

Wrath and Rapture in the Cult of Athletics

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I am tempted to believe that the primary value for the American male is not God, mother, or country, but athletics. Or perhaps I should say that for the American male athletics is joined to God, mother, and country in a quarterernity of values, that athletics like the others is a kind of Jungian archetype, a primordial urge to aggression transmuted into ritualized conflict, harmless but immensely satisfying. It is a deeply spiritual experience, not to be tampered with by heretics, or obstructionists, or even by blunderers who are imperfect in the performance of the ritual.

Not that athletics stands alone or in opposition to the others, or that the values are discrete. Not at all. Each value is enhanced by the others. The most casual observer of the Olympic games must perceive that athletics is inextricably bound to patriotism, and not for Americans only. And it may occur to some that T-V commercials advertising a breakfast cereal make athletics comfortably at home with God and mother.

Events of the past year have given me new reason to reflect on the exalted place athletics occupies among our household gods. For some, I committed the unpardonable sin: I cancelled a football game. My iniquity

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was, to the offended, like a decree eliminating Mass or like a ban against preaching. It struck at the ritual of combat and exaltation on the football field. I might have been overwhelmed by the mad mail had it not been for the exultation of the heretics (somewhat greater in number) who rejoiced at the mortification of the faithful.

I had no animus against football, no intent to cancel a game. My college was caught up in an angry demonstration of black students who protested discrimination in the college and in the surrounding community -- in non-college housing, in the fraternities and sororities, in the treatment of athletes, in the selection of faculty and non-academic personnel, in the development of the curriculum. I have no doubt that we were less guilty than many, perhaps most, colleges. Certainly to the country at large we were a model of non-discrimination. But we were nonetheless guilty as daily hearings clearly demonstrated. Day by day the excitement mounted. We were at the end of the long hot summer of riots. The external community burning with anger threatened to burn with fire. No one, not caught up in the hysteria of a mob, can understand its urge to uncontrollable and indiscriminate violence. Responsible citizens of the community and the college, concerned for the safety of involved spectators, recommended cancellation of the game. I cancelled it.

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The editorial comment of the leading newspapers was largely and vigorously supportive. And so were many of the people who wrote to me. Most of the critics were angry, some were furious, irritated, disappointed, many were vulgar, or profane, a few threatening. But I did not at the moment attach any unusual importance to athletics as a basis for the outburst. For one thing, I had not only cancelled a football game, I had placed fraternities and sororities on probation. And to some of my critics one act seemed as reprehensible as the other. But more to the point, the primary complaint was not probation or the cancellation of the game, but my yielding to threats. That brought recriminations against me and denunciation of the blacks. The usual clichés: "gutless wonder," "creeps like you," "masochist who enjoys surrendering to the pigs," "I question your strength of character," "weakness limp, spineless," "you are a yellow-bellied cowardly, left wing Communist," and somewhat more eloquently, "People like you will pay no attention to anything but their own faint heart-beats and the quivering of their white livers or the pulsing of their yellow bellies."

The remarks about the blacks were hardly more flattering and scarcely more original: crude, abusive common-place epithets, and hard-line advice. "I know what I would have done -- I would have thrown every damn one of them out on their ear."

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What are you going to do if they demand to date your daughter?" "What we need to do, sooner or later, is to outlaw the NAACP, CORE, BLACK PANTHER, and other Racist groups just as we did the Communist party. I think they are more of a threat to the country than the communist." "If nigger well-being is going to lead to the destruction of civilization through the form of integration, then I prefer the nigger perish rather than civilization."

I began to formulate a new definition of courage, demanded of me by my critics: to stand with the strong against the weak, to cry out against the oppressed who dare rebuke their oppressors.

It was the threats and demands of the blacks and my "cowardly" yielding that bugged people. And it was the angry commentary on this issue that, in retrospect, gave me a cue to the high valuation they unconsciously placed on athletics. They were not incensed by demands for non-discrimination in housing or for better personnel policies, or for elimination of discriminatory practices generally -- some of them tried to placate me by declaring their support of these demands. But cancellation of the football game? "Why in the hell didn't you contact the police?" "You should have solicited aid from our Governor . . . I am an ex-marine and have bought a revolver and shells, I am not afraid!" When a deeply held value is threatened, and particularly

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when it is threatened by those already defined and hated as enemy, the primordial drive takes over and men do not ask for facts, they do not even ask if there are facts. And so they were unmindful of the fact that the blacks did not ask for cancellation of the game, they were indisposed to learn that the police were fully mobilized, that the Governor's special riot squad had been alerted, and that the police themselves, knowledgeable in the behavior of hysterical mobs, were among the first to advise cancellation.

Even among these first writers I noted, again in retrospect, the tendency to intermingle the values of patriotism and athletics: "To Americans who uphold the integrity of our nation and its constitution -- are we becoming so cravenly 'liberal' that we fear to defend our homes and selves against criminals and baboons?"

But it was the next series of events, the threats of black athletes to boycott the Olympics, that made clear how inextricably bound together are athletics and patriotism. Tommie Smith, holder of several world's records in the dashes, and a student at San Jose State College, apparently precipitated the crisis. Badgered by a reporter in Tokyo in the late summer of 1967, he admitted that he might boycott the Olympics. Whether Smith had thought about a boycott or whether the reporter suggested the idea to him, I do not know. But Smith had reason to be angry. A handsome, personable,

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and competent young man, who ought to be esteemed as a person, he is valued chiefly for his incredible speed. That is a common fate for athletes, as Housman said so poignantly: "early though the laurel grows, it withers quicker than the rose." But for the black sprinter the withering scarcely waits the breaking of the tape. And for Tommie, among other indignities, that meant the denial to him and his bride of an apartment near the college -- because they are black.

But, as I remarked earlier, reason does not stay the primordial urge. Tommie and his bride were still freshly bruised from apartment hunting when I received the first angry letter, Olympics Booster decal attached: "Your College or any other College in this land of ours does not need Tommie Smiths. In fact, our Country must now take a stand and tell these blackmailers, these hippies, and these traitors that we will not tolerate this Our young people must learn patriotism in our schools."

Harry Edwards, then a popular instructor at the College and leader in the black student demonstration, took up the Olympics boycott issue, made forays into college athletics programs and engineered a trial-run boycott of the New York Athletic Club. Edwards did not have to search for grievances -- they leaped out to him from nearly every dressing room and playing field in organized athletics, amateur or professional, as evidenced later by a well documented series in Sports Illustrated. The threatened boycott was a painful

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experience, not simply from the searing of the conscience, but from the sickening fear that without the black athletes, America would make a poor showing in the Olympics.

That Edwards is a responsible leader and an able negotiator for the betterment of blacks is hidden by the fact that he is also a fiery militant. His unrestrained denunciation of whites, his angry threats or warnings, his towering presence -- he is 6 feet 8 inches tall -- frighten whites and evoke passionate, aggressive responses all of which complicate the problem of appraisal. Not one of my correspondents noted that the New York Times credited him with keeping the athletic club boycott non-violent, few conceded that there was a problem of discrimination against black athletes, many pointed with injured pride to the fact that athletics was the one segment in our society where a black man could succeed through his ability. Their attacks and their demands that I fire Edwards were focused on his militancy, on conduct unbecoming a college teacher. But through much of it came the unmistakably anguished scream against one who would tamper with athletics, particularly with that nearly sacred festival of Olympus. Old Zeus must find some satisfaction in his staying power.

The climax came in Mexico City when Tommie Smith and John Carlos in record breaking time won first and third in the 200-meter dash. With gold and

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bronze medals suspended from their necks, they stood on the victory box. As the flag ran up the mast and the band played the Star Spangled Banner, they dropped their chins and raised gloved fists in what was afterwards identified as the Black Panther salute. The American public, triumphant, but a little apprehensive, watched the ceremony from their T-V screens. Whether they were at once shocked and angered by the incident, or whether the shock and anger followed the news reports I cannot say. But the anger seemed to mount, not antiphonally but by response of one agent to another, T-V to public to press and back again to public.

The night of his victory I heard Tommie Smith, calm and unangered, explain on television the meaning of his action: it was symbolic, his gloved fist, power in black America, the gloved fist of Carlos, black unity, the scarf, the beauty of blackness, and the socks, black poverty. His friends in Black America, he said, would understand what he meant. The reporter baited him. Black America? Wasn't he an American? Smith stood his ground, a slight edge in his voice: he was a "Black American."

I regretted the incident, but I regretted far more the fact of the "other" America, the one to which Smith and Carlos, and most of the other blacks belong, because whites have closed the gates, have failed to make America one country open to all of its people. I wondered what went into that defiant

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gesture: poverty, hunger, despair, not abstractions but concrete experiences. Doors slammed on blackness, loved ones crushed by the meanness of mean people whose only claim to assumed superiority was their whiteness. Success, and adulation, yes, and the right to dream of a gold medal, but along with idolatry on the track, contempt on the streets. I thought of the few blacks in the generations past who have broken the barrier, chiefly in entertainment and sports, of the narrow corridors of their acceptance, of the thin trickle of followers, and of the many who aspired but didn't make it. And I saw in Smith and Carlos the new breed, young blacks who are not satisfied with personal achievement in the prescribed channels of a white man's world, but who are going to take their black brothers with them, who are determined to rip open the conventional barriers that the white man erects to abridge his own creed and law.

But even in this unhappy reminder of our flaws I found reason to be proud of our country and to hope for its future -- proud that the flag these young men defied protected them in their defiance. "Only in America," one cartoonist captioned his drawing. The thought did not occur to me at once, however. The patriotic theme was injected later. When the incident occurred one of the other black athletes was quick to insist that it was "in no way intended to be an

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insult to the American flag." In his interview immediately after the race Smith did not mention the flag. What he and Carlos thought or intended I do not know. I suspect that they did not anticipate the depth or strength of the emotional springs they had plumbed. The American public howled in rage. In the celebration of two of their preeminent values, country and athletics conjoined, the sacred ritual had been interrupted, the symbol defiled.

But I get ahead of my story. I regretted the incident as a breach of accepted conduct and understood when the United States Olympics Committee apologized to the Mexican government and people, although the language and the reasoning troubled me. Thirty hours later, the American committee, responding to pressure from the International Olympics Committee (of which Avery Brundage is the head), suspended the athletes. "Politics," said Brundage. Said the American committee, "untypical exhibitionism, "[that]" "violates the basic standards of sportsmanship and good manners . . ." But no reference to the presumed offense to the flag or disrespect for the national anthem. And at that moment not a word of the ugly rumor of suspected bribery. Because the athletes were students at my college, I released a statement to the press, protesting the moralistic ambiguities of the committee's statement, praising the men for their achievement and for their dedication to justice for black people. I expressed regret that our treatment of black athletes had prompted the demonstration.

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Once more the storm broke, dozens of letters, some strongly supportive, some abusive, most of them angry protests against my support of men who had violated the ceremony and dishonored the flag. I confess that it is difficult for me to understand why so few looked behind the gesture of disrespect, why so many found easy explanation in bad manners, ingratitude, un-Americanism, boorishness, and contempt for law and order.

One could say that their's was a reflex judgment, or lack of judgment, based on the assumption that those honored will accept their honors in humility and gratitude. A convention not lightly to be dismissed among men who must live together.

Or one might say, as I said at the outset, that athletics has taken on a unique sanctity, that it is a transfigured value, a form of worship, its ritual prescribed. Who violates its ceremonies invites the wrath of the faithful. True, but superficial. How did athletics achieve its transcendent character? By what process was it made so evocative of wrath or rapture? By its identification with patriotism? Good, but not enough, as the bums or heroes of any Saturday afternoon's ball game can testify.

I have thought much about this matter in recent months. That passion is involved we cannot deny. Athletics provides both an outlet for the raw passion and the means to tame or sublimate the instinctual rawness. Men are not

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gentle creatures who want to be loved, Freud argued. Rather, they are endowed with a powerful instinct for aggressiveness and destruction; they are tempted to direct their aggression against their neighbor, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to torture or kill him. Civilization brings man's passions more or less under control by directing them into acceptable forms or towards an approved object, say an enemy. Civilization achieves control by elaborate codes of conduct, rules and regulations which, if internalized, become the conscience. Thus is added to the rules of conduct a self regulating agent, a sense of guilt or shame.

Athletics is society's most effective means of civilizing aggression. Under what other circumstances could a man wave a stick or hurl a round, hard missile at another man without evoking anger and retaliation? Where else would he dare strike an opponent a crushing blow with his shoulder or grab a running man around the legs and haul him to the ground? Or where else could he chase a man, overtake and pass him at top speed, break a slender thread with his outthrust chest and claim a glorious victory? And the spectators, full-throated, join in the battle, identify with this man or that, the blue-jerseyed team or the red, and emerge, victor or vanquished, their passions purged, their bodies limp but unbruised. It is a great feeling,

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a cleansing and a healing, even in the remorse of defeat. I have experienced it and liked it, as competitor and spectator, and I shall go back for more.

All of this requires an elaborate code and unending hours of reward and punishment necessary to instill the code in the conscious and unconscious behavior of the players. Coaches take over for parents in the development of the superego -- instructions, pep talks, off-the-cuff lectures, man-to-man talks, father and son banquets with guest speakers on morals and manners and the will to win -- not rules of the game only, but conduct off and on the field, etiquette, behavior reflecting proper attitude, "good sportsmanship," control the temper, smile when discouraged or beaten, give credit to opponents who win, be modest in victory, be courteous and respectful to officials. And the do nots: do not crow, do not grandstand, don't blame the officials, don't alibi, don't play dirty, don't use insulting or profane language, don't break the training rules. And for the spectators: may the best man win, or, root for the underdog -- as long as he has a chance! Primordial passion, sublimated and held in delicate balance by potential punishment and guilt.

There are exceptions, known only to the devotees of sport. "Nice guys never win," is OK if you're professional and winning; eye-ball to eye-ball is an acceptable pantomime for a runner out on a close call, again, if he is a professional; and an exchange of punches at the line adds color and excitement to the football game if the officials don't see it. In general the rule is,

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the more important the contest, the younger and more nearly amateur the contestants, the greater the crowd's insistence on good sportsmanship, the more certain its disapproval of any breach in the code.

The emotion of athlete and spectator alike is heightened by the intermingling of values: athletics, religion, and patriotism. The opening ceremony at games (or presentation of awards at the Olympics) is patriotic in the playing of the national anthem and the raising of the flag. It is religious in the ritual. And if, as in religion, the ritual is drained of its content by repetition, the form is there to be flooded with meaning and emotion when a crisis is at hand -- a play-off or a championship game. Then the solemn ceremony becomes a petition, not always unarticulated, or at the Olympics, an exaltation. The crowd's loyalty to school or town is patriotism when the team represents country, and victory is not merely a show of strength and skill and luck but of pride in school or love of country. The crowd is amused when the athlete fortifies his will to win by superstitious behavior, the carrying of a rabbit's foot, the wearing of a lucky shirt, or the touching of every fifth picket on the fence. But so closely is good sportsmanship, honest winning, associated with religion that the crowd responds with a resonant amen when it is told that a certain athlete draws on a Higher Power, "not to win, "

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but "to do his best."

And thus we have exalted athletics. And thus we have written meaning into the code -- identified gesture with the values we cherish -- and overlaid it with sentiment and explosive emotion. How then could we understand Tommie Smith and John Carlos? How could we separate out the magnificent victory from the breach of ceremony? How honor achievement when subsequent behavior violated the ritual? We could keep the medals of course, and count them in the country's total, and we did. But how could we search out the meaning, how discover the anguish behind the gesture, how find the firm hard line that marks the limits of a black athlete's entry into the white man's world, how could we see the line when the whole of our vision was focused on the fantasy of a gloved fist tearing asunder the stripes of the flag?

That should be explanation enough for the violent reaction to the canceling of a football game, for the anger evoked by a threat to boycott the Olympics, explanation enough for the outcry against the demonstration on the victory stand. I wish it were. But it is not.

Some of the letters addressed to me were vulgar, profane outbursts of men whose rancor and hatred of another race is without shame. Others were from men who, prompted by their love for and pride in the college, feared

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that my support of Smith and Carlos would invite criticism and undermine public support. Innocent though they may be of any thoughtful reflection on what a college is or ought to be, they are loyal, sincere men, whose criticism might have been directed against a white as well as against a black. It is a third group, much larger, that worries, even frightens me. Quite as sincere as the others in their desire to protect the college, they are more complex, more disguised in their responses. They protest too much. They are, in their own words, unprejudiced. They would not stoop to the profane and obscene language of the uninhibited racist. But one marvels that urbane men could be so infuriated by disrespectful behavior at an athletic contest. One begins to probe for the brooding, explosive tension that must be discharged through socially approved channels. And one is moved to ask: is the furious assault on poor sportsmanship and unpatriotic behavior the displacement for deep-seated aggression against the blacks? It is a disturbing possibility.

We cannot psychoanalyze a whole nation. But can we, by calling attention to the meaning of their behavior, awaken a dominant society to a more meaningful response? Can we direct their attention to the agony behind the defiance of the black? Can we engage their enormous motive power in constructive action? I do not know. But we must try.