

Commentary

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Sportsmanship, from Olympia to Omaha

The Olympic Games return in August to the land where they began in 776 B.C.E. and began anew in 1896 C.E. We are caretakers of a tradition of athletic competition that extends back a thousand years before the Olympics themselves. In the second millennium B.C.E., the Hittites in what is modern-day Turkey and the Homeric

Greeks placed a high value on organized sports. We are a small part of bigger and older things.

The Hittites and Greeks had a range of competi-

tive events for their young men: chariot-racing, spear-throwing, running, archery, jousting, weight-throwing, boxing and wrestling.

What did they compete for? Aethla or athla, what we call "awards" or "prizes." The notion of "awards" is the very root of our word "athlete," literally "he who contends for awards." The Hittites called "presentation ceremonies" tarpa — or the "pleasure part" of the overall social event. The tarpa gave society as a whole the opportunity to honor the competitors and what the competition symbolized for the athletes, spectators and organizers.

It would have been unthinkable for any participants in Hittite athletics or in the ancient Olympics not to take part in the award ceremonies, whether they finished first, second, third or lower.

The University of Texas Longhorns baseball team recently did not take part in the presentation ceremonies after their upset losses at the College World Series finals in Omaha. Few involved in the controversy that followed know the long history of Western sportsmanship. But by now, they should know what is expected of young adult athletes.

American-Statesman sports journalist Kirk Bohls triggered the debate by rightly questioning what the

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Longhorns team had done, or in this case, had not done. His sources, Steve Pivovar of the Omaha World-Herald and Dennis Poppe, have attended the College World Series for 25 and 17 years, respectively. They had never seen the second-place team fail to come out for the trophy presentations to both teams.

Bohls' thinking mirrored my own. The awards ceremony is when athletes on the losing team show their true dignity, after the heat of competition. In Omaha, they would have acknowledged and honored the champions on the field and proudly accepted their trophies as second-best team in the nation. My former student, UT's Rhodes scholar and former second-baseman Sean Braswell, wrote me from Oxford, England, saying that the team should also have taken the field to acknowledge its debt to its many fans.

According to the piranha-principles of modern media, what the student-athletes should have done was soon lost in attacking and defending UT head Coach Augie Garrido. It is understandable then that Garrido's "apology" on UT's Web site denies that there was any reason for Bohls or anyone else to be upset in the first place. It is accompanied by a statement from the coach of champion team Cal State-Fullerton that Garrido had discharged his duties with a handshake and personal phone calls.

This all strikes me as playing the game "May the best man spin." Neither statement mentions the duties of the Longhorns players.

Assistant Athletics Director Bill Little thoughtfully discussed with me at

length the Athletics Department's position on what had happened and how unfair this all is to Garrido. And indeed the personal attacks are unfair. This one blip should not overshadow a career of great achievement.

But it is also unfair to shoot the messenger and ignore the message. Bohls placed the emphasis where it should be — squarely on the team's actions. Garrido claims it was unclear what the NCAA expected of his team after the game. But what did he expect of the team, and what did the players expect of themselves?

Little disputes Pivovar's and Poppe's statements. He says that in some other sports, the NCAA no longer requires the runners-up to attend the awards ceremony and that it has not been standard procedure recently at the College World Series for the second-place team to take the field afterward.

But at least one team has been doing the right thing. I contacted the coach's office of Stanford University, the intercollegiate baseball second-place team in 2000, 2001 and 2003, and received this statement:

"We have always gone through the awards ceremony at the World Series . . . when we have been champions and when we have finished second. The 'ceremony' that takes place is (that) each player and coach receives their participation trophy and then a representative from the team (coach, captains, etc.) accepts the NCAA trophy. Following these presentations to each team, the All Tournament Team is announced and each of those players come forward to receive their award."

The NCAA and UT athletics need to think long and hard. Garrido and Little are men of integrity who want to do what is right by UT athletes. Intercollegiate sports should resist the "win or you're a loser" mentality that is now so pervasive. What is right has been right for more than 3,500 years.

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