

# Sports<sup>1</sup> and Competition in Higher Education: A Search for Values and Ethics

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## Abstract

The issue of competition in sports is controversial in certain philosophies of education, especially among the more conservative, often religious, educators. Some understand competition negatively, as opposed to ideal human solidarity, and therefore argue that the practice of sports conveys dangerous attitudes of violence, pride, selfishness, etc. Others view competition positively, as a realistic preparation for life, and see in sports a treasure of educational values such as fair play, spirit of unity, team work, etc. This paper is written from the humanistic perspective of a holistic anthropology. It is my contention that sports of competition can be negative or positive for the personal education of our youth, depending on the way one decides to approach them. A key role is played by the professionals who work in student services, namely educators, trainers, and coaches of sport activities. Those who discern the moral risks of sports activities related to a high level of competition suggest that it is time to provide a human - and even a spiritual- frame of reference to sports activities so that they do not dehumanize athletes. There are important values that the athletes can learn from the practice of sports. If we focus their attention on the way they compete, rather than just on the results or on their personal glory, we may help them to consolidate a coherent ethical behavior. Sports competition can be a powerful stimulus to individual growth, a positive contribution to creating community, and a valuable tool to teach personal, professional, and social ethics to this and future generations.

## Introduction

The goal of this paper is to analyze the main ethical issues raised by sports and competition in higher education and to deduce some basic principles for transmitting values through the practice of sports and competition. This paper is primarily intended for educators dealing with recreational and sportive activities in colleges and universities.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The word “sport” connotes different activities. This paper works with at least two possible definitions, one general and one specific. The large definition includes all kinds of physical activities, from the exercise of children at play to the highest contests at the Olympics. The restricted definition, as worded by Zanon, is the one that interests us here: “The narrow meaning of sport reduces the field to those playful and mobile situations of competitive comparison, whose rules are encoded and controlled by institutions that history shows are a specific and characteristic sign of Western contemporary societies. Then: play, movement, competition, with rules codified and institutionalized.” R. Zenon, *Gioco, Sport, Educazione* (Rome: Società Stampa Sportiva, 1981), 25. Under this definition, I consider that sports include activities in physical education classes, intramural tournaments, intercollegiate leagues, and professional leagues.

<sup>2</sup> This paper refers first of all to American higher education, which is involved in intercollegiate and professional leagues. However, the concept is applicable to education elsewhere, at all levels.

This paper was written from the humanistic perspective of holistic anthropology,<sup>3</sup> and is therefore committed to a comprehensive understanding of the physical, mental, spiritual, and social human manifestations. Grounded in this first presupposition, this study assumes that the practice of sport and competition is compatible with all aspects of the human nature.<sup>4</sup> A second assumption in this paper, shared with most of the cultures and religions, is that a balanced education includes the development of a respectful view of oneself, other human beings, and nature, and belief in a supreme or divine authority.<sup>5</sup> We share with Peter Arnold the conviction that moral values in sport are universal, and that everyone belonging to the sports community and agreeing to the rights and obligations of sports “is expected to commit and live out the values, including moral ones, that are intrinsic to the practice.”<sup>6</sup> Adopting a different perspective than Arnold, I assume that these values are universal, and not culturally determined.

The ethics of many sports is a controversial issue<sup>7</sup> that depends on the place given to competition in one’s philosophy of education. In their analysis of extremely opposite views on competition, Craig Clifford and Randolph Feezell observe that there is “confusion about the balance of playfulness and seriousness in sport.” On one extreme, some educators view competition as inherently bad because it produces losers and winners, which seems ethically wrong. For the defenders of this view, “only non-competitive play is acceptable,” and the goal of every sport should be just to have fun. On the other extreme, some perceive competition as a war in which victory is the only thing that counts. “The opponent is the enemy and the goal is to destroy the enemy.”<sup>8</sup>

Arnold observes that these two extreme ideologies of competition, both positive<sup>9</sup> and negative, and even if they appear intrinsically immoral, deserve our attention:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, vols. I & II (New York: Charles Scribners, 1964); Jean Zurcher, *L'homme, sa Nature et sa Destinée: Essai sur le Problème de l'union, de l'âme et du Corps* (Neuchâtel/Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1953); Stan Wilk, *Humanistic Anthropology* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> “This background seems important because, throughout history, the different anthropological conceptions have conveyed various beliefs and ideals that have exalted or repressed certain physical activities of human beings.” Davide Sciarabba, “The Transmission of Christian Values through Sports in the Curriculum of Physical Education in High School,” in *Christ in the Classroom: Adventist Approaches to the Integrations of Faith and Learning*, 37 vols., comp. Humberto Rasi (Silver Springs, MD: Institute for Christian Teaching, 2004), 31-A:322.

<sup>5</sup> We may disagree on the source of authority, but most agree that to have values and ethics, we need an authority. The respect for that authority, for the neighbour, and for oneself is required for ethics and the transmission of values.

<sup>6</sup> Peter J. Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education* (London: Cassel, 1997), 5-6. For further clarification and study, read pages 5-7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Craig Clifford and Randolph M. Feezell, *Coaching for Character: Reclaiming the Principles for Sportsmanship* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1997), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Z. R. Prvulovich, “In Defense of Competition,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 16, no.1 (1982): 77-88.

<sup>10</sup> M. Fielding, “Against Competition,” *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain* 10 (1976): 140, quoted in Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education*, 33, see also 34. Cf. Derek C. Meakin, “The Moral Status of Competition: An Issue of Concern for Physical Educators,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Education* 20, no.1 (1986): 59.

“The positivist view is one that holds that competition is a precondition of personal development and social progress and that it provides a framework from which benefits and burdens can be distributed fairly and freely. Such a framework, it is argued, is necessary if such qualities as initiatives, resources, and independence are to be fostered and preserved. The negativist view, on the other hand, maintains that a competitive situation threatens cooperative ventures and helps undermine worthwhile personal and social relationships and forms a vicious distinction between winners and losers. Competition, it is said, is often the source of envy, despair, selfishness, pride, and callousness.”<sup>11</sup>

This ethical discussion is a permanent fixture in higher education, and especially in religious institutions. Some consider that competition in sports is a serious problem because it often turns to rivalry, selfishness, violence, cheating, intemperance, and arrogance, and because the love for pleasure distracts many young people from other responsibilities.<sup>12</sup> In the most conservative universities, competition has been perceived as riding roughshod over the great ethical principles common to all cultures. For example, some evangelicals affirm that college sports have become cancer to spiritual life, and that the principles of competition encouraged by sports have eroded Christian culture. For example, “Professional football is a heady mixture of toughness, violence, and piety—vicious collisions coupled with post-touchdown genuflections, trash talk mixed with heaven-directed index fingers, anger and aggression interrupted by prayers.”<sup>13</sup> Most sport chaplains are genuinely concerned about the violent, hyper-competitive culture of excess in which players live.<sup>14</sup> This debate becomes more complex when personal matters of opinion are mixed with the real matter of ethics, values, and education. Thus, this paper raises two questions: Are the professionals of higher education<sup>15</sup> aware of all the risks related to sports competition? If so, are there any ways to avoid the dangers of competition?

First, let us survey the main risks involved in competition.

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<sup>11</sup> Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education*, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Householder, “Amen, and a Foul” in “Are Sports the Problem?” *Christianity Today*, February 2010, 26. E. White, *Education* (Boise, ID: Review and Herald, 1995), 132 (also 210-212). Cf. G. Samperio, “Sportif Chrétien où Chrétien Sportif?” *Forum*, 2nd-3rd quarter 1992, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Shirl James Hoffman, “Whatever Happened to Play? How Christians Have Succumbed to the Sports Culture--and What Might Be Done about It,” *Christianity Today*, February 2010, 21-22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> The American culture, in which I am living now, is traditionally Christian oriented. Many famous universities were founded as Christian institutions that with time became famous state or private universities. Thus, ethics and values are at stake in this debate of religious education. For a further reading, see Philip G. Altbach, Robert O. Berdahl, and Patricia J. Gumpert, eds, *American Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century: Social Political and Economic Challenges*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Frank Newman, Lara Couturier, and Jamie Scurry, *The Future of Higher Education: Rhetoric, Reality, and the Risks of the Market* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004). Cf. Robert Benne, *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2001).

### The risks of competition

Even those who have an extremely positive view of competition have given up on the idea that sports competition has only positive effects. Research has demonstrated that practicing competing sports often has a negative effect on the behavior of students and players. When the pursuit of external goals puts too much pressure on victory, the valued practice of sport becomes corrupted.<sup>16</sup> Research on sports competition shows that students exhibit more aggressive behavior when they lose a match.<sup>17</sup> There is a measurable relationship between the level of competition and the morality of actions. For example the increased intensity of competition pushes the male population to exhibit greater levels of violence, whereas the female population exhibits greater theft.<sup>18</sup>

The major ethical risks of competition include the following:<sup>19</sup> promotion of revenge, glorification of violence, encouragement of aggression, normalization of uncontrolled reactions, worship of victory, exaltation of pride, derogation to the values of solidarity,<sup>20</sup> and distraction from real life.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, many students and service professionals seem to ignore these risks.<sup>22</sup> A 1974 survey on athletics submitted to ACE (American Council of Exercise)<sup>23</sup> identified critical problems such as the “triple-down effect of the competitive excesses in the major big-time sports on the ‘minor’ collegiate ones and on secondary-school athletics.”<sup>24</sup> The reports stated that there was a need “to clean up that mess.”<sup>25</sup> However, the reaction to that analysis was

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<sup>16</sup> Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Lawrence, “Effects of Competition Upon the Aggressive Responses of College Basketball Players and Wrestlers” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education and Recreation, Atlantic City, NJ, 1975).

<sup>18</sup> M. Choquet and P. Arves, “Pratiques sportives, consommations, conduites violentes, une association explosive?” Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale, 2002, in F. Moth, “La Haine,” *Sport et Vie*, March-April 2003, 43.

<sup>19</sup> R. Du Preez, “Competition: Still the Number One Concern?” *Journal of Adventist Education* February/March (2002): 25-27. See also Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education*, 34-43.

<sup>20</sup> See also Robert Simon, *Violence in Sports*, eds. William J. Morgan, Klaus V. Meier, and Angela Schneider (Auckland, New Zealand: Human Kinetics, 2001), 345-356.

<sup>21</sup> “Other athletic games, though not so brutalizing, are scarcely less objectionable because the excess to which they are carried. They stimulate the love of pleasure and excitement, thus a distaste for useful labor, a disposition to shun practical duties and responsibility. They tend to destroy a relish for life’s sober realities and its tranquil enjoyments. Thus the door is open to dissipation and lawlessness, with their terrible results.” E. White, *Education*, 132. See also pages 210-212.

<sup>22</sup> The issue of sportive competition in higher education is not generally perceived as a problem, and most colleges and universities are promoting sport activities, even when they often lead to cheating, selfishness, violence, etc. In higher education literature, the consequences of competition in the intercollegiate tournaments or leagues are not stated openly, but they are simply not taken into consideration, maybe for economical reasons. For example, the following important book among higher education literature and athletics does not address the problem of sports competition. James L. Shulman and William G. Bowen, *The Game of Life: College Sports and Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> George H. Hanford, “We Should Speak the ‘Awful Truth’ About College Sports,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 30, 2003, accessed June 20, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/We-Should-Speak-the-Awful/15514/>.

<sup>24</sup> Hanford, “We Should Speak.”

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

very light: the NCAA did not admit that anything was seriously wrong with intercollegiate athletics; the presidents turned their backs on the problems in their sports programs, and the foundations did not wish to dirty their hands by dealing with anything as unsavory as college sports.<sup>26</sup> Thirty years later, nothing had changed. Financial issues were involved in all bowl games, the presidents of campuses lost control over the leagues, and almost nobody cared about the behavior of students playing sports.<sup>27</sup> Two other surveys were conducted in 1991 and 2001, but “while their suggestions are reasonable, they treat only the symptoms of the problem, not the root causes” because the commissions in charge were always loaded with representatives of higher education, who have vested interests in college sport.<sup>28</sup>

Although the majority of student service professionals seems to ignore the effects of uncontrolled competition, some of them strive for a change in sports practice. They argue that competition often generates violence, fights, sexual harassment, and doping. Sharon K. Stoll, from the University of Idaho, and Jennifer Beller, from Eastern Michigan University, accuse athletic competition of becoming an equal-opportunity corrupter. For 10 years, they have studied ethics in “competitive populations” (i.e., sports teams). They started to work from the rather ideal perspective that sports build character, a sense of fair play, honesty, and respect for others.<sup>29</sup> However, they soon discovered that moral reasoning capacity seems to be inversely related to the level of competition, and that female athletes are becoming as “callous” as their male counterparts. Although most coaches argue that they try to impart moral values and teach youth the difference between right and wrong, it is obvious that many athletes turn out badly.

Previous research has shown that athletes have significantly lower moral-reasoning skills than the general student population as a direct result of competitive sports,<sup>30</sup> and have shown a sharp decline in moral reasoning in recent years. Team-sport athletes seem to perform ethically worse than players of individual sports like golf and tennis, and still lower than non-athletes. Contact sports multiply the opportunities to break the rules, and encourage players to treat opponents as “objects” rather than as “humans.”<sup>31</sup>

The factors that lead athletes to deficient moral thinking are complex. One important factor seems to be the fact that from an early age, many elite players are trained to view their opponents as obstacles to overcome rather than honorable individuals. In addition, these players frequently develop a sense of entitlement because they are not encouraged to think for themselves, and rarely face the consequences of acting irresponsibly. Furthermore, athletes often realize that they can get away with anything. When privileged athletes must pay for their mistakes, they do not always handle it well.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> “Sports Can Build Bad Moral Character, Professors Say,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 16, 1997, accessed June 20, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/Sports-Can-Build-Bad-Moral/76485/>.

<sup>30</sup> Brad Wolverton, “Morality Play,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 4, 2006, accessed June 20, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/Morality-Play/25487/>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Violence and fighting are obvious components of many games. College coaches have enormous authority over their players and have an important responsibility for what happens during the games. A surprising number of coaches admit that they frequently bend rules and push the limits of what is right, because of the pressure to win.<sup>33</sup> “To effect change, they need only make it plain from the beginning that trash talking will not be tolerated and that anyone who indulges in needling his opponent had better be prepared to watch his opponent from the bench.”<sup>34</sup>

Sexual harassment and related problems may also result from pushing women’s competition too far. Another consequence appears in the switching nature of women’s attitudes. To excel in competition, women are pressed to assume forced behaviors and become more aggressive.<sup>35</sup>

The problem of doping has become an issue even in campuses. Craving to perform better, students take prohibited substances even in the lower-level leagues. Suggs explains that students do not always take steroids with the sole intention of winning, but merely to perform the best they can even when the score is not important.<sup>36</sup>

The risks of competition can be summarized with the words of Arnold, who state that “the ultimate degradation of competitive sport comes when there is not just an overemphasis on winning, but when winning comes to be seen as the only criterion of success. To win at all costs exemplifies an attitude of mind and conduct which is the very antithesis of the ethos of sport as culturally valued practice.”<sup>37</sup>

After considering the risks of sports competition, some questions arise: May competition achieve any educational goal? Can the practice of sport can be ethical? How can competition be used to transmit values? To answer to these questions, it is necessary determine what competition means. To achieve this, we would like to recall how sports competition has been used in the past.

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<sup>33</sup> Wolverton, “Morality Play.”

<sup>34</sup> Gordon Marino, “Building Camaraderie from Competition,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 26, 2007, accessed June 20, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/Building-Camaraderie-From/24218/>.

<sup>35</sup> “Such concern shows a profound disrespect, because it assumes that good athletes are not “real women,” and that lesbianism is something to fear, which undermines the fundamental dignity and worth of all female athletes and fosters a homophobia that may discourage women from participating in sports.”(Leslie Heywood, “Despite the Positive Rhetoric About Women’s Sports, Female Athletes Face a Culture of Sexual Harassment,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 8, 1999, accessed June 20, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/Despite-the-Positive-Rhetoric/8098/>.)

<sup>36</sup> Welch Suggs, “Deadly Fuel,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 14, 2003, accessed June 20, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/Deadly-Fuel/28780/>.

<sup>37</sup> Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education*, 23.

## Definition and Meaning of Sports Competition

Based on the observation that higher levels of competition lead to greater risks of violence and loss of control, many educators consider competition to be negative, inherently immoral, and wrong.<sup>38</sup> However, there are two important objections to this viewpoint: Is competition really negative per se? Does sportive competition really hinder the transmission of moral values, or may it also contribute positively to a balanced education?

Before giving any answer and reviewing different arguments, we need to agree on a definition of the word competition. The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines it as the concept of a simultaneous demand by two or more persons striving for the same goal,<sup>39</sup> whereas *Chambers Dictionary* states “The act of competing: rivalry in striving for some goal.”<sup>40</sup>

First of all, the ambiguous gap between the general definition of the term competition and the sportive definition of the word may lead to some misunderstandings. The general sense of the word competition includes, if not a certain cooperation, at least a common intention to reach the same objective between two or more people without being necessarily opposed. However, there is a true confrontation at the very foundation of the sportive sense of the word. Although the dictionary may not intend to highlight the differences between the two definitions of “competition,” it suggests that only sport favors the opposition in competition.

The ancient Greeks used two different terms for competition, one with a positive connotation and another one with a negative connotation. The verb *agonizomai*, meaning “to fight with,”<sup>41</sup> was the term par excellence to describe sportive competition. This is also the word inherited by the English language to speak about a fighting spirit, as in *agonistic* competitions. This term is used to describe the good fight, the good competition in which athletes with their opponents. The second verb, *polemeo* (from which the term “polemic” comes from), means “to do war against someone,”<sup>42</sup> and is used to define opposition against someone without respect of the opponent. It describes the fight without compassion, the fight of a person against another.

The English word “competition” comes from the Latin preposition *cum* (“with”) and the verb *petere* which means “to ask for,” “to pray,” and “to aspire,” “to meet at a point,” “to agree,” and “tending to a point” with the opponent. According to the Greek and Latin etymology, the notion of competition, even sportive competition, does not have in itself a negative opposition between two or more parties, but instead may include cooperation and respect for others.

History is a solid starting point for reflecting on the ethics of sports competition. The Greeks officially started their sportive games in 776 B.C. The competitors in these games did not aim to fight their enemies, to eliminate them, or to entice violence and rivalry against them, but rather the opposite, to make peace with them. In fact, the Olympic Games were born in ancient Greece as means of peace, of fraternizing, of gathering and avoiding the civil wars that were

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>39</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language* (2000), s.v. “Competition.”

<sup>40</sup> *The Chambers Dictionary* (2000), s.v. “Competition.”

<sup>41</sup> A. Bailly, “avgwni,zw,” *Dictionnaire grec français* (1963), 21.

<sup>42</sup> A. Bailly, “poleme,w,” *Dictionnaire grec français* (1963), 1585.

tearing the country.<sup>43</sup> “The Olympic Games served a utopian ideal, never more attained in antiquity, but alive since that time until our days in the most intimate wishes of humanity of eternal peace.”<sup>44</sup> The athletes competed peacefully for the honor of being crowned with a branch of olive tree. Fairness, fair play, and irreproachability were important values for the athletes. “The obsession for purity was not only limited to the physical aspects of competition, but also to the moral aspects. Only free men on whom it had never been pronounced any defamatory condemnation could participate in it, (...) the intentional murderers or by imprudence, the sacrileges, the fined athletes or those who broke the truce, (...) were excluded from Games.”<sup>45</sup>

The Olympic Games of ancient Greece produced one of the most effective factors of civilization.

“The requirement of purity and clean competition, the stimulation to the personal effort, more than in jointly liable competition of teams, the interest for victory more than the record of time and speed, show apparently the true ethics of games. These constituted at the time of splendor an educative factor of first plan which contributed to raise the standards of individual and collective behavior. We can say, without fright of going too far, that, during the biggest part of their history, the Olympic Games were one of the factors of civilization the most important of Greece.”<sup>46</sup>

The second historical element worthy of consideration, and particularly to more conservative institutions, is the positive approach to competition exposed by some of the great religious leaders of the past. For example, Saint Paul used many sports metaphors to convey values for a moral Christian life,<sup>47</sup> specifying that there is a good competition and a good way to compete.<sup>48</sup> It is also interesting that the semantic spectrum of meaning of the word competition in the New Testament is not negative, but rather positive. It includes five related concepts:<sup>49</sup>

1. The word *agon* refers to the full expenditure of all the energies to reach the goal that one has proposed to reach. Through the maximal effort to overcome one owns limits, the person strives for the final victory.
2. The term is used for any struggle that demands self-control and rigid self-denial. Temperance and domination of oneself leads a person to renounce something good or better to obtain the best.

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<sup>43</sup> A. Melero, “La Cultura Olímpica en la Antigüedad” (paper presented at the Symposium: *Los juegos Olímpicos ayer y hoy*, Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo, Valencia, Spain, 1-5 junio 1992).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Melero, “La Cultura Olímpica en la Antigüedad.”

<sup>47</sup> See further Davide Sciarabba, “Métaphores Sportives et Valeurs Chrétiennes dans les Écrits Pauliniens: Contribution a une Philosophie Biblique des Sports.” M.A. thesis, Salève Adventist University, 2004, in Archives Adventistes, <http://www.archivesadventistes.net/EN/BAV/MEM/MetaphoresSportivesValeursChretiennes.pdf> (accessed January 27 2005).

<sup>48</sup> Davide Sciarabba, “II Timothy 4:7 and the Ethics of Competition: A Biblical Perspective” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Society of Biblical Literature, Midwest Meeting, Olivet Nazarene University, Bourbonnais, Illinois, February 10-12, 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Ethelbert Stauffer, “avgw,n,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (1976), 1:136-139.



3. The concept of *agon* is also used to describe the fight of believers against external and internal obstacles, dangers, and opposition to achieve their spiritual mission.
4. The concept may also include the idea of resisting until death through martyrdom.
5. The concept may also describe the struggle endured by a person when fighting, working, or suffering for the sake of others.

For the Apostle Paul, there are good competitions and good ways to live the competition. For him, the good competition is against oneself, representing the commitment to overcome oneself, to go further, the capacity to exceed one's limits. This concept appears to be in full agreement with the motto of the Olympic Games: *altius, fortius, citius*, (higher, stronger, faster). This form of competition does not need to be exerted against an adversary, but it may be lived in reference to oneself. In respect to this, consider the following quote from a high-level sportsman.

“I think that sports can contribute to personal growth in the moment we understand that it is a means of pleasure and personal discovery of oneself. This approach stands for the practice of leisure as much competition. In this last case, the adversary is only an additional pretext to go to one's limits to be constructed. To be built in the physical plan, but mostly in the moral and ethic. (...) The only victory that counts is the one we obtain on our own weaknesses. Considered from this angle, sport enables meeting others.”<sup>50</sup>

Many thinkers have observed these different kinds of competition. “The German philosopher Georg Simmel, for instance, distinguished competition from conflict. In conflict you destroy or severely you damage your adversary while in competition you compete with him for a prize.”<sup>51</sup> Thus, can affirm that sportive competition in itself is not negative, and that some forms of it may even be positive. Hamerslough observes that positive competition is in fact “a cooperative venture. Each offers himself to the other as a testing ground. I offer myself so you can test yourself. We make this effort together. One still plays to win as you cannot provide a good test unless you do what the game is set up to do. You strive for the mutual development of both parties. The noble athlete is to compete utilizing the concept of *cum petere*, or the good strife.”<sup>52</sup> In negative competition, however, “a person strives to exalt him/herself by trying to get others to submit to his/her will. One tries to belittle, to destroy if you please, to beat them until they recognize their own weakness and the other's superiority.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Marie-José Minassian and Jean-Pierre Fernandez, “Le Sport: Culture de Soi, Rencontre des Autres,” *Journal des Instituteurs et des Professeurs des Écoles* 8 (April 2003): 18. The sportsman interviewed is Stéphane Diagana, world champion in 1997, European champion in 2002, and European record man of 400 meter hurdles.

<sup>51</sup> Peter McIntosh, *Fair Play: Ethics Sport in Education* (London: Heinemann, 1979), 177.

<sup>52</sup> W. S. Hamerslough, “Physical Education and Sport from Christian Perspective,” in *Christ in the Classroom: Adventist Approaches to the Integrations of Faith and Learning*, 37 vols., comp. Humberto Rasi (Silver Springs, MD: Institute for Christian Teaching, 2003), 10:212.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

### **Sports Competition in Higher Education: A Search for Values and Ethics**

Based on the historical viewpoint that competition may be also viewed as positive, this study presents how sports and competition can be oriented toward the teaching of values and moral behavior. However, it is important to keep in mind some important factors:<sup>54</sup> First, there are different ways of competing: to beat others, to show to others your superiority, to challenge oneself, to go beyond one's own limits. Second, the opportunities of competing are many: in everyday life, at play, at work, in school, and in sport. Third, we need to consider that mass media can influence students with unethical behaviors, such as obsession for victory at all costs. Fourth, competition in itself does not produce many educational benefits, and the effectiveness of these benefits depends in great part on the person who directs the activity.

#### *The Role of the Leader*

Based on these considerations, we deduce that a healthy attitude to competition in sports is teachable.<sup>55</sup> “The issue in sport education is not too much or too little competition, but appropriate competition. There is much to be learned from appropriate competition, both individually and as a member of a competitive group”.<sup>56</sup> Leaders, educators, and trainers are responsible for the values taught during sports activities. They may, or may not, help students to build their own characters morally. Marino says:

Historically, the reason educational institutions have adopted athletic programs is because, at their best, they promote character building. Sports help people feel comfortable in their skins and provide unique opportunities to develop qualities such as cooperation, perseverance, and the ability to cope with fear. But the arena can be a hothouse for more primal feelings that emerge in competition. Although the Kantian notion of "respect for persons" is the basis for much of the moral rhetoric in America today, it is psychologically very difficult to maintain respect for people with whom one is competing. Feeling warmly toward the person who beats me out of a job does not come naturally. But when managed carefully, the world of whistles and goal lines can cultivate the ability to behave with kindness, or at least respect toward those you are racing against, even when you feel as if your sense of self depends on the outcome.”<sup>57</sup>

As Hanford suggests, “The solution to the competition's excesses is at the level of the leaders. First of all, there has to be the willingness to call a cancer a cancer, that is to say, to not hide the problems. Secondly, to establish a truly independent body outside the educational and athletics establishment that could take a serious in-depth look at intercollegiate athletics, in

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<sup>54</sup> Eduardo Busso, “Pros y Contras de la Competición” (paper presented at the meeting of *Convención de Profesores Adventistas*, Oporto, Portugal, February 13-17, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> South Pacific Division, Education Department, *Education Physique* (Silver Spring, MD: Institute for Christian Teaching, 1990), 20. See also Busso, “Pros y Contras.”

<sup>56</sup> D. Siedentop, *Sport Education: Quality PE Through Positive Sport Experiences* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1994), quoted in P. W. Miller, “Team Sports in Adventist Education: Another Look,” in *Christ in the Classroom: Adventist Approaches to the Integrations of Faith and Learning*, 37 vols., comp. Humberto Rasi (Silver Springs, MD: Institute for Christian Teaching, 1997), 19:196.

<sup>57</sup> Marino, “Building Camaraderie.”

addition to the educators: leaders from the fields of sociology, philosophy, psychology, medicine, law, business, and religion.”<sup>58</sup> Marino uses the example of coaches to show that there is the potential for growth in the ethical behavior of competition during game time: “The potential for that kind of moral growth, however, is thwarted when the gatekeepers and guides to the game wink at athletes who make a practice of verbally spitting on one another.”<sup>59</sup>

A Mormon college took a radical solution to the problem of competition in intercollegiate sports. They changed intercollegiate games to intramural tournaments. The aim of this move was to incorporate as many spiritual values as possible into the athletic program.<sup>60</sup> The result was that more students were involved in the activities and could learn the values deliberately integrated in sports because they were also in charge of the organization and promotion of the games. In this way, many dangers were avoided. “‘The competitive-sports program values sportsmanship in a way that many Division I programs do not,’ says Josh Clawson, a junior and the athletics director. ‘We push for coaches to teach life lessons in our sports: integrity, working as a team, honesty, being kind’”<sup>61</sup> Wolverton affirms that it is possible to overcome the problem of moral decisions among athletes. His article presents an example of curriculum to teach players how to improve their moral reasoning. “Called ‘Winning with Character,’ the course is designed to help players reflect about who they are and think about the influences that people around them can have on their lives, and to provide a forum to discuss how they make decisions.” The classes encourage players to discuss a range of topics, including guns, gangs, drugs, date rape, and how to become responsible citizens. Students are also confronted with hypothetical moral dilemmas.<sup>62</sup> Arnold proves that the example and behavior of teachers and the leaders of sports activities has a greater ethical effect on students than rational discourse on the issues of sports competition.<sup>63</sup>

### *Ethical Implications for Leaders*

After considering the important role of leaders in sports competition, this study suggests some ideas on how to focus sports competition to transform it in a means of teaching ethical values. To achieve this goal, leaders should teach what Clifford and Feezell call principles of sportsmanship,<sup>64</sup> including respect for the rules, respect for the opponents, officials, and coaches, and respect for oneself.<sup>65</sup> An ethic of good competition can be built on these basic principles. The key is to create a list of goals and values that the leadership aims to convey through the practice of sports. The civic and spiritual values that can be taught through the practice of sports are many. First, this includes the virtues that shape personality,<sup>66</sup> such as humbleness, self-discipline,

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<sup>58</sup> Hanford, “We Should Speak.”

<sup>59</sup> Marino, “Building Camaraderie.”

<sup>60</sup> Jennifer Jacobson, “No Contest,” *The Chronicles Review* 51, no.18 (2005): A43.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Wolverton, “Morality Play.”

<sup>63</sup> Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education*, 41-42.

<sup>64</sup> For further study, see Clifford and Feezell, *Coaching for Character*, 25-86.

<sup>65</sup> Robert L. Simon, “Good Competition and Drug-Enhanced Performance,” in *Ethics in Sport*, eds. William J. Morgan, Klaus V. Meier, and Angela J. Schneider (Champaign: IL: Human Kinetics, 2001), 127-128.

<sup>66</sup> Du Preez, “Competition: Still the Number One Concern?” 27.

honesty and rectitude, cooperation and team work, and fostering compassion (love and mercy) rather than rivalry. The point is to ensure that sport is not disconnected from real life, but is part of our lifestyle, in which we “look for the good of every one.”<sup>67</sup> These examples of values are not exhaustive. Arnold considers these values to be internal goals. His analysis underlines the need for educators to not focus on external goals, such as victory and performance, and results in “the immanent process of struggle and challenge.”<sup>68</sup>

For an ethical approach to sports competition, institutions and leaders would benefit from fostering the following ideals: “cooperativeness, helpfulness, and selflessness, a cordial spirit, playing for enjoyment rather than only to win, and observing the rules in spirit and not merely in letter.”<sup>69</sup> Educators and students should openly discuss the crucial importance of a respect for the rules. To teach respect for the rules means to teach something essential for life, because the rules of the game have not only a legal aspect, but also a moral one.<sup>70</sup> This concept includes an awareness of the fact that if the rules allow me to perform a certain action that is immoral according to my ethics, I would not do that action even if it has become a “latent agreement” in sports.<sup>71</sup> Rules are there to allow athletes to play under equal conditions, and to stimulate their creativity within agreed-upon boundaries. To respect the rules means to recognize the person of the opponent and of the authority, who guarantees impartiality and integrity<sup>72</sup> among individuals and in the group.<sup>73</sup> By following the spirit of the rules, students practice the moral behavior that constitutes an essential step in the building of character and a sense of community.

The rules of sports are necessary, but they have limits in educating the character of the students. Arnold says that “the rules of a sport, although they may attempt to embody the ethos desired, can never entirely do so. Much is left to the moral motivation and purpose of the participants involved. The rules can be followed, but the spirit in which they were formulated may be left wanting.”<sup>74</sup> For this reason, it would be suitable to underline the fair-play rules for any sport. Though a moral choice must be a free choice,<sup>75</sup> fair play rules can be an intermediate step to teach respect of the opponent, respect of the authority, and the discipline necessary to develop a moral character. J. P. White affirms that to become a free agent, one must receive a “compulsory education.”<sup>76</sup> The organizers of a league, for example, may change some rules to promote fair play. For example, they may give the same points for victory and for fair play. This

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<sup>67</sup> For this last statement see Warren P. Fraleigh, *Right Actions in Sport* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1984), 18.

<sup>68</sup> Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education*, 22. See also pages 5-7.

<sup>69</sup> General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, “Activities with Elements of Competition: Perspective and Analysis,” <http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main-stat29.html> (accessed June 21, 2012).

<sup>70</sup> Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education*, 24.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27. See also R. Gardner, “On Performance Enhances Substances and the Unfair Advantage Argument,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 16 (1989): 61. Cf. O. Leamon, “Cheating and Fair Play in Sport,” in *Philosophical Enquiry in Sport*, eds. W. Morgan and K. Meier (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1988), 281, see also pages 277-282.

<sup>72</sup> Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education*, 28-29.

<sup>73</sup> Sciarabba, “Métaphores Sportives,” 74-75.

<sup>74</sup> Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education*, 26.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>76</sup> J. P. White, *The Aim of Education Restated* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 132.

alternative policy gives a strong signal to the students about which values are important to the institution. Miller proposes more practical suggestions on this topic. The first step is to establish a sportive council to deal with the issues related to competition and fair play; second, make sure that the reasons for specific behaviors desired in relation to fair play are clear in the eyes of students; third, reward the players of sportive activities by showing that fair play has a value in sports, and that opponents are honored by their honest efforts; fourth, use a system of classification that promotes and rewards fair play and victory equally.<sup>77</sup>

*Is sports competition an ethical means to convey values?*

The ethics of sport assumes not only a respect for the rules, but also respect for those who stand in front of you. The concept of respect and acceptance of others is crucial to an ethical understanding of sports competition.<sup>78</sup> This includes a respect for the rules, for oneself, for the opponent, and for the authority. When it is not seen only as a quest for victory, or as a way to demonstrate one's superiority over others, competition may become a means to convey values, to build up character and a sense of community. In this sense, competition becomes an instrument to look for "fun, fitness, therapy, friendship, sociability, or the pursuit of excellence."<sup>79</sup> If competition is not overly opposed to cooperation,<sup>80</sup> it can become a strong motivation to personal improvement of both parts<sup>81</sup>. The presence of an opponent is necessary to show one's own limits and abilities and strive for excellence.<sup>82</sup> To overcome one's limits and to do his best, every athlete must be confronted with the talents of his neighbor. In this way, the opponent becomes a stimulus and a mirror from which the athlete learns how to grow. The focus is not on how to dominate the opponent, but on how to improve my own performance compared to his. Delattre calls this process "a testing for self-discovery," during which the athlete learns more about himself.<sup>83</sup> Meakin speaks of "mutual benefit,"<sup>84</sup> while Clifford and Feezell call it a "mutual striving for excellence."<sup>85</sup> The concept that can make the difference in competition is that through confrontation, both sides learn to grow. Therefore, they are indispensable to one another if they want to continue their growth. If leaders and athletes become aware of this fact,

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<sup>77</sup> Miller, "Team Sports in Adventist Education," 197.

<sup>78</sup> For a further study see Davide Sciarabba, "Attualità Pedagogica nel Nuovo Testamento: Riflessioni Critiche nel Gioco e nello Sport" (B.A. thesis, Istituto Superiore di Educazione Fisica Università degli Studi di Firenze, 2000), 78-177.

<sup>79</sup> Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education*, 37; see also Clifford and Feezell, *Coaching for Character*, 13.

<sup>80</sup> David Light Shields and Brenda Light Bredemeier, *True Competition: A Guide to Pursuing Excellence in Sport and Society* (Champaign, IL Human Kinetics, 2008), 15.

<sup>81</sup> Meakin shows that competition it is not selfish per se for at least three reasons: first, it is not possible to call people selfish that are playing with fair play; second, both the athlete and his opponent agree to play one against another; and third, by giving their best, athletes are giving to one another the opportunity to enjoy the game. Meakin, "The Moral Status of Competition," 63; McIntosh, *Fair Play*, 178; Clifford and Feezell, *Coaching for Character*, 13.

<sup>82</sup> Clifford and Feezell, *Coaching for Character*, 13.

<sup>83</sup> E. J. Delattre, "Some Reflection on Success and Failure in Competitive Athletics," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport 2* (1975): 135.

<sup>84</sup> Meakin, "The Moral Status of Competition," 63.

<sup>85</sup> Clifford and Feezell, *Coaching for Character*, 13.

they may take further steps toward a practice of sports without a personal, egotistical interest in the mind. This may open the door towards a virtue ethics in sports that may help the individual to build up a better society.

## Conclusion

In our opinion, the main point is that our youth may understand that:

“The values reflected in sports make of it something more than a pleasant diversion and recreation. If exercise can help to relax and evacuate anger, to soothe nerves, to digest an eating excess, if it teaches us to respect others and cooperate with them, to smile at the limits we discover, to submit our bodies, then we can qualify exercise as a faithful friend and we should speak more about its holiness, and how it contributes to our spiritual growth. The human qualities that underline sport activities are the same that underpin the activities of spiritual life”<sup>86</sup>

Discipline and engagement; concentration, targeted effort, and real self-sacrifice; constancy, perseverance, and determination in reaching the goal; respect of rules, loyalty, and “fair play;” balance, satisfaction with the accomplished duty; motivation for reaching the prize, enthusiasm and happy acceptance of the reward; there are some of the human qualities that we can develop and exhibit not only in sports, but also in personal life.

In conclusion, I would like to state that practicing competition is not by itself morally wrong. It all depends on the way it is understood and practiced. The following scheme shows the contrast between the positive values transmitted by practicing competition in a good way and the negative values of practicing competition in a bad way:<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> T. Ryan, “Vers une Spiritualité du Sport,” *Concilium* 225 (1989): 132.

<sup>87</sup> Adapted from Sciarabba, *Attualità Pedagogica nel Nuovo Testamento*, 180.

<b>Right Actions in Competition</b>	<b>Wrong Actions in Competition</b>
Meeting, connection	Squabble, separation
Authenticity	Sophistication
Respect	Not respect of the other
Spirit of competition	Antagonism
Communication	Non communication or aggression
Equality	Inequality
Diversity	Difference, discrimination
Welcome	Rejection
Fantasy, Creativity	Stereotypy
Community	Individualism
Spontaneity	Institutionalization
Total development of the person	Partial development of the person
Ethics	Morality of Situation

As we have seen, competition is teachable.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, if sportive activities are well taught and managed, it is possible to transmit ethical and spiritual values through sports. This in turn is helpful for the development of the character<sup>89</sup>.

J. Rioult says it well:

“Each student has in himself desires that come from his deep passions, psychiatrics say. Must school ignore these desires as it has done in the past (fight, overcome oneself, meet others, win...)? Certainly not! These are too strong motors of action: they are the ones who create in students to do and to believe.

<sup>88</sup> Even the apostle Paul invites the believers to run correctly in order to reach the price (I Corinthians 9:24, 25).

<sup>89</sup> Arnold, *Sport, Ethics and Education*, 44-52.

They are the stand of the pedagogy of the project, even implicit. Nevertheless, they must be canalized through an education that lifts students. Teachers constantly learn that in the adversary exists a human part, sacred, that should be respected regardless of the circumstances, even those of a hard match with stakes as important as those of the class. To respect in others the part of humanity, isn't it proper in all relations? (...) This relation is constructed, it is not given. It requires a long process of education to humanity. As in every educational walk, students can make errors. The progress from error to error. (...) All morals, religious or secular, ask for the respect of the other in the name of God or in the name of the universal. Let us teach our students, even in stadiums, to have access to the universal.”<sup>90</sup>

Finally, competition is a strong motivation for both the person and his opponent to be better. If sportive competition is taught well, it may transform the practice of sports into a powerful means of transmitting personal, professional, and social ethical values<sup>91</sup> for present and future generations, contributing to the formation of a global community.

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<sup>90</sup> Minassian and Fernandez, “Le Sport,” 17.

<sup>91</sup> For believers, sport in education can become a means of what some Christians call “sanctification.” I personally see the ideal competition to which we are called as a stimulant that allows me to be a better person. To overcome my limits, I do not need only my best, but also the presence of the other to push me to go a little farther. In the same way, my presence helps the other to go farther in his limits. I also need to be reminded that my progresses have limits, and that some of them I can only overcome with God’s power. Thus, the right way to live the competition is through a balance of interacting relationships based on the tension of Creator-creature-fellowmen. Cf. Ted Kluck, “The Joy of Sports” in “Are Sports the Problem?” *Christianity Today*, February 2010, 27.