



# Joy Through Sports

The third and last in the series of articles<sup>1</sup> on Sports and Joy

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**H**APPINESS APPEARS TO BE AN ELUSIVE reality and the quest for its source is never ending. Social scientists, mental health practitioners, philosophers and even economists explore endless avenues of thought and experience to determine where people find and obtain it. Is it among the economic indicators such as income, wealth, employment? In actuality, the wealthiest people are not necessarily the happiest. Some researchers have found that even as wealth increases one's freedom of choice and ability to access goods such as education, medical care and comforts in life, happiness does not simultaneously increase.

An international symposium on Sports and Joy was recently held in Trent, Italy. It was sponsored by the Focolare Movement's network of athletes, Sportmeet for a United World.

According to figures given by a World Values Survey—286,000 observations

made in over 80 countries—sports activity is significantly correlated to happiness and to the well-being of people. Based on this study, Luigino Bruni, a noted economist at the Bicocca University of Milan, Italy, proposed that these findings are a result of two factors: sports are activities with intrinsic motivation, and they are venues for genuine relationships. He contends that sports are profoundly linked to happiness, to joy and to human flourishing mainly because it is a human activity that is eminently relational.

The degree of happiness generated for a person who engages in sports depends on the combination of the following relational elements: the amount of satisfaction that comes from peer competition, the relationships among the team members, and the pressure to obtain results, social approval and reputation. Practicing sports for an intrinsic pleasure which enriches the activity itself is very different from practicing sports as a means of making money. Empirical evidence shows that

those who give more intrinsic importance to their objectives have higher levels of happiness (Hirata and Vendrik, 2005).

The Vatican's Council for the Laity underlines the link between sports and the integral formation of the human person, the harmony between the body and the soul. Pope John Paul II, a sportsman





Mountain climber Karl Unterkircher (right) is the head of the Alpine rescue team in the Dolomites. Above: during his Mount Everest climbing in 2005.



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himself, spoke about the formative role sports can play in a person's development. "Sports have an important moral and educative significance," he said. "They are training grounds for virtue, a school for inner balance and an outer control, an introduction to true and lasting conquests. Physical effort thus becomes a rigorous training in human and Christian virtues. As early as the first centuries, Christian theologians opposed a certain ideology

is, in fact, born from their union.' Thus the person is just as much body as he is spirit." Therefore, insofar as sports contribute to the integral formation of the human person, they are valuable.

John Paul II reminded athletes at the Olympic games in Sydney: "The logic of sports is the logic of life. Without practice, sacrifice and effort, long-lasting results cannot be obtained."

The Pontifical Council for the Laity

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then in vogue which was characterized by a lack of appreciation of the body, a consequence of an erroneous exaltation of the spirit. Guided by revelation, they vigorously affirmed instead an integral vision of man. "What is man if not a rational animal composed of body and soul?" they asked. "Is the soul by itself the person? No. Is the body the person? No. Thus, neither the soul nor the body taken separately is the person. That which is called person

gave importance to sports by creating a department specifically dedicated to it. "True happiness and peace of mind are the fruits of our experience of life as a whole and not the mere sum of isolated moments or activities," Rev. P. Kevin Lixey of the Vatican's Department of Sports commented at the symposium. "Just as there is a physiological and psychological dimension to sports, there is also a spiritual and social dimension."

He said that when sports are at the service of the entire person, body and soul, they can help a person experience joy and wonder. "It can help one to be more attentive to the present moment and to better relate with others. In this way sports can contribute to lasting joy," he added.

Sports can also give a contribution to peace and development, to the building of a better society. Michael Kleiner, head of the U.N. office of the International Year of Sports and Physical Education in Switzerland, is convinced of this. "The International Year of Sports invited everyone to discover the authentic values one can achieve through sports. It underlined the opportunity to consider sports not just as something enjoyable and recreational but also as an important element to be included in state programs and non-governmental organizations.

Through sports one learns values, how to live with others, how to win and lose while maintaining respect for others. Sports alone cannot be the answer to today's problems but they should be included in this global approach since it contributes to the development of the individual, of groups and the community."


Sportmeet is convinced that the "golden rule" opens the way to joy, to peace, to wholesome development even in the world of sports. "It will make us discover a way that focuses on others and not on ourselves," Sportmeet President Paolo Crepez, MD, commented. "We will start considering others in the way we would like others to consider us." He proposed that the "golden rule" invites us to be happy with the successes of the others just as we are happy with our own success, to experience joy and share it with others. It helps us achieve important goals if we are together in an intense experience of relationship, of enrichment, motivation and reciprocal encouragement. It means to help others in a very concrete manner to reach a goal, to look for what is positive in them and to discover that every person is important regardless of their athletic ability and performance. Everyone will experience great joy, true joy, a joy that

does not end and, as Jackie Joyner-Kersey said, "Sow joy in your neighbor's garden and you will find it growing in yours."

The "golden rule" also invites us to abandon a culture of egotistic sports geared only towards competition and to focus on a culture of living together, of reciprocal esteem and respect. It leads us to a new vision of humanity and towards a new lifestyle which stimulates commitment, favors peace, creates a basis for experiencing joy. In this way sports help to give an answer to the most sincere aspirations of everyone.

And what did athletes have to say about sports and joy? "I think sports should always go hand in hand with joy, otherwise it could become 'ugly,' as we have sometime seen," Josefa Idem, Olympic champion of canoeing shared. "Any sport which aims at success and money can only generate negative outcomes that can only be eliminated by sports done with joy."

Francesca Porcellato, winner of 10 medals in 5 editions of Special Olympics, competes in track and field races. "For me to do sports is always joy. What I like about Sportmeet is that it does not consider sports only as physical exercise, but as fulfilling a number of functions: building solidarity, offering the opportunity to be able to compare one's performance with others, rejoicing together for the other's success. These are the wonderful elements of sports."

Mountain climber Karl Unterkircher, head of the Alpine rescue team in the Dolomites, who last year climbed Everest and K2 in just over a month, and Fausto De Stefani, the sixth person in the world to climb the earth's 14 peaks over 8,000 meters high, are committed to supporting a school in Nepal for 750 disadvantaged children, some of whom are Tibetan refugees. "The mountain climbing I have done for years is not only a sport," Fausto De Stefani said. "For me, it is also philosophy, a way of life, the joy of living, the urge to experience certain emotions. But it would be a shame to reduce it all to climbing walls or peaks. Finding real meaning in life does not just happen by climbing mountains, but also by using our time to help those who are less fortunate than we are." 

*1) See Living City Feb. and March 2006*