

On Playing One Game at a Time and Putting Numbers on the Board

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For serious participants in sports—I'm thinking of organized team sports—their involvement soon becomes more than just a chance to play a game they like. When they play ball for the school or college team, or professionally, those contexts especially, but so too in community settings, Little League and American Legion baseball and summer basketball and soccer teams and adult amateur sports leagues and so on, they become a member of a distinct and, in good measure, separate domain from the larger scheme of things in society--school, family, peers, work, love relationships, political arrangements, the media, and so on. Sport participants—both children and adults--become *athletes*: citizens, as it were, of the sports nation, with a particular identity and role within that setting and generally. For those who become highly invested in sports, it becomes not just what they *do*, play their game, but who they *are*.

Another way to put it, and the focus in this thought, committed sports participants are enlisted into the sports *culture*. A culture in an anthropological or sociological sense, the use of the term here, is a coherent set of assumptions about what is true and important and right and proper. A culture says to its members, participants, citizens, whatever term best applies: this is what things mean here, this is how things work in this place, this is what is believed and valued here, this is what's done and not done here, this is where you fit in here, this is how you are to think and act here (and elsewhere), and this is how you are to be with other people in this world, fellow players and coaches; this is how you are to treat them, this is what you owe them and this is what they owe you.

Although the fundamental beliefs and values and behavioral patterns of any culture, including the sport culture, are largely tacitly communicated--represented through example and affirmed through myth and cue and inflection and allocation of attention and status and various other rewards large and small--they are also explicitly articulated, spelled out, affirmed, lectured, and preached, in team meetings, communications between coaches and players and players with one another, and in the sports literature and the sports-related media, including print and television and the

Internet. One way or the other, the idea comes across to those in the sport culture, the referent in this writing: don't just play the game on the field; play the way-of-going-about-things game on the table with us, on this team, in this league, in this sport. While I can't imagine anyone in sports using such an affected term as culture to get across the admonition, "Get in accord with the culture of this sport"--one of the core values of the sports culture is don't get fancy--nevertheless, culture is a good conceptual handle for what we are getting at here.

Any culture, including the sports culture, has processes, formal and informal, of keeping people in line. If you don't align with the ideas that prevail in the sports culture, if you don't abide by them, you'll pay a price. You'll go without acknowledgment and affirmation and praise, and you'll be admonished, scolded, criticized, and condemned, and if you still don't come around you'll sit on the end of the bench and be marginalized and, eventually, shunned and expelled, cut from the team, no matter how good you are. (There are exceptions, but you had better be a really big star to get a pass on cultural transgressions.)

One way to understand, and get a perspective on, how we think and operate in any setting is to compare it to the way people in another setting do business. That's what I'm doing here. I'm not so concerned with how sports goes about things, though I am interested in that, the sports world fascinates me; more, I'm interested in what the ways of sports, the sports culture, can tell us about how we non-athlete types conduct our lives, and more, how it can give us direction in living better than we are at present.

I've made the point elsewhere that examining the sport culture can help us make better sense of how we live our lives generally in America, not just in sports (I'm a largely untraveled American, so I'm going to stick to talking about my home turf, as it were, America).¹ Sports at all levels, from sixth grade field hockey on up, is characterized by laudable levels of commitment, personal responsibility, engagement, effort, and sacrifice, excellent collaboration and mutual support, and remarkable, even transcendent, individual and collective accomplishment. It's worth our time to look into any context where exceptionality is commonplace. If you want to get something worthwhile done, find someplace where people are getting that done and see how they do

it, and note how they set up and maintain a circumstance where they are encouraged and supported in doing it, and notice how they integrate newcomers into that arrangement, and learn from all that and use it, as is or modified, in your own situation. That's the spirit in which this thought is written.

We are dealing with sports here, but this same sort of analysis could be applied to anywhere particularly good things happen: in businesses, schools, military units, theater companies, fraternal organizations, families—anyplace where there's superior attainment accompanied by high levels of personal gratification.

A good way to study the sport culture, or any culture, any area of life, is to look at how it uses language. What words and phrases does the sport culture employ, and what does that tell us about it? I'll list some words and phrases one hears a lot in the sports world. It's important not to view the items on this list in isolation; discern how they go together. A culture is an interrelated whole (which is not to say cultures are completely free of conflicting aspects and contradictions). As I go through the list, think about how the assumptions and values underlying each of these words and phrases apply to other areas of life, including your own circumstance. It can't be assumed that elements of one culture, the sports culture in this case, can be incorporated unaltered in another domain of life, but in modified form they might. And even if they don't fit in some other situation, some other culture, they might prompt ideas of other things that will. Go beyond what I offer: take it deeper, extend it, improve on it, add to it, use it to create your own fresh insights and perspectives. Decide what needs to be investigated, clarified, created, and implemented.

The list:

"Play one game at a time". It can be exasperating, don't I know, to listen to athletes in interviews repeatedly say they are going to play one game a time. Off the top, it sounds so trite, clichéd, immature, and even dumb. But no way of holding the meaning of one's life in the sport world, and one's challenge in that context, is more central to the sports culture. And if you think about it, it's not dumb at all; it makes sense. Sport—and as far as I'm concerned, all of life—comes down, metaphorically if not literally, to playing this game, the one right here and now. That's all we can control. The past games have been played and we can't

replay those, and we can't play tomorrow's game today. Play tomorrow's game tomorrow. And then the next game and the next and the next. One game at a time.

"Come to play." He (or, of course, she) took the game seriously; he was into it mentally and physically and emotionally, with all of his being. He was completely present on that occasion, and he meant business. He came to play.

"Give it 110 percent." Do your absolute best in the game—and more. Go at it with all you have in you. Half-ass engagement, anything but the highest standards, an easy-does-it, good-enough-is-good-enough attitude; they don't make it here.

"Put numbers on the board." What counts in sports are tangible results, production, numbers on the (score)board--singles and doubles and home runs, yards gained running the football, passes completed and caught, baskets made, goals scored and saved, assists, and so on. Plans and commitments, good intentions, potential, near misses and misfortune, and obstacles that got in the way of achievement are fine and good to a point, but what really matters in sport, and the only thing that ultimately counts, is what you actually accomplish. The sports world cuts through the explanations and excuses and assurances about how it will happen next time to what you tangibly get done. In the sport world you are judged by the numbers you produce, period. You don't get away with talking a good game and making promises in sports; you have to *play* a good game, get something worthwhile achieved. Sports is about production.

"Focus." If you are going to be successful at sports (or anything else) you need to give your complete attention to what you are doing now, this instant. You can't be here, there, and everywhere in your thinking and conduct and be successful in sports. You need to prioritize your goals and objectives and actions and zero in on them, focus on them. Dilettantism, dabbling, and flitting don't go over in the sport culture.

"I'm this kind of guy." The sport world acknowledges that we are who we are and not somebody else. We have a certain inherent nature, certain predilections, a certain personal style, and it is best that we know what they are, what kind of guy, person, we are, so that we can take that into account as we pursue success in sports. Yes, we can change ourselves, we aren't absolutely chiseled in stone, but the sport world thinks there are tight limits on that. Says the

sport world: don't assume you are going to alter in any significant way the kind of guy you are; better, get the maximum out of the kind of guy you happen to be.

"Play my game." You hear the idea of a player's particular *game* in basketball especially. This concept of one's game follows from the previous "kind of guy" idea. It gets at the fact that we aren't equally good at everything. We are better at some things than other things. The sport culture emphasizes acknowledging that reality and playing to your strengths. Not to the exclusion of everything else certainly—indeed, work on other areas to build up your overall capability and performance—but center your efforts on what you do well: hone that, express that, be that to the max. That's playing your game. Staying with basketball, your game might be rebounding, or scoring, or ball handling, or defense. You might want to lead the league in three point scoring, and yes, work on your long range shooting, some anyway, but if that isn't your game, stick to your game; and be proud of your game, don't put your game down or think somebody else's game is better than yours or that you have to play somebody else's game to be valid as a player. If you have paid your dues to play it the best you can, your game is just fine. And more, playing your game is the best thing you can do both for yourself and for your team. Figure out your game and play it.

"Study the tapes." Sports emphasizes self-analysis and improvement, usually with the help of coaches and sometimes other players. Playing one game at a time includes the understanding that something can be learned from your performance in yesterday's game that can help you in today's game; and that reviewing how you did in today's game can help you put numbers on the board tomorrow. So become a student of yourself as a player; and don't depend on someone else doing that for you. Study the (video)tapes (literally in sports, figuratively in the rest of life): learn what you did right and do more of that; and discern where you need to improve and get about the job of improving in that direction.

"Put in the work." Sports success depends on doing things you really don't want to do but need to do. Six o'clock in the morning and the last thing you want to be doing is lifting weights and running the track, and that's what you do. You put in the work in sports. You don't just show up and hope for the best.

“Mistakes.” The sport world isn’t big on moralizing, self-condemnation, groveling, apologies, and guilt. Invariably when athletes do something that is called into question they call whatever it is a mistake. They don’t say “I did something wrong,” or “I did something bad,” or “I’m bad.” They say, “I made a mistake.” They take the morality out of it.

Today, I read about a major league pitcher who in his younger days stole, I think it was, twenty-three computers and was dismissed from the university he was attending at the time. He says now that it was a mistake to have done that. Whatever it is—drunk driving, beating up a girlfriend or spouse, drug use, robbing a convenience store, sexual assault, you name it—a mistake. I think of a mistake as adding up the numbers wrong in my checkbook. It wasn’t a moral lapse on my part; no need for me to feel bad about myself or stew over it or apologize or make restitution or pay a penalty for my checkbook addition error. It was a mistake, an error.

The sports culture greatly expands the applicability of the concept of a mistake. If somebody thinks you are a bad person for doing something or another, well, it was a mistake, and if they take issue with it that’s their problem; you don’t have to give your time and energy to it. I remember a future Hall of Fame baseball player with a wife and children who was revealed to have traveled with a mistress on road trips for years. He didn’t hang his head in shame and beat himself up and crawl on his knees and beg for forgiveness. “I made a mistake,” he said. He got it across—tersely, he wasn’t about to get into extended, detailed, therapist-office discourse, the sports culture isn’t big on verbosity—that that was then and this is now and he regrets it happened (it would have been better if he hadn’t done it, he concedes that) and he’s learned from it and he’s not going to make that mistake again. Case closed. If anybody including the media and his wife, want to make something out of it, that’s their right, but he’s not going to get into it any further. He is not going play the guilt and redemption game, which is about the past. He’s playing today’s game. As it turned out, his wife took him back. But whether she did or didn’t, he was going to . . .

“Move on.” All you have in sports (in life generally?) is today’s game. What happened in the past happened. That’s over. You aren’t going to change that. If it was bad it was a mistake; learn from it and then put it behind you, don’t dwell on it, don’t relive it, don’t give energy to it, don’t let it affect you or control you or tie

you up. It's a new day. It's now and there's a game starting up; play it. Move on.

"Respect the game." It's important not to oversimplify the sports culture. The emphasis on seeing things as mistakes and moving on does not mean that sports is an amoral world. It isn't. There is a stress in sports on *playing the game the right way*, as they put it. Don't do anything that insults or cheapens the sport. Honor the rules, both formal and informal, which in our time means don't use performance-enhancing drugs, and don't be headhunting (throwing at a batter's head in baseball) or undercutting anybody (cutting the legs out from a player going up for a layup in basketball). *Don't show anybody up* (don't mock opponents, belittle them). *Make the people around you better.* Help out your teammates. *And keep things in the clubhouse* (respect others' privacy).

"I couldn't have done it without my teammates and coaches." No matter how good you are, how dedicated, the sport culture underscores that you need the encouragement and support of others if you are going to achieve anything of worth in sports. You can't do it alone. Really.

That's the list that comes to my mind. What do you think? Any insights you can offer? Any other items that should be on the list? Any applicability of any or all of this to non-sport areas that you can see? Any connections between this consideration of the sports culture and your own life?

As for me, it's 2:55 in the afternoon on a Friday and I've completed the write-a-thought-for-the-site game for today. I focused and gave it 110 percent, and I think I put some decent numbers on the board. Now to the next game, writing an email to my young daughter on the west coast. I'll play that game the same way I played this last one. And then to the next game, and the next and the next. One game at a time. Through it all, I'll be the kind of guy I am and play my game. I'll study the tapes hard—reflect, write in my journal--and see where I can improve. I'll put in the work to be the best version of the kind of "player" I am. I'll acknowledge and learn from my mistakes and move on from them. I'll respect the game of life, and I'll support those who play it with me. I'll keep firmly in mind that I can't get it done without the help of my teammates and coaches (the people around me). And whatever my

batting average at the end of the season (the end of my life) turns out to be, I'll have the satisfaction of knowing that, indeed, I came to play.

Note

1. See, for example, the book chapter "What Schools Can Learn from Sports" in the writing section of this site.