Intercollegiate Athletics
Two Compelling, Competing Logics of Excellence

INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS have been the target of reform efforts for over a century—for nearly as long as they have existed. Yet, any student of these ongoing reform efforts will conclude that there are strong obstacles to change. The challenges colleges and universities face in intercollegiate athletics—and the difficulties of reform—can be understood through a framing that captures a deep, core conflict of the human condition. John DeGioia, president of Georgetown University, describes the conflict as one between two competing and compelling understandings of what constitutes human excellence. The first understanding is grounded in achieving balance and harmony among various human qualities and interests in one’s life; the second—very different from the first—holds that human excellence is best demonstrated in boundary-breaking achievements. DeGioia discusses the implications of these competing logics for college sports, and higher education in general, and offers five propositions for the conduct of intercollegiate athletics.

Two Logics of Excellence

The discipline of philosophy helps us understand the difficulties colleges and universities face in intercollegiate athletics. At their most fundamental level, the problems we’re wrestling with in college sports are not simply a matter of a lack of goodwill or good intentions. Nor are they just a result of misplaced priorities. Rather, they reflect a deep human conflict stemming from two opposing understandings of excellence.
The first understanding holds that human excellence is best understood as a balance, an integration, of the various dimensions of our humanity. We have intellect and can reason, we are capable of artistic expression, we can communicate between and among one another, we feel emotions, we have religious experiences and sensibilities, we are social and political beings, we are capable of enjoying ourselves, and we can make moral judgments. Some of these capacities we share with other species, but the full inventory, blended together, characterizes what it means to be human.

From there, human excellence can be understood as the ability to find the proper harmony within and among these many qualities.

The second understanding is very different. It holds that human excellence is best demonstrated in boundary-breaking achievements. Excellence means performing feats that others can’t even imagine, forging beyond the limits of previous accomplishment, pushing back the “frontiers,” going where others have not gone before. Typically this form of excellence requires that one sacrifice well-roundedness and harmony to the focused, unyielding pursuit of truly unprecedented discovery or performance.

I will label these two understandings “logics,” because once an individual accepts either of them as a guiding assumption, it catalyzes and justifies whole sets of decisions or actions. I’ll call the first “Aristotelian” because it captures an understanding of the human condition first mapped by Aristotle. Strictly speaking, it is not Aristotle’s view, but the perspective I hope to explicate does owe many of its key concepts to a tradition originated by him.

According to Aristotle, each of us is on a journey, seeking the point and purpose of our life, our “telos.” We all share the same end—eudaimonia, or “human flourishing”—but how we orient our lives to achieve it will be unique for each of us. Such flourishing occurs when our pursuit of our own unique point and purpose, our proper end, occurs with all things in balance. What sustains such a balance? Habits, dispositions, or—more specifically—virtues. A virtue is the “mean” between the two extremes of excess and deficit with respect to a particular action or emotion. For example, in the “sphere of action or feeling” involving “fear and confidence,” courage is the virtue between the deficiency of cowardice and the excess of rashness. The emphasis is on balance. ¹

The second logic is more complex and difficult to label. With apologies to many in my discipline of philosophy (who will recoil at the sweeping generalization), perhaps calling it “Nietzschean” will help us draw out its dimensions.

In the Nietzschean logic, human excellence can be found in the “limit experience.” Exceptional people define themselves through exceptional accomplishments. Human excellence is not to be found in the affective feeling of some fleeting moment of balance. Life should be lived at the edges, on the boundaries, in the pursuit of triumph. By definition, everyone can strive to live in Aristotelian balance, while few can reach Nietzschean greatness. In this logic those who can—whether as individuals or as groups—are challenged to make every sacrifice necessary in the quest to redefine standards of achievement by which humanity measures itself in a particular endeavor.

Nietzsche establishes the tone for this tradition when he writes: “The most spiritual of men, the strongest, find their happiness where others would find their destruction, in hardness against themselves and others, in experiments; their joy is self-conquest…Difficult tasks are a privilege to them; to play with burdens that crush others, a recreation.”² This is a tradition that has a deep hold on our public consciousness today. We recognize it immediately in the world of athletic competition.

Tension Between the Logics

Efforts to reform intercollegiate athletics are generally focused on two sports—football and men’s basketball—for straightforward reasons:

1) These two sports have held widespread public interest over a sustained period of time.

2) The money connected with them is of a different order of magnitude than the money involved in other sports. The CBS contract for televising the NCAA Division I men’s basketball championship will bring at least $6 billion over the 11 years from 2003 to 2013, and the recently negotiated television contracts with Fox and ABC for the Bowl Championship Series’ postseason football bowl games will pay approximately $25 million per game.
3) Football and men’s basketball are the most obvious examples of cases in which leading institutions of higher learning have pursued the Nietzschean logic of excellence rather than the Aristotelian logic of balance.

Why do universities choose the Nietzschean path? It is helpful to recognize the relevance of Nietzschean logic and the “limit experience” to the mission of higher education. Part of our academic mission is to push our students to test their limits. We place great demands on them to help them find out what they can do now and to set a trajectory of future achievement. While we also try to leaven the logic of extraordinary achievement with an Aristotelian respect for the mean, it is undeniable that we support and often encourage Nietzschean endeavor.

Indeed, American research universities are explicit in providing support for faculty to engage in these limit experiences. We want our faculty working at the outer boundaries of current understanding. We define our missions with terms such as “at the forefront of knowledge” or “pushing back the frontiers of knowledge.” We seek to create communities that will encourage, reward, promote, and sustain scholars and researchers who venture out into this terrain. Sometimes we’re criticized for this commitment. Outside of the academy, our faculty’s work can look rarefied, unusual, overly specialized, and out of the mainstream. We defend that, because people who are pushing boundaries need space and time and freedom within which to create.

Of course, we find such driven people in all domains, in all social practices. Sometimes there are casualties. Often the cost of performing, for living out at this edge, can be difficult to reconcile with the demands of everyday life. In fact, universities are very good at providing supportive contexts in which talented researchers and thought leaders can expand the boundaries of knowledge, whether in the arts or sciences or in other fields.

My point is this: the tension between Aristotelian logic and Nietzschean logic doesn’t only play out in questions related to athletics. Throughout our society, we live this tension between the logic of balance—the logic of integration and synthesis—and the logic of singular distinction. A fundamental commitment of the university is to support and sustain people in the reconciliation of this tension. In this way, intercollegiate athletics reflect a driving characteristic of the university and are not simply the aberrational force they are often portrayed as being.

Five Propositions

I offer five propositions for the conduct of intercollegiate athletics—propositions that extend from the framework of the two logics of excellence and their centrality in university life:

Proposition 1: Each institution needs to know where it is on the continuum of the two logics of excellence. I believe that if the NCAA were eliminated today and we started all over from scratch, in a short period of time things would look like they do today. As long as the game is played, athletes will take it upon themselves to find the best coach, the ideal training regimen, or the most performance-enhancing nutrition. One institution will hire someone to videotape practice, using a simple technology to improve performance. Another will build and equip a weight room to strengthen its athletes. Another will build a new stadium or arena to attract athletes and fans. There is a Nietzschean logic at work that runs deep through the core mission of the academy. If we’re pushing that logic to the extreme edge of appropriateness, we had better know that we’re doing it.

Proposition 2: Research universities can absorb the impact of the logic of the limit experience. The major research universities have some experience playing at this edge, because it is characteristic of the kinds of engagements we seek to provide for the members of our communities. The sheer size, scope, and complexity of research universities’ missions make it possible to successfully provide for these experiences in athletics; the key question for each academic community is the extent to which it wishes to provide such limit opportunities.

Proposition 3: Limit experiences require supportive containers. A university community is uniquely qualified to play the role of supporting and sustaining the engagement of some of its members in limit experiences. The responsibility of a community is to understand the demands and the risks that come with such support and to retain the capacity to identify and stop dangerous, illegal, or unethical applications of this logic.

Proposition 4: Each university must choose the specific limit experiences that are appropriate to its context and identity. Choosing is harder than drifting because we force ourselves to articulate what we are committed to and why. In a university setting, with all its constituencies and internal politics, it often feels easier to do things without explanation and hope no one notices until they’re cheering a great success. There is much hard
work involved in supporting boundary-breaking endeavor; much of that work will be neglected unless the institution has made a conscious and public choice regarding which limit experiences it will pursue. A fundamental question facing the 117 Division I-A football schools and 326 Division I basketball schools is whether the significant demands that come with providing such an opportunity are consistent with those of the other kinds of opportunities provided in their communities.

Proposition 5: There is a need to ensure an appropriate alignment between the choices made in athletics and the capacity of the institution. This is important because it shows that we choose a specific set of sports among the overall menu of activities we choose for our students. Among the factors that contribute to these choices are (1) student interest; (2) institutional history, tradition, and culture; (3) geography; (4) peer institutions; (5) alumni and community interest; and (6) institutional needs. Each university makes its own decisions, applying these factors differently. At this juncture, we need to aspire to Aristotelian excellence, to the extent that we balance all these factors to make decisions that are right for our unique institution. Additionally, the cost of any possible misalignment—in terms of dollars and integrity—must be acknowledged and assessed.

Conclusion

The academy as a whole, and not simply our athletics programs, is shaped by the conflict between these Aristotelian and Nietzschean logics. We encourage both. We celebrate both. We contain this conflict within our walls and laboratories and libraries and playing fields. Managing this conflict is one of the defining challenges of the academy, and doing so well is among the most vital tasks we perform in our society, which is itself sometimes torn by tension between these two ways of viewing excellence. It is clear that a college or university committed to providing young men and women with the opportunity to compete seriously in athletics as part of their undergraduate education must also fully embrace the responsibilities that come with engagement in activities that fall within the logic of the limit experience. Only when we understand the ramifications of such activities can we begin to articulate what we value and set a course toward achieving it.

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