts.

To you as an athlete much has been given. You have been blessed. You got to play the game you love and be taught its fundamentals and nuances by a trained expert. You got better. You made friends for life. What is asked of you in return? That you not take it for granted. Be a missionary for sports. Hold yourself to a high standard. Do not say, "others do it too," when you are confronted with your shortcomings and mistakes. Be humble.

Now, here you are at this precipice, on the verge of a new life. In his celebration of Ted Williams' last game, John Updike referred to "that little death" that awaits athletes when they retire, that unwilling retirement that faces you at this point, while you are still young. We are confident that you will be reborn into satisfying lives away from Middlebury. We trust that your athletic glories are a prelude to other great things. As you leave this place that has nurtured your love of sports and competition, know that we love you and wish you well.

It's a beautiful day. Let's play two!