Sunday, September 17, 1972
SPORTS, VALUES AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH (Winning isn't Everything)
Ecclesiastes 9:11-12; I Corinthians 9:24-27

The past several weeks in particular have been dominated by athletics, games, and sports events of all kinds. Never has so much television tie been devoted to such activities as in the Olympic games just finished. Added to that has been the beginning of the football season for many of the nation's colleges and universities, plus the baseball season getting closer to the World Series, pro-fessional football exhibition games, the World Series of golf and the world chess championship in Iceland. Locally, of course, the newspapers and other media have been filled with the news of Nebraska's loss to UCLA and now its victory over Texas A&M.

Sports, games, and athletics have been and continue to be a big part of people's lives in this country in particular. They preoccupy our children, pre-empt the te1evision screen and pour huge sums of money into the economy.

What then is the relation of all of this activity with our values, with religion and particularly with the Christian Faith? Well, no one in America who is interested in both sports and religion can overlook the unmistakable link between them.

1. In the first place, have you ever considered or noticed the great similarity between football and religion? The players, both rookies (or in religious terms, novices, and veterans (those who are ordained), often train in secluded areas like monasteries. The coaches like the religious hierarchy, demand total commitment from their charges, including abstinence from alcoholic beverages. And football has its distinctive uniform or religious garb and its weekly ritual of emotional and violent con-frontation with the opposing team, what we call in religious terms, sin.

And, of course, there are hundreds of thousands-of devout / followers who witness and participate in these rituals by invoking traditional and hallowed chants. It is not unusual for these pilgrims to travel hundreds, even thousands of miles to witness a game, sometimes braving the bitter cold with the zeal and ardor of ancient martyrs.

Moreover, in performing their acts, the players intone mysterious incantations and employ a specialized nomen-clature that few laymen can comprehend. Commentators give explanations that sometimes obscure and distort simple truths — a problem, alas, common to all religious systems. Some players endorse specific brands of helmets, footballs, shoulder pads and uniforms, and the articles so blessed, are in turn, used by the young and not so young in the hope that the miraculous power of the sponsors will be transferred to them.

Instead of Salvation and Redemption, the goal is collective victory for Vince Lombardi has taught us that "winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." Furthermore, in the past, religious vocabulary has often entered the lang-uage of statecraft. How many crusades for good government have there been in American politics? But now football supplies the political sector with appropriate terminology, the most famous instance being the President's economic "game" plan.

Also historically, there has often been a close relation- ship between religion and the temporal leaders of the state. Today the President identifies with the new religion by visiting the practice session of his favorite team, by watching two games at once on TV, by making telephone calls

to locker rooms offering presidential praise, and/or consolation and by suggesting special plays to a coach. Incidentally, the President's code name within the secret service is "quarterback."

2. But secondly, and more seriously, games, sports, and athletics lend themselves readily to analogies concerning values and right living. The Bible contains a number of these analogies. Thus, the Apostle Paul said, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race." And the writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, calls us to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us." And in I Corinthians, we are reminded, "Do you not know that in a race, all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it."

And on a still deeper level, sports, athletics, and games tell us even more about life and are related to our faith in more ways than by analogy. Whether athletic events involve interschool rivalry or competition between the teams of two cities, or between countries or individuals, the spectators tacitly infer that the contest represents the symbolic acting-out of a larger cosmic drama between opposing forces. The winning team's victory is appropriated by those the team represents and as we in Nebraska know so well, the entire supporting crowd can shout with con-viction, "We're Number One!" The cathartic effect of victory is felt not only by the participants but also by those on whose behalf they compete.

A few years ago, when the New York Mets won the National League Pennant and then the World Series, all of New York City went wild. We all need things in life to cheer about, things to celebrate, and athletic events can provide some of these.

New Yorkers at that time came to believe that passage in / the Bible that says, "He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree." In those days no baseball team was of more low degree than the lowly Mets. I suppose UCLA and its fans last week had the same feeling as those New Yorkers who supported the Mets.

But someone always has to be on the losing end. And that too can help put life in its proper perspective. It can teach us humility which is also a Christian virtue. It reminds us of our humanness.

The Lincoln Journal in an editorial after the loss to UCLA, noted this when it said, "Football-nutty Nebraskans now have discovered that their cornhusker heroes are human after all. They can bleed, they can weep. Like all mortals, they can make mistakes (my, how they can make mistakes). But Nebraskans discovered too that the world didn't end Saturday night in the dust of the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. The sun came up the next morning (although some vow it made its entrance from the west. Church-goers sang of the glories of the universe (" For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies ") Birds sang; children laughed."

Besides giving us something to enjoy and cheer about and also teaching us humility and perspective, sports, games, and athletic contests can provide that needed change of pace for us. Throughout history, the enjoyment of sports has often diverted people from day-to-day cares and anxieties and carried them away to a world of excitement and thrills; Sports probably began as a necessity for human survival. For in addition to fulfilling man's innate desire for competition and diversion, sports enabled primitive man to develop the muscular strength, alertness, and skill to defend himself against human, animal, and other natural foes. Thus, a spear-throwing contest was fun but also had a practical value.

Sports, athletics, and games of all kinds then, have many positive values. They can be used to enhance our human life on earth and in that sense the Christian Faith is all for them. However, like many other gifts from God in this world, they can also become evil and destructive.

If, for example, winning becomes the only thing, then we may lose some of the positive values in sports, games, and athletic contests. This is not to say that winning should not be a goal. However, if in our zeal to win we teach persons on a team to hate their opponents or if we try to destroy the opponents, then that sport or game has lost its value. If winning becomes the only thing by any means, then games, sports or athletics become destructive and demonic.

Again, this is not at all to say that we should not do our best to win. To tell a competitive athlete who is training three and four hours a day, day in, day out, year after year to not be concerned with victory is foolishness, or at best it is the remark of someone who simply does not understand the agonistic struggle that is a part of the competitive sport experience. It is just as wrong to say “winning isn’t anything as it is to say that winning is the only thing. There is nothing wrong or dehumanizing about a person taking pride in accomplishment whether it be in athletics or in any other human endeavor. But the quest for excellence should not be accomplished at the ex-pense of himself or others.

To put it another way, the Christian Faith has no quarrel with the quest for excellence. It only says that the means by which excellence is achieved are as important as the excellence itself. Thus, for example, it is not right to give athletes various kinds of stimulant drugs in the quest of victory.

The opponent is not simply an obstacle in the way of victory or an instrument to be used for one’s glory. In a very real sense, the opponent is a brother or sister who is presenting you with a challenge. You cannot ex-perience that challenge and struggle of sport without him or her. Thus, the real champion athlete will share his knowledge and skill with lesser athletes in the hope that they will rise to his level. His pride in victory comes when he struggles courageously in the face of a real challenge. Thank God for strong opponents.

This kind of healthy competition, besides being a gratifying and immediately enjoyable experience, can also foster group spirit and build community. One of the purposes of the Olympic games is to foster international understanding and one of the most beautiful sights on television were the many times after a close contest when the cameras showed a winner and loser from different nations hugging each other. Or think how many Americans, how many of us here today were cheering for young Olga Korbut, the young Russian gymnast. The fact that she was Russian became unimportant.

There is yet another and more pervasive quality to all athletics, sports and games, a kind of transcendent quality: This_ can be seen in the fact that games and playfulness can be found in about any sector of human culture throughout history. They are important for human beings because they can set up a separate universe which suspends, for the duration, the rules and general assumptions of the more serious work-a-day world, except of course if you are a professional athlete, then play becomes your work. We alluded to this earlier when we talked about the value and need of the change of pace, of diversion from the ordinary round of activities.

When we are playing a game or participating in a sport, and even when we are taking part only by watching, then often we are in a different dimension at least for a time. In playing, one can step out of one time into another.

One of the most pervasive features of play and games is that it is usually and should be a joyful activity. In- deed, when it ceases to be joyful and becomes misery or even indifferent routine, it no longer serves its purpose. But when adults play with genuine joy, we momentarily regain the deathlessness of childhood. It is this that stirs us about people making music in a city under bombardment or a person doing mathematics on his deathbed.

C. S. Lewis, in a sermon preached at the beginning of World War II, put this eloquently, “human life has always been lived at the edge of a precipice. People propound mathematical theories in beleaguered cities, conduct meta-physical arguments in condemned cells, and make jokes on scaffolds.”

Some little girls are playing hopscotch in the park. They are completely intent on their game, closed to the world outside it, happy in their concentration. Time has stood still for them, or more accurately, it has been collapsed into the movements of the game. The outside world has for the duration of the game ceased to exist. And by implication, since the little girls may not be very conscious of this pain and death, which are the law of that world, have also ceased to exist. Even the adult observer of this scene, who is perhaps all too conscious of pain and death, is momentarily drawn into this beautiful immunity.

In a similar way, just before the Soviet troops occupied Vienna in 1945, the Vienna Philharmonic gave one of its scheduled concerts. There was fighting in the immediate proximity of the city, and the concert goers could hear the rumbling of the guns in the distance. The entry of the Soviet Army interrupted the concert schedule for about a week. Then the concerts resumed, as scheduled.

In the universe of this particular play, the world shatter-ing events of the Soviet invasion, the overthrow of one empire and the cataclysmic appearance of another, meant a small interruption in the program. Was this simply a case of callousness, of indifference to suffering? Per-haps in the case of some individuals, but basically, I would say not. It was rather an affirr11ation of the ultimate triumph of all human gestures of creative beauty over the gestures of destruction and even over the ugliness of war and death. It was a sign of God in the midst of the human struggle.

God has given we human beings the gift of games, sports, and athletics, along with the creativeness of many other arts. We are to use them to enhance our human life to-gether. If we do this, then even though we will lose particular games from time to time, we will have won in the long run. Amen.