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Priest tackles the spiritual side of sports

Seattle University professor who once starred in college football says athletics plays role in life's lessons

SEATTLE

BY TERRY MCGUIRE

As he studied for the priesthood, Jesuit Father Patrick Kelly figured he had put sports behind him. His days as an all-conference free safety for the perennial NCAA Division II powerhouse Grand Valley State University in Michigan were history. It was time to focus on his spiritual life.

"But I realized over time it doesn't work that way," the Seattle University professor recalled last week. "I couldn't pretend that I didn't have that whole life that I had playing sports. They were profoundly formational for me – both for good and ill – and any attempt to live the spiritual life would have to be in relationship with my (previous) life and my youth as well."

The realization that he needed to continue to stay in touch with his experiences came to him during his month-long spiritual exercises in the Jesuit novitiate. Since then, sports and spirituality have been a focus for the 47-year-old, Michigan-raised Jesuit, now a LeRoux Professor at SU with a dual appointment teaching theology in religious studies and working in the school's Center for the Study of Sport and Exercise.

Ethics of work, play

A foremost scholar on sports and spirituality, Father Kelly has written and lectured extensively on the topic. The former assistant director of the Center for the Study of Sport at the University of Detroit Mercy is co-author of the book, "WE: A Model for Coaching and Christian Living." This winter quarter he'll launch a course at SU connecting sports with mind and spirit entitled, "The Soul of Sport: An Interdisciplinary Inquiry." The priest also is helping organize a conference at SU for next June 27-29 for coaches and others involved with young people on the themes of sports and spirituality.

On its good side, sports can promote Christian values including community and development of the whole person, Father Kelly said. He said pontiffs since Pope Pius XII have made over 100 addresses on the subject, "and one of the themes they keep coming back to – and this is especially true with John Paul II – is that the dignity of the person needs to be the criterion by which we develop sports programs and policies." Popes have also cited many virtues that sports can engender, such as fortitude, temperance, prudence and justice, he said.

He noted that Catholic tradition has long included play as an important aspect of life, such as on feasts days, holy days and Sundays. St. Thomas Aquinas promoted a virtuous life balanced with work and play. "For Thomas, play was actually related to spiritual values precisely because both contemplation and play were enjoyable and done for their own sake," Father Kelly said.

Unfortunately, he said, sport today in the U.S. often centers on the participant's work ethic rather than their play ethic. It dates to early U.S. history, he said, when the Puritans emphasized work while associating play with sin.



Jesuit Father Patrick Kelly, Ph.D., has followed athletics as a player and a scholar. PhotoByMike.com

'Broader values'

"I think this and subsequent theology developments ...have had a big influence on this aspect of culture," he said. Today, coaches and commentators talk about an athlete's work ethic, and children start training and playing for championships at a young age and become serious about sports instead of regarding it as play.

Athletes can also go awry when they come to see their body as an "instrument or machine" designed to get the job done rather than as an element of their personhood, he said. In his own youth growing up near Detroit, Father Kelly was an athletically-gifted eighth grader who was recruited by local high schools. He became a three-sport standout in high school, but his other activities suffered because of the attention he received and the large amount of time he devoted to sports.

"What happens now-a-days is that a young person can receive so much attention for this one activity – especially if they're good at it – that they begin to think this is the most important thing they do," he said. "And what happens is the young person's world narrows."

A broken ankle during football practice at the start of his senior year in high school was a turning point in his athletic career. "This (senior season) was what all my friends and I had worked for all these years," he recalled, "and now – all of a sudden – it was over.

"I think the injury highlighted the precariousness of all of this," he said. "And for me, it started the process of realizing that I needed broader values or criterion on which to base my life."