

In Defense of Sportsmanship

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First, in defense of the word. We know it's an old-fashioned word, and that the second syllable might be taken to exclude female athletes. As for it being old-fashioned, we do want to harken back to a more traditional way of understanding sports, and we know of no other expression that carries the moral weight that "sportsmanship" does. To us, "being a good sport" just doesn't have the same resonance. We certainly mean for the term to be inclusive of both genders. In fact, it's arguable that there is a greater emphasis on sportsmanship in women's and girls' athletics than in men's and boys'.

Now, the concept itself. The arguments against the principles of sportsmanship are loud, and – we need to be honest here – awfully persuasive. Take respect for opponents, at the very heart of the whole idea of sportsmanship. Why should I respect the guy who's trying to take my head off? Why should I shake hands with someone who just spent nine innings trying to make me look bad in front of thousands of people? If I worry about treating my opponents with respect, they're going to beat the tar out of me. And isn't sport about winning? Those aren't easy questions to answer, and they're impossible to answer without thinking about what it is we're doing when we step on to the playing field.

Why is it that we are first drawn to athletic competition? What is it that we get out of sports that we don't get out of non-competitive activities? What we get out of competition has something to do with the opposition of opponents. On one level, opponents oppose each other. Both sides are trying to win. Competition, on this level, is about winning. And if both sides aren't trying to win, then it's not competition – or at least it's not good competition.

But on another level this competition, this opposition, gives me an opportunity. My opponent pushes me to excel, pushes me to excel in ways that would not be possible, and certainly wouldn't be meaningful, without a good opponent. That's why great rivalries are so exciting – greatness in athletics requires great opponents. What would John McEnroe have been without Bjorn Borg? Gwen Torrence without Gail Devers? What would Mark McGwire's 70 home runs mean if he had hit them against Little League pitchers?

If playing the game is valuable, then we owe our respect and gratitude to our opponents. Without them, we can't play. Opponents who act inappropriately might manage to earn our disrespect, and we have to deal with them in the best way the situation and our ingenuity will allow; but the underlying principle requires that at some level we must be grateful to opponents who make it possible for us to play the game, and, if they are good opponents, make it possible for us to excel as human beings.