

## BEYOND COMPETITION: SPORT AND SPIRITUALITY

by Frank Young Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>[1]

**We need to compete, to get the juices flowing,  
and to go beyond competition to keep the spirit flowing.**

Beyond the level of basic skills, we all need competition to know if we are making progress toward greater levels of mastery. For this we need some kind of game or competitive environment, where someone is keeping score or making comparative measures. This stimulation of evaluation usually makes us reach for the best within ourselves, and push our competitors to their limits as well. Competition stimulates us, but ultimately limits us in our attempts to beat its challenges for our ultimate enjoyment of life. We all know of examples where a person's having to win overshadows all other considerations, where their entire self-esteem is based on the outcome of a game or their relative standing on the national or international ratings. This need can distort the purpose of competition, and eventually lead to emptiness and disillusionment rather than the enjoyment of sport and life.

The central idea of the spirituality of sport is that **we are all essentially on a path inward**, to return where we started as a child, in **a state of unity with something greater than ourselves**, but now, as a more experienced and differentiated adult.

A child begins with the premise that (s)he is not only the centre of the universe, but the very universe itself. Everything is an extension of the self. By age two we begin to realize

that we are separate from, and dependent upon, all other beings. In order to have our needs met we need to negotiate with others. We learn patterns and rules that generally reward social behavior. We also learn how to play by the rules in games and sports as we progress in mastery of the skills involved.

**At the junior and senior levels of sport, we rely quite heavily on external role models, rule structures, and external guideposts of excellence and achievement.** We need competition, and comparison with others both current and past, to gauge our success and development in sport and life. That is, we begin to live in a world where we are measuring our worth as a competitor, our mastery, and

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our ultimate identity, against everybody in our age/weight/ability category. These comparative standards are clear but ruthless. For every placement in the medals, the top 10, the top 100, there are hundreds or thousands more who never make it to that level, and millions more who never even tried. For many of us at the senior competitive level, we want to make it in history, to have our one moment in time. Perhaps more realistically for most of us, maybe to go as far as our talents and training can take us.

**At some point, all athletes need to consider the transition from the senior level to the masters level.**

A crucial crisis of identity, meaning, and mortality occurs at this juncture. The standards are still clear and external: number of seconds, height climbed, goals scored, speed, distance covered, etc. What happens, of course, is the shift between competing with the best in the world, to the best in your age category.

**The signposts of excellence and mastery are now becoming more internal.** From best in the class or group, you are gradually shifting to personal best as the standard, and eventually, personal best under these particular circumstances on a particular day in a particular match. You are now progressing to a comparative, rather than an ultimate, standard. You are beginning to deal with issues of limitation and handicapping. Enjoyment is being redefined in the dawning awareness of resignation, and for the first time, of surrender to mortality. Surrender is not passive. It is living and embracing life as it is, not as you would like it to be. It is a stepping stone on the road to transcendence, beyond competition into the uncharted regions of personal depth, tranquility, and the quiet personal power of enjoyment.

You do not have to be at the masters level to experience this dimension of sport. However, this concept of spirituality or unity seems easier to embrace when you are not overly striving to establish yourself as the best in your sport. It's like the saying: "When you're up to your elbows in alligators, you tend to forget that your job was to drain the swamp (your ego)."

At the masters level, progression and skill mastery still motivate, perhaps more than ever, but the factors of enjoyment and satisfaction are now becoming most important. **Process is beginning to be more important than product.** You are returning to the level of enjoyment you may have had as a child, the pure joy of rhythm and the process of flow. You have blended into the sport, losing your ego, but having an expanded sense of your peace and oneness with the sport. You and your opponent are in skills opposed, in spirit united. You have moved beyond competition into ultimate flow, the experience of total blend with Unity at last. Thus you progress in sport to the level of a total child, where your identity and that of the universe are a seamless whole.

You have moved into the zone of flow, beyond the external structure of competition. **Now the journey is internal. The question is: where are the signposts now?** The internal journey is subjective and spiritual. You will need to find your own signposts. Here are just a selected few:

- How do you assess your true potential for technical excellence now and in the future?

- How will you know you are making progress to your ultimate goals?
- How do you regard your competitors, as worrisome threats, or friendly challengers?
- How are they teaching you about life and its ultimate enjoyment?
- What do you need to do on your next step to fulfillment and completion, to transcendence, to a sense of the Divine?

We all live for these moments of transcendence. We know intuitively that they cannot be extended beyond their natural time. We wish to replicate them by creating the same circumstances. After repeated experience, however, we learn that it is not the circumstance, it is the attitude we take to the event that determines a major part of the experience. When we look beyond competition and into the spirituality of sport, we experience these states of ecstasy

more deeply and more often.

**Beyond the individual experience of ecstasy is communion, the notion of the collective, the validation of teamwork in the participation of excellence.** Does this mean that the spiritual experience of sport is greater in team sport experiences? Perhaps, but that is another article. For now, know that there is no greater experience than that of the unity of the Flow experience, whether in individual or in team sports. This is the experience of the eternal One, in which we can occasionally delight in the spirit of transcendent Unity beyond our personal identity. The unity with flow and form is all that really matters in sport and spirituality.

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