On Play and Competition

You might say that I have a love-hate relationship with sport. In high school, I enjoyed taking long runs with the track team, running the steps of the gymnasium when it rained, and high jumping onto a mattress. But no sooner had our track bus brought us to the opposition's stadium than my seven-league boots turned to concrete, lunch congealed in the pit of my stomach, and I had an embarrassing urge to yawn.

I was never good at track by any standards other than my own, but my meet times and heights, those that counted, were always slightly worse than in training. Coach Ernsberger pleaded in vain, "Relax, son, you're trying too hard." I could not understand how I could run my fastest without trying my hardest, or why my most earnest efforts produced mediocre times. I soon hated competition for its pain, embarrassment, and anxiety.

Nevertheless, after three years in the Army and five years in college, I took up jogging to get rid of the "Milwaukee muscle" I'd euphemistically come to call the pillow of fat that preceded the bulk of me. I ran alone as a rule, entered no races, and progressed steadily from five miles a week to twenty, occasionally running with a stopwatch but mindful of self-induced stress and its enervating effects. Generally I was happy to get my aerobic points for the week and record them on the tiny, precise charts I'd become accustomed to keeping.

I soon found, however, that reducing my waist line and "running for life insurance," as a friend of mine called his exercise, were unduly practical motives. Running became, by accident I guess, sheer fun, and when it did, I was hooked as securely as any addict. Withdrawal symptoms usually began on the second rainy day. I found myself agreeing wholeheartedly with George Sheehan that "when we expose play to the function of promoting fitness and preventing heart attacks, we change its gold to dross."

Word of my new athletic endeavors spread across the campus where I taught, and I was invited to join a group that played volleyball on Tuesday nights. Some of the men had been playing together for twenty years, so I expected to meet some resentment, but my stamina and height helped me to gain the respect of the group, and in a few weeks I felt like a veteran. Typically the group would play two hours of three-, four-, five-, or six-man volleyball depending on how many showed up on a given night. If the first game ended in a lopsided score, one or more players would voluntarily switch sides to even matters up. Score was carefully kept and competition was keen, but I never saw a winner gloat, though there was much good-natured joking, and losers were seldom on a losing side for more than two or three games. If a serve or spike landed near a line, the majority ruled; if there was no majority, the ball was replayed.

Hitting a service ace, spiking, blocking, and even setting were more fun than jogging, though I loved the runner's high. On the other hand, running up the face of the dike on the cross-country course was not as bad as hitting a teammate's good set into the net. Nevertheless, competition, I decided after all, was great fun. When I was put in charge of a departmental lecture series, I deliberately scheduled all talks for Wednesday or Thursday to keep Tuesdays free for "v-ball."

Shortly after I began playing, I started hearing about the group's traditional dominance of the school's intramural volleyball tournament held each April. The Senile Setters, as the group called itself in the competition, had won just about every tournament ever

held, and it had never finished worse than fourth. I promised myself I was not going to let a two-week tournament spoil my Tuesday-night volleyball fun. I had seen the finals of the softball and touch-football intramural tournaments the year before, and I knew from the bloody lips and torn shirts how intensely some of the fraternities played. A few days before the volleyball competition started, I caught myself daydreaming of an opposing team consisting of six students who could leap like Rudolf Nureyev and hit an overhand smash like Jimmy Connors. Furthermore most of these athletic paragons had failed my English composition course.

As the tournament turned out, the Senile Setters won with relative ease, and, for the greater part, the losers were sporting young gentlemen. I suspected that most teams we'd played resigned themselves to losing like the College All Stars, submissive before their almost certain defeat at the hands of the NFL champions. Perhaps the game of volleyball itself nullifies most hostile feeling. Since there is no body contact between the teams, most anger is channeled within or directed at the referees, but if the officials are knowledgeable, firm, and consistent, there is seldom an argument.

Knowing of my jogging and volleyball play, an acquaintance of mine asked me shortly after the tournament if I'd like to play tennis. Though I'd never enjoyed tennis very much, I accepted his invitation with some reluctance and apologies for my poor game. Blitzed, 6-2, 6-2, 6-0, and my dislike for a sport having turned to hate as I became a trophy, I turned again to the question of whether play and competition aren't a lethal mixture. A week before my tennis match, I'd watched my son's YMCA basketball team throw elbows and tantrums despite technical fouls in an obsessive concern for a "W" in some soon-forgotten record book. The boys, I thought, cared too much for the things of this world. I began to understand what sport critics like Jack Scott and George Leonard were talking about: grace, skill, and cooperation counted for much more than winning. As Leonard put it, "Out of a lifetime of sport's spectating, the moments that live for us are pure dance. We may forget league standings and final scores and even who won, but we can never forget certain dance-like movements." Who needs, I asked myself, what Olympic swimmer Don Schollander called "pushing through the pain barrier into real agony"? Who needs the sort of voluntary humiliation I'd subjected myself to in that tennis match? It wasn't that I wanted to win that match; I just did not want to lose, even if losing is a fine preparation for reality. I was not willing to die or kill to be a winner.

When I asked a friend in psychology about what I considered the problem of competition, he led me to a study on the value of play. Jerome Bruner had conducted an experiment in which five groups of children between the ages of three and five were tested to see which group could learn a task best. The problem confronting the children was the retrieval of a prize from a box out of their reach. The only tools available were two sticks and a clamp. The results of the experiment were interesting: forty-one percent of the children who observed adults clamping two sticks and retrieving prizes were successful. Forty percent who were allowed to play with the three tools, but who received no instruction or observation of adults, successfully retrieved a prize. The three other groups which had varying degrees of practice and observation had a twenty percent or less success rate.

After reading Bruner's account, I was more convinced of the value of play, but I wished he had introduced the element of competition. I had visions of four-year-olds splintering sticks over their tiny knees and flinging C-clamps in their frustrated attempts

to whip their opposition and get their prizes. I remembered a story I'd heard as an undergraduate in a physics class of Albert Einstein as a sixteen-year old playfully imagining himself with a mirror in his hand traveling through space at the speed of light. At such a speed, he reasoned, he would not be visible in the mirror because the light reflected off his face could not catch up with the mirror. From Einstein's imaginative play came the Special Theory of Relativity.

With Einstein's mirror and Newton's apple in mind, I thought perhaps scientists would do well to keep a childlike attitude toward all their work. In fact, I learned that Erik Erikson had found in a thirty-year follow-up of people, who had been studied as children, those subjects who had the most interesting and fulfilling lives were those who had managed to keep a sense of playfulness at the center of things. As Karl Menninger put it, mentally healthy people play and take their play seriously. Those who fail at play, I thought, might turn out like the play-deprived monkeys at the University of Wisconsin Primate Research Center: incompetent in virtually every aspect of monkey social activity, sexually inept, aggressive to the extent that they will attack helpless infants or dominant males they have no chance of defeating, or self-aggressive to the point they will rend their own skin and muscle to the bone.

A philosophy teacher next suggested that I read a classic study of play: Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. Unfortunately for my purposes, however, Huizinga is more interested in man playing than man competing. Competition, he admits, does serve to give proof of superiority, but the passion to win sometimes threatens the levity proper to a game. A competitor, Huizinga believes, desires first "to excel others, to be first and honored for that." Only secondarily is his motive "a desire for power or a will to dominate." The faces I had observed at my son's YMCA basketball game seemed to contradict the philosopher: those faces had not been seeking any laurel crowns. Huizinga does grant that the systematization and regimentation of modern sport have damaged its pure play quality, its spontaneity and carelessness, but the all-out condemnation of competition I was looking for was absent.

Next, a Lutheran minister suggested Hugo Rahner, author of *Man at Play*. This Jesuit writer espouses the theology of play because earthly play is an anticipation of heavenly joy. Only at play can there be a harmony between body and soul; only one capable of play can find the crucial balance between buffoonery and boorishness. Rahner warns that one should never lose oneself in work or play, but like Huizinga, his concerns are much loftier than mine, and he does not distinguish between competition and play.

Unaided, I found a book in the library by M.J. Ellis that discusses why men play. In coming to his own answer, Ellis relates how others have answered the question: play is the mandatory release of surplus energy; it is a preparation for adulthood; it is the instinctive recapitulation of man's development; it is a way of compensating for our working lives; it is a cathartic response after unpleasantness; it demonstrates our competence and volition; or it is a way of avoiding boredom and seeking stimuli. The last explanation, man plays because he naturally seeks pleasure and interesting alternatives to his work, is most strongly supported by scientific research, Ellis asserts. Although the relationship between play and competition still was not clarified for me, I had gained a broader view of the subject.

I began then to compile my own argument against competition, and I turned to the writers who had influenced me to run regularly. Kenneth Cooper, author of *Aerobics* and my personal "guru," skirts the issue of competition in his first book despite his insistence

on recording times and distances. As long as one gets thirty aerobic points weekly, Cooper doesn't care whether they are obtained jumping rope in the bedroom or swimming competitive time trials. Thaddeus Kostrubala, psychoanalyst and author of *The Joy of Running*, however, attacks Cooper's charts and point system as destructive because they orient the runner away from his inner self and focus his mind on an artificial target. Kostrubala complains of the "cultural net of competition, tension, false values, and despair." He recommends running to achieve a sort of mystical experience, to touch another level of one's consciousness, to "resonate with one's biological heritage." Fred Rohe, author of *The Zen of Running*, agrees: "You can be victimized by your imagination if you imagine yourself astonishing your world with your progress and prowess. This mechanism is called ego. . . ." Similarly, Joe Henderson, editor of *Runner's World*, realized after his college competitive days were finished that his "running had to be more like play and less like the work it had been before. . . . The biggest victory," Henderson believes, "is to want and to be able to run each new day."

The longer I looked, however, the less I was convinced by these amicable writers because competition is the lifeblood of nature, commerce, and politics, not to mention professional sports. Arguments for non-competitive games like Infinity Volleyball, in which the ball is volleyed indefinitely to the chanting of participants and in which both sides share the final score, sounded to me like "transcendent silliness, dime-store Marxism, and counterculture blather," as William Bennett observed. I imagined such a game as an endless theatrical rehearsal, or a game of poker without any stakes.

George Sheehan, who set a world record for the mile for men over fifty, was more convincing. He speaks of the agony and fear of athletic rivalry, yet argues that competition is essential. His strongest argument is taken from the poet Robinson Jeffers: "In pleasant ease and security how soon the soul of man begins to die." As a tenured teacher, I knew all about pleasant ease. But it was James Michener, more than Sheehan or Jeffers who helped me finally settle the question of whether competition was for me. In Michener's *Sports in America* he writes:

> I find competition to be the rule of nature, tension to be the structure of the universe. I believe that normal competition is good for a human being, and I am sure that flight from it hastens death. I am prepared to acknowledge every charge against fanatical competition, or senselessly prolonged tension, and I would not foist either upon young people. But I would not wish to avoid reasonable competition, for I like a world in which men and women test themselves against others or against abstract ideals....

Armed with Michener's reassuring credo, I signed up for an intramural five-mile race, reminding myself that no horse ever ran himself to death without a mad jockey aboard. I was determined to run, but my competition was myself: I wanted only to finish strongly in a time near my personal best and maybe learn something about myself along the way. I'd traveled a long distance from my high school coach's idea that any race you can walk away from is a lousy one. I promised myself that if I did improve my best previous time I would not regard this race as a criticism of every race run at a slower rate. I was prepared, in short, to accept what I was.

I started dead last in the field of twenty, but moved up to nineteenth when the fellow in front of me stopped to retie his shoes. He obviously had the same attitude as I had toward racing or at least I thought so until he passed me. I was content to run my own

race, however, staying in plodding fashion about ten yards behind the next to the last man until we reached the 4.5 mile marker. At that point I realized from the dry, wheezing gasps I heard that the man in front of me was exhausted; he'd been running at his upper limit since he'd tied his shoes, and I'd let him pace me. I sensed I could pass him, but I worried about how he'd feel. Shouldn't we finish holding hands? No, I decided; how would I feel if I let him beat me and if I cheated myself of a good performance? Finishing last was a dreary prospect; I could run for substance and self-development another day. I charged through the last quarter mile finishing next to the last, and though my time was not a personal best, I was a happy man.

I shook hands with the man I'd beaten who said, "You should have passed me earlier." I replied, "I didn't know what I had." I was sorry he'd finished last, but he said he was happy to finish; he'd never run that far before. My guilt disappeared when I saw how satisfied he was. Running was more than a mere distraction for both of us, and I knew I'd done the right thing competing fiercely down the home stretch.

George Orwell called sports "war minus the shooting"; to others, it's a popular opiate. But finer distinctions need to be drawn. "Toughness without callousness," is the discriminating ideal William James set for sports. If the emphasis is a rational one, on processes more than outcome, then sport, or more specifically competition, deserves to be an integral part of human society. The Old Testament suggests such a rational integration, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." But playing for nothing is as unrewarding as working for nothing. "Without danger," the wise man said, "the game grows cold."

A Love Poem

For Ingrid

The plural of grass is lea,
for rain it's sea,
and God is three,
but the plural of three is me.