SOME REFLECTIONS ON SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN COMPETITIVE ATHLETICS

Edwin J. Delattre
Associate Professor of Philosophy
University of Toledo

The initial objects of my reflections are the great and transporting moments of participation in competitive athletics. Reflection on these moments draws our attention to the conditions under which they are possible and to the kinds of people who are capable of achieving them. Reflection on these, in turn, enables us to see at once the touchstone relationship of competitors, and the moral and logical incompatibility of competing and cheating. Most of all we are reminded throughout these reflections that success in competitive athletics is not reducible to winning, nor failure to losing.

Richard Harding Davis was sensitive to the great and transporting moments of participation in competitive athletics. In the late fall of 1895, he wrote a gripping account of the recently contested Yale-Princeton football game. He captured both the involvement of the spectators and the struggle of the participants in revealing ways.

With the score at 16-10 in favor of Yale, but amidst a Princeton comeback, the description proceeds:

> It was obviously easy after that to argue that if the Tigers had scored twice in ten minutes they could score at least once more...or even snatch a victory out of defeat. And at the thought of this the yells redoubled, and the air shook, and every play, good, bad, or indifferent, was greeted with shouts of encouragement that fell like blows of a whip on one side and that tasted like wine to the other. People forgot for a few precious minutes to think about themselves, they enjoyed the rare sensation of being carried completely away by something outside of themselves, and the love of a fight, or a struggle, or combat, or whatever else you choose to call it, rose in everyone's breast and choked him until he had either to yell and get rid of it or suffocate. (2:p. 9)

Forgetting "for a few precious moments to think about" oneself, being "carried completely away," can be among the high points of human existence. Yet being so transported in the wrong way, or in the wrong context, becomes fanaticism, irresponsible loss of self-control, even madness. Here we will not concern ourselves with the problematic dimensions of being "carried completely away," since they are not relevant to our reflections.

As the objects of eros are many, we can become passionately involved in diverse pursuits and activities, concerns, persons, even places. Inquiry can be transporting, the quest to discover--was anyone ever more obviously carried completely away than the Leakeys at Olduvai George? The love of another, a symphony, dance; the range of our passionate concerns is virtually endless. In this list, of course, is the game: competitive athletics. Because of its special place on this list, which will emerge in our discussion, competitive athletics merit our attention and reflection.

Let us return then to Davis' description, for it becomes even more revealing about the transporting moments in competitive athletics:

> The clamor ceased once absolutely, and the silence was even more impressive than the tumult that had preceded it. It came toward the end of the second half, when the light had begun to fail and the mist was rising from the ground. The Yale men had forced the ball to within two yards of Princeton's goal, and they had still one more chance left them to rush it across the line. While they were lining up for that effort the cheering died away, yells, both measured and inarticulate, stopped, and the place was so still that for the first time during the day you could hear the telegraph instruments chirping like crickets from the side line. (2:p. 9)

What is crucial in this passage is not the silence of the crowd, but the occasion for it. The silence is occasioned by the resolution of the game into this moment, this spellbinding moment when the competition is most intense. Think of the moment not as a spectator, but as a competitor. Think of the overwhelming silence of the moments when the game is most of all a test, the moments of significance in the game, the turning points, which all the practice and diligence and preparation point to and anticipate.

Such moments are what make the game worth the candle. Whether amidst the soft lights and the sparkling balls against the baize of a billiard table, on the rolling terrain of a lush fairway or in the violent and crashing pit where linemen struggle, it is the moments when no let-up is possible, when there is virtually no tolerance for error, which make the game. The best and most satisfying contests maximize these moments and minimize respite from pressure. When competition achieves this intensity it frequently renders the outcome of the contest anti-climatic, and it inevitably reduces victory celebrations to pallor by contrast.

We see here the basic condition of success in competitive athletics. We must be able mutually to discover worthy opponents, opponents who are capable of generating with us the intensity of competition. Exclusive emphasis on winning has particularly tended to obscure the importance of the quality of the opposition and of the thrill of the competition itself. It is of the utmost importance for competitors to discover opponents whose preparation and skill are comparable to their own and who respect the game utterly.

We are recalled to this insight by the applicability to competitive athletics of the phrase "testing one's mettle." The etymological roots of "mettle" are the same as those of metal; indeed these were originally variant spellings of the same word. Just as the quality of a metal ore was determined long ago by the intensity of the color streak produced by rubbing it against a mica-like material called a touchstone, so in competition, one's opponent is his touchstone. In rubbing against a worthy opponent, against his skill, dedication and preparation, the quality of a competitor's mettle is tested.

As all philosophers know, Socrates employed the metaphor of the touchstone in the dialogues. Fellow participants in dialogue are the touchstones by which one tests the epistemic quality of his beliefs. That I have used the same metaphor must not be allowed to obscure the point that inquiry, dialogue, is, without qualification, not competitive. To view inquiry as competition, argument as something won or lost, is to misunderstand both. Dialectical inquiry is the shared and cooperative pursuit of the best approximation of the truth. In successful dialogues, false and confused beliefs are exposed as such, and those who held them benefit by the disclosure of their inadequacy. The testing of one's mettle in competitive athletics is quite another thing. The distinction is vital because when inquiry is treated as competition it is destroyed as inquiry.

Competition, contesting, if you will, thus requires commensurate opponents. The testing of one's mettle in competitive athletics is a form of self-discovery, just as the preparation to compete is a form of self-creation. The claim of competitive athletics to importance rests squarely on their providing for us opportunities for self-discovery which might otherwise have been missed. They are not unique in this by any means--the entire fabric of moral life is woven of such opportunities--but there is no need for them to claim uniqueness. They provide opportunities for self-discovery, for concentration and intensity of involvement, for being carried away by the demands of the contest and thereby in part for being able to meet them, with a frequency seldom matched elsewhere. It is in the face of these demands and with respect to them that an athlete succeeds or fails. This is why it is a far greater success in competitive athletics to have played well under the pressure of a truly worthy opponent and lost than to have defeated a less worthy or unworthy one where no demands were made.

We may appreciate this last point through a final look at Davis' chronicle:

> And then, just as the Yale men were growing fearful that the game would end in a tie, and while the Princeton men were shrieking their lungs out that it might, Captain Thorne made his run, and settled the question forever.
>
> It is not possible to describe that run. It would be as easy to explain how a snake disappears through the grass, or an eel slips from your fingers, or to say how a flash of linked lightning wriggles across the sky. (2:p. 9)

We cannot separate the significance of the Yale victory and the Princeton defeat from the fact that there was involved a player capable of such a run. For Princeton to have played well against a team with such a back, to have held a back of such quality to a single long run, to have required magnificence of Thorne for him to score, is a great success in itself.

How different this is from the occasion for Jack London's concluding lament in his coverage of the Jack Johnson-Jim Jeffries fight:

> Johnson is a wonder. No one understands him, this man who smiles. Well, the story of the fight is the story of a smile. If ever man won by nothing more fatiguing than a smile, Johnson won today.
>
> And where now is the champion who will make Johnson extend himself...(4:p. 513)

Jeffries was game in that fight, and he took a terrible beating. But the fight was no real competition, because the opponents were not commensurate. Worse, Jeffries was ill-prepared, he was not the opponent he might have been. Accordingly, the extent of success possible for Johnson was extremely limited by the time the fight began.

As we noted above, more is required for successful competition than commensurate opponents. Opponents, to be worthy, must utterly respect the game. Let us return now to explore that claim, for it involves not only important moral considerations but also rather more subtle logical or conceptual ones. An example will help us to expose and deal with both.

It is well known that during his career as a golfer, Bobby Jones several times called penalty strokes on himself. By 1926, he had won the American and British Opens and the American amateur title. In that year he granted an interview on golf style to O. B. Keeler, who asked Jones about those self-imposed penalties:

> 'One thing more, Bobby. There is a lot of interest in those penalty strokes you have called on yourself. At St. Louis and Brookline and at Worcester--they say that one cost you the championship--and the one at Scioto, in that awful round of 79 when the ball moved on the green--' Bobby held up a warning hand. 'That is absolutely nothing to talk about,' he said, 'and you are not to write about it. There is only one way to play this game.' (3:p. 222)

From the point of view of morality, competitors must consider it unworthy of themselves to break deliberately the rules of the game. When a person violates the rules which govern competition, he treats his opponents as means merely to his end of victory. The symbols of victory have status or meaningfulness only because they stand for triumph in competition; without the opposition, they are worthless. Attainment of these symbols by cheating is therefore the exploitation of those who competed in good faith. Competitors are equally reduced to means merely in cases where the end of the cheater is prize money or gambling profit. Without the competition there can be neither prize nor wager, and the cheater simply uses the bona fide competitors solely for his own gain. Cheating is thus a paradigm case of failure to act with respect for the moral status of persons as ends.

From the point of view of logic, the need for the players' utter respect for the game is equally crucial. Competing, winning and losing in athletics are intelligible only within the framework of rules which define a specific competitive sport. A person may cheat at a game or compete at it, but it is logically impossible for him to do both. To cheat is to cease to compete. It is for this reason that cheaters are the greatest failures of all in competitive athletics, not because of any considerations of winning or failing to do so, but because they fail even to compete.

In the case of golf, as in the Bob Jones example, failure to impose a penalty on oneself where it is required by the rules, is to cease to compete at golf. For one can compete with others only in accordance with the rules which govern and define the competition.

Or consider the case of pocket billiards. In all pocket billiard games it is a rule violation to touch any object ball or the cue ball with one's hands or clothing, etc. during play. It is also a violation for the cue to touch any object ball in the execution of a shot; any player who violates these rules has committed a foul. The penalty for a foul in all cases is termination of one's inning or turn. Now suppose that during a game of straight pool in the execution of a shot where the cue ball must be struck at a steep angle because of an object ball immediately behind it, a player knowingly touches that object ball with his finger, undetected by his opponent or a referee. If he continues to shoot, if he does not terminate his inning voluntarily, he has ceased to compete at straight pool. And because he is no longer competing, he cannot win at straight pool. He may appear to do so, he may pocket the prize money or collect on the wager or carry off the trophy, but since he is not competing any longer, he cannot win. The cheater is logically prohibited from competing and therefore from winning. He can lose by disqualification.[1]

We may wish here to recall Bernard Suits' discussion of rules in "The Elements of Sport." Suits distinguishes the constitutive rules of a game, those which proscribe certain means of achieving the end of the game, from rules of skill which apply to how to play the game well or effectively. He points out that to"...break a constitutive rule is to fail to play the game at all." (5:p. 52) He mentions also a third kind of rule, namely the kind of rule which if violated requires the imposition of a specific penalty, the sort of rule we have been discussing. He urges rightly that violating such a rule is neither to fail to play the game nor to fail to play it well, since the penalized action may be nonetheless advantageous to the competitor. But he also notes that such rules are extensions of the constitutive rules. This is the emphasis of my argument. In particular, to commit an act which merits a penalty, to do so knowingly and <u>not</u> to incur the penalty is to cease to play the game. To ground a club in golf or to commit a foul in pool is not to cease to play the game. But to ignore the penalty imposed by the rules surely is, and it is in this sense that we understand rules with penalties as extensions of constitutive rules.

Both morally and logically, then, there is indeed only one way to play a game. Grantland Rice makes clear his appreciation of this insight in his autobiography, <u>The Tumult and the Shouting</u>. For emphasis, he employs the example of a rookie professional offensive lineman. The athlete responds to Rice's praise for his play during his rookie year by observing that he will be better when he becomes more adept at holding illegally without being caught. Of course, to Rice this confused vision of successful competition is heartbreaking.

We have seen now that success in competitive athletics requires being and discovering worthy opponents, and that worthy opponents must be relative equals with utter respect for the game and their fellow competitors. We have related success to competing well, performing well, under pressure. No one can be a success in competititve athletics if he fails to compete, either by avoiding worthy opposition or by cheating.[2]

Of course, our treatment of competitive athletics is rather narrow; it does not deal with the variety of reasons and purposes people have for engaging in competitive athletics. Our reflections do not really pertain to people who play at competitive games merely for fun or relaxation or exercise, who use, as it were, the format of competitive games for purposes largely indifferent to competing and to winning. We are talking only about people who seek to compete with those whose investment in a game, whose seriousness of purpose and talent, are comparable to their own and who therefore play to win.

Now people vary greatly in talent and available time for preparation, opportunity, training and so on. This means that success in competitive athletics cannot be tied unconditionally to absolute quality of performance. Whether a competitive athlete is a success hinges on numerous relevant factual considerations. We acknowledge this point as part of our sense of fairness through handicapping, establishment of weight divisions in boxing and wrestling, age divisions in junior and senior competition, and division of amateur and professional, to mention only a few.

What then of the athlete as competitor, the athlete who competes with equals, who, in the very act of competing, sets victory among his goals? Is winning everything in such competition, the only thing, the sole criterion of success?

We have been told so often enough, and we have seen the young encouraged to believe that winning and success are inseparable, that those who win are "winners" and those who lose, "losers." This view, however, must be tempered by our previous insights; we must not become preoccupied with individual victories to the exclusion of recognition of the importance of patterns of outstanding performance. As Thackeray saw, "The prize be sometimes to the fool. The race not always to the swift." (6:p. 57)

Sometimes performance in victory is mediocre, in defeat awesome. Many super bowls are testimonial to the former. There are countless other examples of mediocrity in victory, from little league games to professional contests. So too of excellence in defeat. To cite only one:

> Anyone who saw Wohlhuter's heroic performance in Munich won't soon forget it. In the first qualifying heat, he tripped, and his pipestem body scraped along the track. Scrambling to his feet, he chased after the field--but was shut out by a stride.
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> 'I was startled,' he recalls. 'To this day, I don't even know why or how I went down. When there're 80,000 people watching you, you want to have a good day. I had a choice--walk off the track or give it a try. I chose to be competitive.' (1:p. 48)

To stress victory to the point of overlooking quality of performance is to impoverish our sense of success in competitive athletics.

It matters whether we win or lose. It also matters whether we play the game well or badly, given our own potential and preparation. It matters who we play against and whether they are worthy of us, whether they can press us to call up our final resources. Satisfaction in victory is warranted only when we have played well against a worthy opponent. Otherwise victory is no achievement, and pride in it is false.

NOTES

1 We might ask whether other members of a team are competing if one member is cheating. We would ask immediately whether they knew of it, and deny that they were competing if they knew and did nothing. We would be more perplexed if they did not know. But we would still deny, I think, that the team as a unit were competing. Notice that a team can be disqualified for the violations of one member. The same considerations apply to cheating in the form, say, of recruiting violations.

2 Obviously there is no failure involved in the decision not to participate in athletic or non-athletic competition. Some people are constitutionally unsuited for athletics, some for competition, while others find the demands of games artificial or fabricated and therefore unsatisfying. That there is failure in cheating or in constantly playing unworthy opponents neither suggests nor entails that there is anything wrong with unwillingness to enter at all into competition.

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