

# SPORT AND CHARACTER

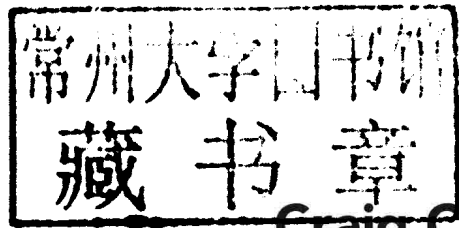
*Reclaiming the Principles  
of Sportsmanship*



RAIG CLIFFORD • RANDOLPH M. FEEZELL

# Sport and Character

**Reclaiming the Principles  
of Sportsmanship**



**Craig Clifford**

**Randolph M. Feezell**



Human Kinetics

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# Sport and Character

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of Sportsmanship**

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# PREFACE

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**It seemed inevitable that** we would write this book. Anytime we talked, the conversation would turn to the topic of sport—and then, inevitably, to sportsmanship. We talked about trying to teach it to the kids we were coaching and the kids we were raising; we talked about watching its occasional display and its frequent absence in college and professional athletics. Expressions such as “respect for the game,” “respect for the opponent,” and “respect for officials” repeatedly surfaced. We apologized to each other for invoking sportsmanship clichés in our conversations, until one day we realized that expressions which sound like clichés to us many young athletes today have never heard.

In 1985, Gerald Ford remarked,

*Broadly speaking, outside of a national character and an educated society, there are few things more important to a country's growth and well-being than competitive athletics. If it is a cliché to say athletics build character as well as muscle, then I subscribe to the cliché.*

A generation ago many people might have nodded approvingly when such views were expressed. Several decades later it is difficult to be as charitable when thinking about the moral possibilities of sport participation. What are our children learning as they turn off ESPN and hurry off to practice? There was a time when they may have had the good fortune of watching Mickey Mantle trot around the bases after hitting a home run, head down so as not to show up the opposing pitcher, exhibiting a respect for his opponents and humility and grace in relation to the traditions and reality of the game of baseball. Now what do they learn when they watch sports on TV? Respect for opponents? Humility? Grace? Loyalty? Hardly. It would be tedious to recite a lengthy list of the disturbing aspects of contemporary sport: bench-clearing brawls, trash talking, taunting, strutting, college athletic scandals, cheating, drug abuse—why go on?

A cover story by columnist Robert Lipsyte in the April 2, 1995, issue of the *New York Times Magazine* even proclaimed the end of American sport:

*Sports are over because they no longer have any moral resonance. They are merely entertainment, the bread and circuses of a New Rome. Nothing makes this more chillingly real than our current Babes: Mike Tyson and Tonya Harding. Two of the neediest, hungriest, most troubled and misguided young people in athletic history, they are the archetypal extremes of this frenzied, confused sports endgame. (p. 56)*

When we consider the years since Lipsyte's hyperbolic proclamation, it's hard to believe that things have improved in the world of sport. Some of the biggest news stories have continued to document these problems, despite pockets of resistance that have formed in various cultural venues: books about the importance (and decline) of moral character in society, character education programs in our schools, organizations devoted to promoting better behavior in sport, and so forth.

But merely bemoaning the situation is not enough. Something seems to have happened concerning the substance of our collective moral lives, in sport and in society at large—and some kind of response is called for. In such a contemporary context, we think our book on sportsmanship is important and timely. We can't expect children to do what is right if we don't teach them. We can't expect children to become good people unless we attempt to instill good habits in them and help them develop good character traits. Virtue, said Aristotle, requires practice. We contend that one can, and must, *practice* sportsmanship, just as one must practice a fast break, a baserunning situation, or the timing for a poach in tennis doubles. But we can't teach children sportsmanship and guide them in its practice if we don't know what it is or why it's important. Although many have bemoaned the situation in today's sports world, there appears to be little available in the way of a clear articulation of the basic principles of sportsmanship.

Given the overwhelming numbers of young people who are involved in sport as participants, spectators, and fans, it is imperative to reclaim moral language for sport in order for this part of their lives to be charged with the possibilities of moral growth and excellence of character. Sport is not the only arena, but it can

and should be an important one for practicing virtue. And it doesn't just happen of its own accord. Sport can—and often does—inculcate the worst habits, the worst character. In 1962, Brutus Hamilton, the great track and field coach, said: “When ideals are obscured in amateur sports, then comes the danger of an athletic injury to the character of the athlete” (Walton, p. 117). One thing is sure: How we conduct ourselves as players, coaches, parents, and school administrators will make its mark upon the kinds of human beings we are going to be. Sport is an expression of our culture, and because of the enormous importance we attribute to it, it shapes that culture as well.

Being a good sport also requires proper perspective about what sporting activity is and what its central values are. In this sense, sportsmanship involves a kind of wisdom that requires proper insight, right attitudes, and good judgment, as well as appropriate conduct. Sport can and should teach lessons, and such lessons can be crucial for self-understanding. As you will see, we believe that sportsmanship primarily involves *respect*: for the opponent, for teammates, for officials, for coaches, and for the game. The principles of good sportsmanship do not supply specific rules for behavior; rather, they supply the general guidelines and the context in which good judgment, relying on experience and understanding, can arrive at specific decisions in a meaningful way. It is precisely that context that seems to be missing in today's sports culture.

The thread that runs through the entire book is a philosophic return to the old-fashioned notion of *sportsmanship* as the unifying moral concept that describes good character in sport. We chose the word as our central concept after much consideration and much discussion with coaches and ex-coaches who care about the sorts of things we are trying to express. As for it being old-fashioned, we need a word that carries the weight of tradition, for it is our contention that we need to get back in touch with something we were once in touch with. We also hasten to say that the second syllable of the word should not be taken to exclude female athletes; indeed, it's arguable that girls' and women's athletics have continued to place a far greater emphasis on sportsmanship than the male version. In its etymological origin, the word “man” is generic, and “sports-person-ship” or “sports-human-ship” would be an abomination of language that would send most athletes, male and female, scampering out of the locker room in hysterical laughter. We occasionally resort to the expression “being a good sport,” but even that expression doesn't have the resonance of the traditional noun. In an informal survey, we found several women's basketball coaches, themselves women, who quite reasonably avoid the expression “man-to-man” defense but don't hesitate to use the term “sportsmanship.” Our position is simple: Excellence of character, on the playing field and in life generally, is just as important for girls and women as it is for boys and men.

This book represents a reworking and expansion of an earlier publication, *Coaching for Character*. And much of what we have to say in *Sport and Character: Reclaiming the Principles of Sportsmanship* is addressed to coaches who work with young athletes. Part of the reason for the new title is that we want to indicate that this book, although some of it is explicitly addressed to coaches, has something



to say to anyone who is interested in the issue of sportsmanship. Whether you are involved with the world of sport as a coach, an athlete, a parent, a teacher, a minister, a school administrator, or a citizen concerned about the social fabric of American culture, you face tough decisions about ethical matters, and many of these matters ultimately relate to your most basic views about the very nature of sport—why it's important to you, why you care about it, and how sport relates to other basic values.

While you can scarcely avoid the many situations in which you must make important ethical decisions, you can certainly avoid thoughtfully engaging these issues. This avoidance is what we want to challenge. We want to challenge you to become more reflective about athletic competition. We want you to think with us. You may not agree with everything we say, but that's natural. Our goal is not to preach, but to encourage and to help. We encourage you to think for yourself, and we challenge you to develop your own answers to these questions. However, we believe we can help you think about these issues and give you a framework within which you can make your own decisions and help your players grow not just as athletes but as human beings. The ultimate goal of ethical reflection is practical: It makes a difference in how you act, in how you treat others, and in what kind of person you are.

We hope this book will be useful as a basis for discussion and reflection about virtuous conduct in sport. We want this book to engage and provoke you, as well as guide and instruct. We believe that something good happens to people when they engage in dialogue and reflection about important human concerns. Long ago Socrates argued that we should be most concerned about virtue and the greatest possible care of our souls. He exhorted his fellow Athenians to try, above all, to make themselves as good and as wise as possible. Reading a book on sportsmanship and thinking about such issues may appear to be a trivial response to Socrates' challenge. Yet where else do we have such an opportunity to connect with young people in an area they care about and raise these questions again and again? Why not exhort young athletes to be as good and as wise as possible when they play their games, as well as in life as a whole?

# CREDITS

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# INTRODUCTION

## Sport Today

**The year was 1954** when the University of Oklahoma played Texas Christian University in the biggest college football game of the season up to that point. Oklahoma had won a national championship in 1950, and from 1953 until 1957 the team would win two more national championships and 47 games in a row. Oklahoma came into the game ranked number three in the country; TCU was ranked number four. You get the point: This was a huge game with a packed stadium and national attention. As the clock ran down in the fourth quarter with Oklahoma ahead, 21–16, TCU marched down the field and the quarterback threw an apparent touchdown pass into the end zone just before time ran out. The field judge signaled touchdown. The receiver walked toward the official, handed him the ball, and said, “Ref, I didn’t catch it. I trapped it.”

Hard to imagine. In this day and age, where receivers often are shown on the replay pretending to catch a ball that was trapped (and undoubtedly celebrating in some showy fashion)—or in baseball, where it happens all the time that an outfielder traps a ball and holds it up as if he made a legitimate catch—the receiver’s behavior seems unreal, fictional, even absurd. Now return to the game. The back judge saw the trapped catch, had some uncertainty, and initially didn’t want to overrule the field judge. They discussed the play, and because the receiver admitted that he didn’t catch the ball cleanly, the original call was reversed. The result: incomplete pass, Oklahoma victory, and a rather amazing example of sportsmanship and fair play.

Can you imagine such behavior in a comparably significant big-time college football game today, for example, Ohio State versus Michigan, Florida versus Georgia, or Texas versus Oklahoma? If you find such behavior so unrealistic or improbable in the context of sport today, it might be worthwhile to wonder what has happened in sport, or better, whether some important change has occurred in our attitudes toward our games, our expectations and judgments about athletic events, and our emotional reactions to our team’s wins and losses, our heroes’ achievements and failures, our children’s successes and defeats.

Fast forward to April 2008, and a less exalted sports venue, yet no less important for the players, coaches, and fans of two division II college softball teams vying for a conference championship. A senior part-time starter for Western Oregon steps to the plate with two runners on base and hits the first home run of her college career. As she’s trying to retrace her steps after missing first base when she rounded the bag, her right knee gives out and she falls in a heap, unable to continue her home-run trot. The rules apparently allow no assistance from any other teammates or coaches, and permit only a pinch runner at first, the consequence of which is

that a three-run homer would be reduced to a two-run single. A career highlight would be reduced to a humdrum occurrence. Central Washington's first baseman has a better idea. After consulting with the umpires, she and a teammate carry the injured player around the bases, stopping briefly at each one so she can lightly tap it with her left foot. At home plate the injured player is passed to her teammates. The Central Washington players return to their positions as the fans continue to cheer a remarkable display of sportsmanship. Is sportsmanship dead? No. Is it on life support? Probably not. Is there work to do? Yes, much work is required.

The national reaction to what was called "the ultimate act of sportsmanship," "an unforgettable story of compassion and selflessness amid intense competition," was "pretty phenomenal," said the sports information director from Western Oregon. Numerous media outlets around the country covered the story. We might wonder, however, why this act was taken to be so extraordinary. The very reaction seemed to say something about "our" assumptions concerning what kind of behavior we expect in the heat of "intense competition." Why would we think that attitudes toward competition, winning, and opponents would be such that helping an injured opponent would be trumpeted as an act of ethical heroism rather than a praiseworthy but expected action, hardly the stuff for ESPN highlights, effusive praise, and national applause? The TCU receiver played by the rules, and the Central Washington players helped an opponent achieve what she deserved, yet we are startled by these actions, which are so contrary to the single-minded pursuit of victory. Pam Knox, the Western Oregon coach, said this about the events that unfolded during the game: "It kept everything in perspective and the fact that we're never bigger than the game. . . . It was such a lesson that we learned—that it's not all about winning. And we forget that, because as coaches, we're always trying to get to the top. We forget that. But I will never, ever forget this moment. It's changed me, and I'm sure it's changed my players" (Hayes 2008).

Why do we forget? Why is this so difficult to remember? We may be less surprised by current events at the other end of the ethical spectrum. However memorable we find our favorite historical or relatively recent examples of ethically meritorious actions in sport—from Olympians who have sacrificed their medals to help overturn an opponent's unjust disqualification to tennis players, race car drivers, and soccer players who have sought to do the right thing rather than the expedient one—our contemporary discussions are often dominated by disheartening examples of cheating, disrespect, and even violence. The head coach of the most successful National Football League franchise since 2002 is involved in a cheating scandal in which an assistant was caught videotaping New York Jets defensive signals from the sidelines during a game. As a result, the NFL penalizes the New England Patriots and coach Bill Belichick \$750,000 and a first-round draft pick for cheating. Former senator George Mitchell is named to lead an intensive investigation into the use of performance-enhancing drugs in Major League Baseball. In 2007, the Mitchell Report states that "for more than a decade there has been widespread use of steroids and other performance enhancing substances by players in Major League Baseball, in violation of federal law and baseball policy." In a memo to all Major

League Baseball players, Mitchell says, “The illegal use of performance enhancing substances is a serious violation of the rules of Major League Baseball which directly affects the integrity of the game. The principal victims are the majority of players who don’t use such substances.” Our heroes are paraded in front of congressional committees and are exposed, much to our disappointment. But everyone does it. Cyclists and track athletes are also found guilty, but they’re just trying to win, aren’t they? “If you ain’t cheatin’, you ain’t tryin’,” says the NASCAR fan. Isn’t that what we expect from our coaches and athletes? Why be upset when they merely respond to the prevailing ethos of contemporary sport? It’s all about winning, isn’t it?

Despite outstanding examples of good ethical conduct in sport and increasing institutional interest in these issues across a wide range of organizations, it’s difficult not to be pessimistic about the state of sport today in relation to the ideals of good sportsmanship. It’s important, however, not to overstate the case. Such pessimism expresses our sense that the ethical climate of modern sport is at least ambivalent, sometimes even hostile to the notion that questions of good character and conduct are important notions that we must take seriously when we think about sport and athletics. One contemporary thinker, Simon Blackburn, asks us to become sensitive not only to our physical environment but also to our moral or ethical environment. This is the surrounding climate of ideas about how to live. It determines what we find acceptable or unacceptable, admirable or contemptible. It determines our conception of when things are going well and when they are going badly. It shapes our emotional responses, determining what is the cause of pride or shame, or anger or gratitude, and what can be forgiven and what cannot. It gives us our standards—our standards of behavior.

This notion provides a particularly useful way of engaging important issues. For example, as Blackburn points out, we tend to talk more about our rights than about what is good, as classical ethicists did in both Western and non-Western philosophy. We don’t talk much about a life devoted to duty, as the Victorians might have. We value individualism and freedom. We don’t like to be told what to do by supposed moral authorities. We think our privacy should be vigorously protected from governmental interference. Although we may take certain ethical ideals to be obvious or unchallengeable, it’s important to think carefully about such ideas, to critically examine them and see whether they can survive important questions about their status and consequences.

We might distinguish the general set of surrounding ideas about how to live and the ethical atmosphere within which vital parts of life are located—sport, business, the professions, and so on. Of course, there will be interesting interactions between the general ethical climate and more localized ethical milieus. In chapter 1 when we consider some common objections to teaching sportsmanship, we may think that the skepticism about moralizing and moral authorities in sport represents a more general skepticism or relativism derived from our ethical surroundings. Now consider the ethical climate of sport today—that is, the surrounding ideas about what sport is, how participants should conduct themselves, what their proper motives should be, when things are going well or badly, and what should be the shape of

our emotional responses to various involvements in sport. Let's try to identify, as best we can, what appears to be a predominant attitude toward sport, expressed in the language we use to talk about sport and athletes, as well as the most powerful metaphors that guide our experiences and underlie our expectations and standards of behavior. And if we find some tension between the ethical climate surrounding sport today and the principles that are central to sportsmanship, then it should not surprise us that we face an uphill battle—to use a very common sports metaphor—in “reclaiming the principles of sportsmanship.”

Turn on ESPN. Tune in to sports talk radio. Go online. Read the sports page. What is sport? What are the dominant concepts and metaphors that express the ethical climate of contemporary sport? First, sport is about winning, period. If your team is bad, break the contract and demand to be traded so you can realize the holy grail—the championship. The athlete must achieve the championship, and it's ultimately important to be recognized, paradoxically, as the individual who is best, at least in team sports, because she earned the ring—with teammates. If it's all about winning, then one may as well cheat to win (notwithstanding the important notion that sports are constituted by rules, to play the game is to follow the rules, and to violate constitutive rules, that is, to cheat, seems to mean that the cheater can't really “win”, since the cheater isn't really playing the game at all). If sport is just about winning, then becoming excellent, playing well, relating to others, engaging in meaningful activity, experiencing the joy of athletic competition—none of these really matter. Second place is un-American—the silver medal is for losers. What are the consequences for children, fans, coaches, and players if we accept the win-at-all-costs attitude?

Alongside the reductive notion that sport is simply about winning is the emphasis on sport as a competitive activity, a zero-sum game in which losing is the ultimate disgrace and your opponent wants to take something from you, even humiliate you. Metaphors associated with war reinforce the notion that athletes are warriors engaged in battle against an enemy. Trash talking and taunting are common behaviors against opponents. We're trying to kill our opponents. Let's murder, trounce, stomp, or destroy them. No doubt sport is competitive, but what's missing or downplayed is the cooperative aspect of sport in which participants come together not in war, but in an attempt to become excellent or simply to engage in interesting and satisfying activities in an artificially constructed arena of shared meanings and values. Are we surprised by the Central Washington players' actions because we don't expect altruism or benevolence on the field of battle? (After all, we're trying to “kill” the other team.) Are we expected to be indifferent or perhaps even unkind to our mortal enemies, especially if it enhances our chance at winning?

Next, for many, sport is entertainment, pure display offered for the pleasure of the spectators. (Ignore for the moment how limited such a view of sport is.) If sport is entertainment, then the athlete should do what is entertaining, and those who entertain best should be rewarded. The gaudy celebrations and choreographed displays after the touchdown, sack, dunk, or goal entertain, don't they? But they also reinforce the “look-at-me” attitude that sometimes degenerates into tawdry



forms of self-indulgence, both on and off the field. So younger athletes may come to see themselves as future professional entertainers (or current “amateur” performers in big-time college athletics) characterized by selfishness, greed, and arrogance. Entitlement means that the sports world revolves around the star.

Sport is also viewed as big business, or simply motivated by the aspiration to become bigger, economically speaking. If “no one cares” about a sporting event because no one is watching, then no one is entertained and no one is paying for the seats. The ultimate put-down of an athletic event on sports talk radio is that “no one cares,” as if the event’s value is directly proportional to its ability to occasion fan interest, usually evaluated in terms of monetary power or television ratings. The path to success, at even lower levels of sport, is to build “The Program,” improve the facilities in order to increase interest and keep the turnstiles moving. Fire the high school coach who can’t survive this model, whose evaluation is intimately related to economic considerations. Bring in the illegal player and be sure to keep him eligible. Ignore bad attitudes for the sake of success. Forget about integrity and honor.

Sport is also about playing with emotion in an arena of intense competition. The blood-curdling screams after the “big play” may have once seemed like adolescent displays of lack of self-control. Now the big boys and girls are teaching the little boys and girls it’s all right to scream, pump your fists, and beat your chest. Such displays are the norm at lower and lower levels of competitive sport. “Look what I’ve done! And, it’s all about me!” Sport is supposedly about playing with passion, even if such emotion initiates disrespect for opponents, teammates and team, officials, and the game itself. Excuse or ignore the stupid displays that hurt a team’s chances for victory because of penalties. That’s just playing with emotion.

In part, the ethical climate that surrounds popular sports involves the following: Sport is about winning, competition, entertainment, market values, and highly emotional involvements. That’s what we hear over and over about sport conducted at the highest levels, and the atmosphere that is created by such attitudes filters down into sport at all levels, in sometimes insidious ways. It’s not that sport doesn’t involve winning and competition and passionate commitment. It’s not that sport doesn’t inevitably involve economic matters. The problem is what is left out when we focus so much on these ethical ideas and their consequences. And make no mistake about it—these ideas are ethical in a broad sense, in just the way suggested by the notion of an “ethical climate” within which we develop our preferences, make our evaluative judgments, and shape our emotional responses. “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.” “Show me a good loser and I’ll show you a loser.” “Losing is like death.” “If winning is not the point, then why do they keep the score?” “Sport is about winning championships.” They’re clichés, of course, but they never seem to be extinguished. They are often embodied in the actions of coaches, athletes, and fans, and they form the foundation for standards of behavior that may come into conflict with the principles of sportsmanship—at least the ones we attempt to explain and defend in this book.

As we write this, the sports pages have included the following stories in the last few days: During a state 3A high school championship baseball game in Georgia,

a pitcher and catcher who are angry over the umpire's calls conspire to commit what would probably count as assault and battery if it happened outside the ballpark. The pitcher throws a high fastball. The catcher pretends he is expecting a low curveball and ducks. The ball hits the umpire in the facemask. Ten WNBA players and a coach are suspended and fined for a "dustup" in a women's professional basketball game. Members of the U.S. Olympic swim team are involved with accusations about endorsing products banned by the NCAA and positive drug tests. A local father is banned from Little League for a year because he assaulted an umpire after a baseball game played by 12-year-olds. And so it goes.

Examples are everywhere, some uplifting, others dismaying. To the extent that the ethical climate of sport today has something to do with the conduct that we fret about, it's appropriate to keep trying to counteract such influences. We hope our book continues to function in this way.

In part I, *Thinking About Sportsmanship*, we'll provide a foundation for the rest of the book. In part II, *The Principles of Sportsmanship*, we'll develop a series of principles that derive from the foundation we've laid down in part I. In part III, *Thinking About Sport and Life*, we'll ask you to go beyond the playing fields of athletic competition and think about sport in relation to the rest of life.

Some of the things we say in part I might seem somewhat abstract, but the principles of sportsmanship that we offer in part II—respect for opponents, for the team, for officials, for the game—must be based on *something*. Otherwise, they will float about as nothing more than groundless recommendations. We believe these principles of respect are not merely the subjective impressions of the authors. Ultimately, the principles of sportsmanship are grounded in the very nature of what we're about as players, coaches, and human beings. Thinking about sport, as we'll see in part III, will inevitably lead us to the most fundamental questions about life. So bear with us—and think with us. That beautiful jump shot you had in high school won't help you, but the tenacity and courage that you've developed in the heat of athletic competition will.



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