

High School Sports and Ultimate Values

T.A. and I have been friends since junior high, which means we are counting our friendship in terms of decades, rather than years. We attended the same college for about a year, when I transferred to a different university. T.A. was recently honored by his college Alma Mater. He was feted about for a weekend, with he and his wife spending two nights in a nice hotel, all meals and mileage reimbursed. He gave a speech before a gathering of alumni, and was presented with a nice plaque commemorating his Lifetime Accomplishment.

What was this landmark accomplishment? T.A. was inducted in the Athletic Hall of Fame because, as a cross country and track runner, 25 years ago he broke a conference record at the 10,000 meter run, and his record still stands. To put it another way – during his college years he ran in a 6 mile circle faster than anyone else. To date, no one has run in the same circle any faster.

Makes me wonder which game warden was chasing him.

T.A. is a man who deserves some recognition. He has been married to his college sweetheart for more than 25 years. Both are college graduates. They had 3 children, who themselves have become hard-working, college-educated adults. Besides that, they are all just nice people. T.A. is a successful business man and farmer. He and his wife spend several months of each year living and working (self-funded no less) among poor people in third-world countries. He pays his taxes, votes, and, except for a possible error in judgment early one November, he obeys the law. He deserves some recognition.

But for running in a circle?

I learned many years ago that to say anything against athletes or sporting events was to invite scorn, ridicule and even banishment. It was in a class at Duluth Central High School during my sophomore year. Those were the days when DCHS was best known for victory's at the State Basketball Championships. On the fateful day there was to be a basketball game at the high school for which the last two periods of classes were canceled. It went without saying that we were all to attend The Game. The class period right after lunch was to be the final one, and among the students in my class were several of the "star" basketball players. The teacher called the class to order, and then went around collecting our homework assignments from the day before. One of the athletes didn't have his done. "Get it in by tomorrow" the teacher instructed him, and then continued on to collect papers from the rest of us.

My innate sense of justice was offended. "Why" I protested "do I have to have my work done today, but he doesn't?" A stunned silence fell over the classroom, as the 30 or so other students looked at me in gasping horror. I had challenged that which was holy and sacred above all: basketball.

The students were horrified, but the teacher was incensed. In barely restrained rage the teacher ordered me out of the room and down to the Principals' Office RIGHT NOW! I duly presented myself to the appropriate authorities and awaited my fate. After the teacher had come down to explain my belligerent malfeasance, The Principle listened to my account of the situation. When I finished, he looked at me with a tired but paternal gaze. "Greg" he said "it's perfectly acceptable to have an opinion, you just need to learn the best times and ways to express that opinion." He then sent me to the library for the remainder of the period and also banned me from attending The Game that day. I was exiled to the library for almost 3 hours, reading whatever I wanted. If memory serves, the janitor came thru to check on me. Everyone else was at The Game.

The Principle had wisdom beyond what he was often credited for.

Attitudes about sports haven't changed much. Argue for the elimination of the athletic program in high schools, and you're against kids and education. Protest the dominance of athletics on college campuses and you are treated as radically out-of-touch with reality. Be a state legislator and fight against public financing of stadiums for professional teams and you're sure to become un-elected.

If what we worship is defined as that by which we structure and arrange our lives, as well as that to which we assign ultimate value, then inarguably sports has become the civil religion of our age. Sports have taken the place of religion in our culture. I can easily imagine centuries hence anthropologists mistaking our stadiums and playing fields for temples, athletes as religious disciples, coaches as priests, sports commentators as theologians, and games as times of worship.

We as a community are in dire need of unifying values and principles around which we can make public decisions and direct our regions future growth and development. We need to articulate ideals that our children can aspire to, and have role models that exemplify those ideals. We need more than some least common denominator of what we're all against. We need to know what we are for.

The speed any of us can run in circles just can't do that.

Greg Hull is a sawyer and philosopher-at-large. He owns and operates Hull's Sawmill, and hasn't attended a high school basketball game in nearly four decades.