

Virtue of Sport

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Saint John Paul II, an avid sportsman in his youth, once lauded the moral value of sports. “They are a training ground of virtue,” he said.

His wisdom is worth contemplating during a busy summer that, in addition to the usual menu of baseball, football, tennis, golf, etc., offers the Olympic Summer Games in London, England.

Unfortunately, virtue can sometimes be difficult to find in modern sport. Multi-million-dollar professional salaries, bloated TV ratings and lucrative endorsements frequently breed a cult of celebrity that often spawns immoral behaviour both on and off the playing field.

The Olympics are supposed to represent sport in its purest form but, even if that was once the case, that purity has been compromised. Commercialism is rampant and, in many glamour sports, the financial stakes are high. Organizers in London will spend millions of dollars on drug testing and it will be a shock if they fail to expose some cheaters.

But those inevitable incidents shouldn’t detract from the overall celebration of virtue that Saint John Paul II believed was the essence of sport.



Saint John Paul II was affectionately known as the “athlete pope.” As a student he was a runner and soccer player and later became an ardent swimmer, skier and hiker. He believed that sport, in its pure form, could provide an arena for evangelization because the attributes required to become a champion – sacrifice, passion, obedience, discipline – were similar in many respects to those required to become a saint.

Sportsmanship, as an ideal, is all about character. It’s about humility, honesty, loyalty, respect and generosity. It is not a quest for perfection but, like a faith journey, is a quest for virtue. There will be moments of temptation and times of failure but the true sportsman, like the faithful person, will acknowledge setbacks with integrity and strive to become better.

Saint John Paul II once said the Church values sport because it advances the complete development of the body and soul and contributes to the advancement of a more human society. He believed the virtues evident in true sport could cultivate harmony among cultures and peace among nations.

“Sports have, in themselves, an important moral and educative significance,” said John Paul II. “They are a training ground of virtue, a school of inner balance and outer control, an introduction to more true and lasting conquests.”

He called sport a gift from God to mankind. And like the late pope, the 19th-century founders of the modern Olympics believed in sport as a training ground of virtue.

That noble ideal may have taken a beating over the past century, but the pursuit of virtue is still worth championing and, when it bubbles to the surface in a young athlete, well worth celebrating.