

# Sportsmanship and True Competition: The Spiritual Aspect of Sports

By Ken Reed

As a teenager, I remember my parents telling me how important sportsmanship was. I recall hearing them paraphrase the old Grantland Rice quote, “It’s not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game.”

I would nod, give a cursory “Yeah, it’s important” and quickly get back to the business of being a self-absorbed teenager. It’s not that I disagreed with them about the importance of sportsmanship, it’s just that I couldn’t really grasp how it could be *the* most important thing. There were games to win, championships to seek, points to score, and all-star teams to make.

Today, I get it. I’m convinced that how you play the game is the most important thing in sports – above and beyond all team and individual accomplishments and awards.

I believe that no matter how long your sports career lasts, whether it ends after Little League, or after winning the Super Bowl, what you will most be remembered for is what kind of competitor you were, what kind of teammate you were, and whether or not you respected the game. In short, whether you were a good sport or a bad sport.

Consider two baseball Hall-of-Famers, Ty Cobb and Harmon Killebrew. Both great players but both probably better known for how they played the game and carried themselves on and off the field.

Cobb played with anger on the field, regularly sliding into opponents with his spikes up. He was a well-known racist who was disliked by opponents and teammates alike.

“I think if I had my life to live over again, I’d do things a little different,” said Cobb, near the end of his life. “I was aggressive, perhaps too aggressive. Maybe I went too far. I always had to be right in any argument I was in, I always had to be first in everything. I do indeed think I would have done some things different. And if I had I believe I would have had more friends.”

Killebrew, on the other hand, was respected and liked by virtually everyone who came into contact with him, including opponents.

“We all loved Harmon so much,” said fellow Hall-of-Famer Bert Blyleven, a teammate of Killebrew’s with the Minnesota Twins. “Harmon was a great man, on and off the field. He was a bigger hall-of-famer off the field. Everyone that Harmon ever came into contact with has a story about what a class man he was.”

Another Hall-of-Famer, George Brett, had this to say about Killebrew: “He was just a fierce competitor and a perfect gentleman at the same time. You don’t see that a lot.

Sometimes you get fierce competitors who are bad people. You see guys that are not fierce competitors but not nice guys. You don't see the two of them together very much."

Basketball great Steve Nash wants to be remembered like Killebrew.

"I simply want people to remember me as a competitor and a great teammate," said Nash, a two-time NBA MVP who's headed to the Hall of Fame. "That's it. Those are the two most important things."

Legendary Green Bay Packers football coach Vince Lombardi is quoted as saying, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." I couldn't disagree with that sentiment more.

Let's take a step back and consider what sports competition really is.

Are one's opponents the enemy? Do they have evil intent? Do they need to be vanquished? Is a sports contest a zero sum game in which only one team, or one individual, can gain anything positive?

Or, are one's competitors people who are a lot like you? Do they love sports? Do they desire to become the best they can be? Do they play hard, strive to win, and do it by the rules?

I think in the vast majority of cases, the answer to the first set of questions is "No," and the answer to the second set of questions is "Yes."

Sport, at its best, is a cooperative activity in which competitors on both sides play with honor in a mutual quest for excellence. As such, our opponents are also our colleagues. We compete *with* our opponents, not *against* them.

Unfortunately, I think we're seeing a slow but steady decline in sportsmanship and ethical competition today, from the youth level to the pro level.

David Light Shields and Brenda Light Bredemeier wrote a thought-provoking book called "True Competition: A Guide to Pursuing Excellence in Sport and Society." In this book, they make an important distinction between "true competition" and "decompetition."

True competition is in essence a partnership in which opponents play ethically against each other to optimize performance, develop life skills, and have fun. Decompetition is based on a metaphor of war, in which antagonistic conflict reigns and the goal is simply to come out on top – at whatever cost.

I love true competition and hate decomposition.

Today, one of my competitive sports activities is a USTA tennis league I play in. Interestingly, I see the same types of opponents in this league that I saw as a nine-year old Little League baseball player.

Some weeks you run into the tennis guy who swears, pouts and pounds his racquet into the ground on missed shots. If he loses, he may or may not shake your hand before marching off.

Other weeks you run into the classy competitor who plays his heart out, complements your good shots, takes his bad shots in stride and wins or loses with grace and dignity. After the match, he'll have a snack and drink with you and talk about a variety of things - - some sports-related some not. There's a sense of mutual appreciation, and an unspoken acknowledgement that you came together to not only test each other's abilities, but just as importantly, for exercise, camaraderie and fun.

Regrettably, I've been a decompetitor during my sports career more times than I'd like to admit. But as I've gotten older, I've made being a true competitor a top priority in my life.

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The concepts of sportsmanship and true competition remind us that there are things more important than winning and our own desires. Sport, at its best, is about respect, honor and relationships.

Sportsmanship and true competition are soul-based. They are the spiritual aspect of sports. And they are the polar opposite of the ego-based win-at-all-costs mentality that's becoming too prevalent in sports today.

After all these years, perhaps nobody has described this spiritual aspect of sports as succinctly as Rice did in his famous poem:

"For when the One Great Scorer comes  
To mark against your name,  
He writes – not that you won or lost –  
But how you played the Game."

Those four simple -- but powerful -- lines should be posted on signs at the entrance of every sports venue across the globe.