

If They Don't Win, It's a Shame: Ball Games and the Battle for Men's Souls

It happened at a Browns-Jacksonville game, when hundreds of enraged Cleveland football fans showered the field with beer bottles—stopping the game and sending players, referees, and coaches running for cover—after a last-minute botched call by officials gave the game to Jacksonville. “I like the fact that our fans care,” the Browns’ president affirmed. Below a five-column headline “Trashing the Game,” the next morning’s *Los Angeles Times*^[i] ran a telling photo of high-fisted, team-jerseyed fans shouting in the stands and lifting up a home-made banner:

**MAKE US PROUD
GO BROWNS**

These simple words, emblazoned in brown-and-gold team colors, state quite simply why a man can become so invested in his team, and allow its performance to determine his very life outlook and priorities.

The fan, that is, enters an unspoken contract with the team: I identify with the players, wearing their hats and jerseys, watching games, and cheering my loyalty. I pay them my money and devotion; their job is to make me proud.

Clearly, a lot’s at stake here. It’s my team. How they perform, therefore, reflects upon me. If they win, I’m a winner. If they lose, I’m a loser. The “game” is not just a chance to have fun, but the promise of redemption.

This is the province of the gods, entered at every kickoff and first pitch.

Let me say here that I enjoy ballgames. I’m a Lakers fan, own hours of NBA DVDs, go to local football and basketball games, both college and high school. My heart pounds when it’s down to the wire; I cheer at great plays and groan at a missed chance to score.

Wins pump you up, no doubt about it--and losses are a bummer. As the old baseball ditty goes, “Root, root, root for the home team; if they don’t win, it’s a shame.”

My own and other men’s heartfelt engagement with The Game leads me not to discount athletic contests as mere distraction from the more important things of a man’s life. Rather, it may well reflect, albeit dimly, the most important thing. If so, then we had better not short-circuit our vision and allow passion—or disdain--for the game to eclipse the larger contest which it reflects.

In fact, something archetypal beckons at every athletic contest, a faint echo of a larger, cosmic contest between powers of good and evil. As lion cubs wrestle and “play” together in anticipation of the vital hunt to come in maturity, to “play” a ball game can reflect and even stir you after the larger life struggles which every man faces.

Teams fight to win. But why do we want to win? If it’s just about external exigencies, that urge should dissipate when no life-or-death military conflict lies at hand. But thousands of cheering, even bottle-throwing fans testify to the contrary.

Could it be that a man’s urge for victory stirs not simply from ignoble pride, but rather, from his most noble destiny?

As human beings, that is, we all have natural shortcomings. We're not gods. When a man has an image of who he should be, he strives to achieve it. When inevitably he falls short, the gap between his natural self and his perfect image fills with shame—which only *super*-natural power, rooted in truth and released in grace, can overcome.

In a man, shame stirs a crippling, burn-in-your-gut sense that *I don't measure up*. What's more, *If I act like my true self, the other men will find out, and kick me off the team forever into outer darkness.*

Evil, as the seductive genesis of lies, lurks here, in the contradictory belief that, "If I'm real, I'm excluded from the company of real men." The conundrum both begs and mocks the definition, as terrifying as it is obvious: *A real man is a man who's real.*

The fear of being real, and thereby exposed to others' rejection, breeds a desperation to remove your human inadequacy, and in that idolatrous sense, become like God. The powers of evil prey upon this fear, promising to remove your shame and lift you up. But powers rooted in deception cannot make you real. Evil therefore urges you rather to dump your shame on others and fabricate a dignity by diminishing others in comparison to you. Hence, racism, sexism, nationalism, sectarian fundamentalism, and a host of insidious I'm OK-You're not OK ideologies and fellowships.

I'm not saying here that rooting for your home team makes you evil. I'm saying that looking to a group of athletes to "Make Me Proud," and thereby, cover your shame, is idolatry--a false spirituality which at best diverts a man from his larger life focus and destiny. No ball team, no matter how winning, can deliver you from the human condition of not measuring up to your created purpose and the shame which that engenders.

Men who have not faced the larger spiritual conflict in their own hearts cannot recognize it in the larger world, and therefore, will not responsibly take up their positions to win it. "Team spirit" thereby becomes a self-defeating distraction from authentic spirituality and the battle that infuses it. What's worse, it can delude a man into believing, "My team—like me--is good, and all others are evil."

The cosmic war between good and evil is not won by those who mistake Boot Camp for field combat and thus, sit riveted and paunched before TV ballgames while their families and communities wait bereft in the background. We've seen enough of these AWOL men—and not just in cartoons. They haven't outgrown the passion for a ball game to focus it at last on their calling to fight against evil in the world, even in themselves.

When a man shouts desperately for his home team to win because their loss would point to his own inadequacy, he has defined himself as a war casualty if not a deserter, seduced from his post by pride. He's no longer a true and viable warrior—who deliberately and diligently seeks to reveal his weakest spots in order to strengthen them for battle.

Among real men, therefore, the antidote to shame is not pride, but humility.

Too many men today remain spiritually flabby, preferring not to believe in the reality of evil. May they live happily ever after. From the Holocaust and 9/11 to drive-by shootings, from widespread addictions and disease to warmaking and divorce, I don't have time to argue the point. I'm too busy trying to overcome the evil in my own heart and fighting alongside other men to overcome it in this broken but otherwise beautiful world.

Those of us who live in the real world have been scarred by its evil. We've been forced thereby to recognize the conflict at hand, and we want to win it.

Front and center, men. Let's get real together and train for the battles of life.

And while we're at it, let's catch the Big Game this weekend. Both teams have been fighting hard this season, and it'll be a great contest.
