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Aretism: An Ancient Sports Philosophy for the Modern Sports World

M. Andrew Holowchak and Heather L. Reid
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011
215 pages, \$65

Reviewed by Matt Hoven, St. Joseph's College at the University of Alberta

Successful athletic programs often increase student enrollment and boost morale in Catholic high schools. Despite this, an overemphasis on sport can conflict with the educational aims of schools. School-related athletic teams, the standard line of thinking goes, can distract from academic learning and take resources away from other programs. There are also questions regarding the potential negative effects of highly competitive sport on moral character, funding inequalities based on gender, and on the psychological well-being of adolescent athletes.* As Catholic schools seek to foster growth for the whole person in the light of Christ, how fully should Catholic educational leadership embrace sport programs?

In *Aretism: An Ancient Sports Philosophy for the Modern Sports World*, sport philosophers and former collegiate athletes Andrew Holowchak and Heather Reid offer theoretical and practical assistance—filled with sporting stories and examples—for tackling the above concerns. Their book provides a substantial and necessary critique of modern sport, yet pushes back against those who envision school-related sport as merely recreational.

The book is organized into four parts. The first part offers five short chapters on the history of sport. The second part, building on the first, describes problems with competitive sport today: performance enhancements, individualism, sensationalism, violence, and gender issues. The authors define this “winner-take-all” approach as the martial/commercial (MC) model. The name reveals sports’ (1) militaristic roots (e.g., consider sports rhetoric: “blitz,” “weapons,” or “taking aim”), and (2) commercial overemphasis (i.e., greatest value is often given to external goods achieved through elite performance). Part three of the book surveys the antithesis of the MC model. The aesthetic/recreational model (AR) underlines experiences of joy, pleasure, and beauty found in recreational sport. Here competition is acceptable only so far as to encourage enjoyment and team spirit. Parts two and three each contain six chapters, where

the authors correlate and contrast counter-perspectives from the MC and AR positions. For example, the statisticization of sport (MC) highlighted in chapter 10 is compared to the beauty of sport (AR) found in chapter 16.

Each chapter is less than 10 pages in length, allowing a snapshot of important issues and engagement with numerous (and predominantly) American sporting examples. One of the reviewer's favorite stories is the recollection of a highly competitive 1975 World Series game between the Boston Red Sox and Cincinnati Reds. As the game went into extra innings tied at six runs apiece, Reds' batter Pete Rose turned to Red Sox catcher Carlton Fisk and rhetorically asked, "This is some kind of game, isn't it?" (p. 118). Amid a high-stakes game, the strongly driven Rose exemplifies playing sport for its intrinsic worth (this in spite of later seeking extrinsic gain from betting on his team's own games as a manager). Many examples will resonate with readers, while each is supported by concise argumentation. For instance, a particular strength of the book is its timely raising of significant examples that question gender stereotypes and inequalities in sport.

After examination of the MC and AR models, Holowchak and Reid provide readers with an approach to reform sport—the aretic model—in the final part of the book. Aretē is the ancient Greek concept meaning "excellence" or "virtue," in which persons seek to obtain their highest human potential (p. 162). While the authors engage a traditional idea that others employ in educating for character development, they use it as the basis for a model that seeks the Aristotelian mean between the excesses of the MC model and the limitations of the AR model. In contrast, the aretic model seeks the middle ground. It strives for victory as the means for excellence. It views competitive play as a cooperative journey for excellence. Aretism seeks knowledge of self and others. Finally, it is educational—"its goal is to improve persons and societies by creating an arena within which aretē may be cultivated, tested, and publicly appreciated" (p. 168). Reflecting the fact that the ancient gymnasium was for both athletic and intellectual pursuits, this educational dimension seeks the harmonization of commitment to play hard with respect for the dignity of sport and those persons involved in games.

The authors' conciliatory model conceptualizes the road Catholic schools can best take in their sport programs. Instead of arguing whether sport is distinct from the mission of the Catholic school (i.e., sport having its own extrinsic worth separate from its supporting educational institution) or antithetical to the mission (i.e., sport having no or little worth for education), sport can be seen as taking an educative role in the purpose of the school. Although

conciliatory, this includes a challenge to hyper-competitive high school athletics. In a chapter on aretism and education, the authors state practical steps that can moderate competitive youth sports. Based on a list of the reasons why youth quit sport, they offer a dozen aretic-inspired suggestions for practicing youth sports. The practices reflect the work of youth programs like *SportsLeader* (Louisville, KY) or the University of Notre Dame's *Play Like a Champion*. Further, the authors look beyond simply the personal growth of the athlete and insist that "competitive sport can substantially contribute to moral betterment within a community, a society, and the global human community" (p. 175). Their expansive view of sport, however, would be assisted by further explanation beyond a few worthy examples.

Envisioning sport as part of an ancient practice of striving for excellence enables educational and spiritual qualities of sport for the school setting. The approach could act as the basis for spiritual development of student athletes, along with their coaches and parents. It could include wrestling with issues of inclusion and accessibility of sport based upon the dignity of every individual. Despite the need for greater development of hands-on application of aretism for practitioners, the book broadens educators' perspectives and provides another avenue for the incorporation of virtue-based ethics.

Catholic schools have the opportunity to shape the meaning of sport through their athletic programs. Whereas the MC model upsets the very essence of sport, an aretic approach can not only assist the mission of the school but also challenge dominant societal norms toward sport. The task is great, but leaders in Catholic education have frequently risen to challenges throughout the centuries.

* For practical suggestions related to these problems, see an entire issue of the NCEA's *Momentum* (Nov/Dec 2009, 40:4) dedicated to sport and spirituality.

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