

Friendly Rivalries: Sports and Cultural Solidarity

[Adam Rook](#)

The holiday season is a unique time in society's annual rhythm. In theory, the year coming to a close offers an occasion for reflection and thanksgiving amid celebration, though this is often offset by the stress and busyness of preparation or travel. So too, the notion of cherishing this time with family and friends meets a harsh contrast for many in the painful experience of (or association with) loss, separation, or loneliness.

Coinciding with this time, the end of the NFL regular season in particular is also an opportunity to step back for a better view of the bigger picture. It is similarly easy to get caught up in the anticipation and excitement of this time, such that we lose sight of the deeper significance that sports have for human culture. So here I'd like to examine our mentality towards sports within a larger context, asking: what are the best lessons we can learn from this part of life?

Essentially, we are looking at how sports foster human development and relationship, both for society and for us as individuals. Here we can draw a strong analogy in seeing our various connections to the world as part of a team. I've written previously about the professional and ethical attitudes of sportsmanship: "becoming a consummate teammate extends to one's personal life, to serve as a role model, to help make the team cohesive in every capacity. One's personal interests must often be subordinated to those of the team, regarding one's team as a kind of family."¹ Our commitments must be kept in right priority and proportion, of course. But the point is to see in a team, just as in a family, an inherent greater purpose beyond oneself, one that involves obligation and sacrifice. How we construe ourselves as members of a team can extend to our community, our workplaces. And how we learn selflessness in our respective roles is one of the valuable lessons that can be learned from sports.

Another important part of sports ethics is how we learn to regard opponents or opposing teams. For this, the idea of friendly rivalry, the best spirit of competition, helps us see that there are higher values than winning. For starters, there is a standard of fairness and integrity without which a championship is meaningless. What does a trophy prove if the victor cheated to obtain it? Yet there is much more at stake than deciding who wears the crown for a year – and that is in how sports shape the way the people of this world regard and treat each other.

¹ From part one of my two-part essay *Right Relationship With Life*.

In friendly rivalry, we recognize and value the fact that we participate in a mutual and cooperative cause. The game itself is the type of common interest that so often serves as a basis of friendship: we can relate to and *identify with* our opponent's passion for the game and for their team, because it is something we also hold. We should never have true animosity for a rival sports team or treat them as a true enemy. This degrades oneself, one's team, and the game at large. It also illustrates the moral seriousness of the way in which we approach what is meant to be a form of celebration.

The best spirit of the game can overflow into the rest of life. Sports can be a powerful source of cultural solidarity, which is desperately needed in our day. Just as with stories, sports help us participate in the drama of life in its ebb and flow of defeats and victories. These require acceptance, relinquishing, and often some measure of forgiveness. The society that affords these possibilities is similarly precarious and tenuous in ways that are all too easy to take for granted. So, as we join each other in the sports arena, let's better converge on what it is to have common hopes, common joys, and fellowship with others through a shared love.