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COMMENTARY

Palaima: These UT athletes have reasons to be thankful

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Austin American-Statesman Wednesday, November 23, 2005, page A17

Victory at the ancient Greek Olympic Games, especially in the four-horse chariot races, was a big deal.

The first recorded event in Athenian history was an attempted coup by an Olympic victor named Cylon. Its bloody suppression by the Alcmeonid clan tainted Athenian politics for the next 200 years. At the end of that period, the Athenian general Alcibiades gained notoriety for winning multiple victories in the chariot races, for his intellectual attainments - he was a student of Socrates - for his strategic brilliance and for his ostentatious personal life.

Herodotus tells us that Demaratus was the only Spartan king to win the chariot event in the first 350 years of Olympic competition. Deposed and in exile, Demaratus advised the Persian King Xerxes during his major military campaign against the Greeks, known as the Second Persian War.

My point is not that high-level sports success makes one a political adventurer, an intellectual roué or a traitor to one's country. Very few public figures in Greek history are unblemished, and each of these cases is much more complex politically, socially, ethically and morally than my brief summary suggests. But sports were important to the character development and public careers of individual Greeks.

I have been critical of the sports programs at the University of Texas at Austin. So I recently took the time to find out what impact participation in NCAA sports is having on individual athletes. Here are two case studies.

Standing on the soccer field at St. Francis School near Highland Mall while seventh-grade boys and girls enjoyed their gym class, former Longhorn Dustin Armstrong explained what playing football at UT has meant to him. It was his boyhood dream. A highly recruited receiver from Cleburne, Armstrong entered UT in 1995 and graduated with a degree in communications in 2000. He still lists signing his letter of intent to UT as one of the three highlights of his life, although it takes third place now to his marriage to his high school sweetheart and the birth of their two children, Donovan and Dominique.

The only time in our long conversation that Coach Armstrong was at a loss for words was when I asked him what it meant to play in Royal-Memorial Stadium. He looked off, shook his head, paused and then said quietly: "The experience is really hard to explain. I can't explain it. But it stays with you. Coming out of the locker room, all those people in burnt orange and white."

Armstrong also speaks with sincere and quiet passion about coaching younger children. His own experience fitting the demands of training and playing in with his academic work required extraordinary personal discipline and dedication. He believes in developing inner passion, setting goals and working hard at them. And he tailors his beliefs to the needs of the third- to eighth-graders he oversees in physical education classes and the fifth- to eighth- graders he coaches in volleyball and basketball. He is proud that more than 90 percent of the middle-school students at St. Francis participate in some kind of organized sport.

Armstrong says that very few of UT's star athletes can admit to themselves, despite lots of realistic advice, that they might not be among the fortunate few to play professional football. He was no exception until after a severe knee injury in 1997 and a re-injury in 1998 ended his playing career. The UT program treated him no differently because of his injury, but he had to change his priorities.

Armstrong's grandmother and mother emphasized that he was at UT to get a degree, and he listened to their loving counsel. Participating in the Longhorns athletes' school mentoring program made him realize how much he loved working with children. In his senior year, he worked as an after-care counselor at St. Francis and eventually has taken on the major responsibilities he has today.

Coco Reed on the UT women's basketball team will graduate after this season with a degree in sports management and business. She speaks with the same directness, intensity and sense of well-being as Armstrong, and she has already learned the same lessons. She made the 2004-05 Big 12 All-Academic Second Team. She stresses the discipline and commitment this requires, including study halls on plane flights and tutoring sessions after study halls.

A knee injury in her freshman year has limited Reed's playing time, and she has become more academically focused. She agrees with Armstrong that it has been a dream come true to play at the top level of her athletic skills against opponents who are always up to play against Texas. And she thanks the UT staff for its care and advice, for innovative career days and for the African American women's mentoring program.

The moral of these two stories is that UT athletes in big-time sports have lots to be thankful for at Thanksgiving. And they will live better lives than Cylon or Alcibiades if they can foresee what their lives will be like once playing at Royal-Memorial Stadium and the Frank Erwin Center are ancient history.

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