

## USAGE STATEMENT & AGREEMENT

- **This document is the property of the author(s) and of [www.epsociety.org](http://www.epsociety.org).**
- **This document has been made available for your individual usage.**
- **It's possible that the ideas contained in this document are of a "preprint" quality. Please consult the author(s) for any updated content.**
- **If you quote from this document, whether for personal or professional purposes, please give appropriate attribution and link to the original URL whenever you cite it.**
- **Please do not upload or store this document to any personal or organization owned website, intranet, portal, server, FTP area, or any other shared space.**
- **You are permitted to store this document on your own individual, privately-owned computer or device.**
- **By opening this document, you have agreed to abide by the above stated usage policy.**
- ***We welcome your comments and interaction about the ideas shared in this document by going to [www.epsociety.org](http://www.epsociety.org)!***

## Virtue, Vice, and Violence: A Response to Michael Austin

Matthew Roberts  
 Department of Philosophy  
 Patrick Henry College

**Abstract:** *I argue that football possesses certain intrinsic bads which are both perpetuated by its extrinsic goods and perpetuate vice in some of its participants. As a means to the inculcation of virtue, football, like most sports, provides ample opportunity. But, other non heavy-contact sports are to be preferred over football when considered as a means to the inculcation of virtue.*

Professor Austin’s distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic goods is a helpful and necessary one for any practice, football included. But do certain extrinsic goods of the practice of football (like wealth and fame) encourage participants (players, coaches, owners, fans) of the game to overly downplay the game’s intrinsic bads? I will argue that they do. This, of course, assumes that there *are* intrinsic bads of football. So, I must first argue that there are. If each of these arguments works, it follows that football and other heavy-contact sports like boxing and mixed martial arts possess a particular weakness not shared by other popular sports. Thus, as a means to the end of inculcating virtue, other sports like basketball are to be preferred to football.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic goods works *mutatis mutandis* for a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic bads. Like intrinsic goods, intrinsic bads are essential to a practice and in many ways constitute it. Are there any intrinsic bads in the practice of football? One of the unique elements of football, as opposed to other popular American sports, is the violent collisions that routinely occur on the field. In the mind of the average football fan, such collisions are just “part of the game”—i.e., they are intrinsic to the game. Here’s a common scenario: a receiver catches a pass thrown down the middle of the field. In order to catch the ball, the receiver must turn his head in the opposite direction to which he is running. Doing so prevents him

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor Austin, an old friend of mine, will no doubt be tempted to assess this objection in terms of my psychological motives given that, while we are both Kansas boys, we are diametrically opposed to each other in our collegiate loyalties. While Professor Austin regrettably roots for his alma mater, the Kansas State Wildcats (who have had more success in football of late than in basketball), I always have and will be a fan of my hometown Jayhawks, who, in recent years, are decisively better in basketball than football. But I assure Professor Austin that this argument stands in spite of our respective loyalties. Fortunately, all is not lost as we find ourselves on the same side (the right side, of course) in our loyalty to the Kansas City Chiefs.

from anticipating the defender coming headlong at him at breakneck speed. A collision ensues. Perhaps the receiver hangs on to the ball, perhaps not. Connoisseurs of the game marvel when he does, are disappointed when he doesn't. Routinely, such collisions produce injured players. The gravitational forces in such a collision can be as high as 1600 pounds of force.<sup>2</sup> Players often remain on the ground after such collisions, woozy but still conscious, or even knocked out, with the end result being a concussion. While it is rare that the injuries incurred from such collisions are career-ending, they are, no doubt, injurious to the players to one extent or another. Players that have endured numerous collisions over their football careers are, no doubt, physically the worse for wear. While the NFL has taken measures to prevent serious injury to the players by, for example, implementing fines for helmet-to-helmet hits, the fact remains that given the heavy contact-nature of the sport, injuries from such collisions will continue to be a part of the game.

Head trauma is not the only common injury in football. Serious knee injuries are even more common. Players regularly tear knee ligaments due to being tackled (usually from the side). An ACL tear can take a year of rehabilitation and often leaves players with arthritis in their post-football years. Moreover, their talents are often permanently diminished.

Are such head and knee injuries bads? They are certainly deleterious to the players' bodies. All things considered, football would be a better game if such injuries did not take place. But are they *intrinsic* bads? They are certainly inevitable effects of the game, given its rules and methods of play. Even if one argues that these injuries are not intrinsic to the game, their causes, i.e., certain types of tackling, certainly are. Imagine that the NFL instituted a no-blind-tackling rule to eliminate violent collisions over the middle of the field. How would the games' participants react? No doubt, the common sentiment would be that "It's just not the same; it's just not football!" So, for all practical purposes, as long as there are certain types of tackling and hard hitting in football, there will be the injuries that result. And thus, it is safe to say that these injuries are themselves *intrinsic* bads.

Now, even if I'm right that football involves these intrinsic bads, it doesn't follow that football is an intrinsically bad practice. Perhaps there are many practices that include both intrinsic goods *and* intrinsic bads, but are still worth pursuing since the former outweigh the latter. Additionally, a practice's extrinsic goods may outweigh its intrinsic bads making it a valuable pursuit. For example, perhaps the public platform provided by success in football outweighs the potential injuries incurred by playing the game.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.popularmechanics.com/outdoors/sports/physics/4212171> (Accessed 1-20-11).

Suppose for the sake of argument that football, taken as a whole, is a worthwhile practice both for players and for fans, since its intrinsic and extrinsic goods outweigh their bad counterparts. On this assumption, the following question still remains: what effect do the extrinsic goods of the game have on the perpetuation of the game's intrinsic bads? If one of the draws to professional football for fans is the violent collisions described above, such that the sports' revenues are increased as a result, won't these intrinsic bads be less likely to disappear and even be encouraged? Players make more money when there are more fans. Football has more fans because it tolerates such intrinsic bads. In the same vein we can ask whether these intrinsic bads don't encourage vice in the game's fans. Watching violent collisions encourages the celebration of violence and personal injury in their spectators. By allowing such collisions to be legal and "part of the game," the game's fans are implicitly told to value these bads. Vice is thereby inculcated in these fans since their desires are, in this case, improperly ordered. One should never cheer at the prospect that a player has suffered a concussion due to a violent collision, but fans do; some are happy when their rival team's star receiver is knocked out of the game.

Football, like most other team sports, offers tremendous opportunity for inculcating all sorts of virtue. But we should be honest about the game's bads so that we choose carefully which sports we promote for the inculcation of virtue, both for ourselves and our children. Along these lines, Dr. James Naismith, inventor of basketball, invented his game, at least in part, due to the injurious nature of football; he is also credited as an inventor of the first football helmet. Naismith countered the intrinsic bads of football by demonstrating the virtue of concern for the human body. A Presbyterian, Naismith served both as a basketball coach and a campus chaplain at the University of Kansas. While Naismith did not condemn football outright, he did attempt to mitigate the effects of its intrinsic bads. In following Naismith's lead, it behooves us, when considering which sports to pursue for the purpose of virtue inculcation, to consider whether one sport possesses more intrinsic bads than another and, if so, whether those with less or no intrinsic bads ought not to be pursued above those that do. In comparing basketball, baseball, or soccer to football, the choice on this criterion is obvious.

In sum, I have argued that football possesses certain intrinsic bads which are both perpetuated by its extrinsic goods and perpetuate vice in some of its participants. As a means to the inculcation of virtue, football, like most sports, provides ample opportunity. But, other non-heavy-contact sports are to be preferred over football when considered as a means to the inculcation of virtue.

*Matthew Roberts is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Patrick Henry College in Purcellville, VA.*

## Further Benefits of Sports

Jim Spiegel  
 Department of Philosophy  
 Taylor University

***Abstract:** In addition to the potential of sports to help build virtue in athletes, there are many other benefits as well. In this piece I discuss some of these, which are social, aesthetic, and even theological in nature. And I note how these benefits extend beyond athletes to spectators.*

**M**ike Austin’s article “Football, Fame and Fortune” provides much food for thought regarding the potential moral benefits related to football. Presumably, he would say that athletes in all sports can grow in virtue through their competitive involvement. And I suspect he would also recognize many other benefits of sports that extend to broader society, particularly for those who consider themselves sports fans. Here I want to highlight just a few of these benefits that I consider especially significant.

**1. Professional athletes provide clear examples of excellence.** Whatever your own vocation might be, whether you’re a teacher, carpenter, dentist, social worker, accountant, or auto mechanic, you will only excel if properly inspired to a high level of performance. Accomplished athletes, especially at the professional level, inspire us to excel at whatever we do. For one thing, the fact that someone is a pro baseball, tennis, or basketball player tells us that he or she is one out of a million. Consider how even those baseball players that we criticize as among the worst in Major League Baseball are still in the top percentile compared to all baseball players in the world. And so it goes for all professional athletes. When we follow professional sports, we regularly expose ourselves to excellence, and this is all the more pronounced among the superstars, whose feats on the field or court often leave us shaking our heads in amazement.

In Philippians 4:8 the Apostle Paul tells us, “If anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things.” I take this to be a strong endorsement to appreciate many things in the world of sports, since there is so much excellence to be found there. Dwelling upon excellence of any kind is inspiring, motivating us also to aim high and require of ourselves similar self-mastery. Paul implicitly recommends this in 1 Corinthians 9 where he compares spiritual discipline to athletic competition. And elsewhere he

recognizes the significance of sports at least as a powerful analogy for “training for godliness” (cf. 1 Tim. 4:7). This point should not be lost on us Americans, who glibly declare “no pain, no gain” when it comes to becoming better physical specimens but balk at the idea of hard work in the spiritual life. Let’s admit it—prayer, Bible study, fasting, and the other disciplines of the faith *are* hard work. But the payoffs are great. Athletic competition provides a wonderful image of this truth, as Paul explains. If only for this reason, sports have value for the spiritually devout.

**2. *Sports have aesthetic value.*** Why is it that we are so drawn to sports as spectators? Why are we willing to spend hours of our valuable time going to games and watching them on TV? And why are we so enthralled by game highlights, even of plays that we’ve seen hundreds of times, from Franco Harris’s so-called “immaculate reception” in the 1972 NFL playoffs to Bill Buckner’s booted groundball in the 1986 World Series? Why are Peyton Manning, Michael Jordan, Maria Sharapova, and Tiger Woods household names, even celebrities? I can sum up the answer in one word: *beauty*. No, I’m not referring here to the physical appearance of these people. The point is that their athletic performances are aesthetically pleasing. We all are naturally drawn to things that are beautiful, and the best athletes satisfy this longing by the precision, efficiency, and even elegance of their performances.

To recognize the significance of aesthetic values is also to see the significance of sports for this reason. I suppose there will always be those who fail to see the beauty in an alley-oop, a triple-axle, or a perfectly executed suicide-squeeze play. But then again, there are also those who are unmoved by Bach’s Canon in D, Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, and Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*. In each instance the failure to perceive beauty reveals a flaw in the observer, not what is observed. What such a person needs is to be educated about the subject, whether it is film, a fugue, baseball or badminton.

**3. *Athletic competition builds perseverance.*** In his article, Mike explains how the game of football can build virtues such as prudence, courage, temperance, and justice. Another virtue gained through sports is perseverance. Athletes must learn how to graciously deal with disappointment and persevere through difficulty and pain. We might even say—if it’s not too melodramatic to put it this way—that athletes learn that grief is the price you pay for love. This is true for fans too, as any Chicago Cubs devotee knows.

Every sport provides a microcosm of the human experience, and this includes the fact that it is our lot to suffer in this life, as Moses reminds us in Psalm 90. The sooner you grasp this fact, the better your chances to make it through to the end without losing your mind. You don’t have to be a fan of

the Cubs or Detroit Lions (I happen to be both!) to know that the love of a game or a particular team carries with it both joy and sorrow. While the joys and sorrows on the field or court pale in comparison to the birth of a child or loss of a loved one, they do provide healthy metaphors for these and other more serious life experiences. And I would even say that to have been exhilarated or disappointed in these less significant ways provides valuable preparation for life's greater joys and sorrows.

**4. Sports can point us to Shalom.** Christian community aims ultimately at peace or, in theological terms, Shalom. This is a feature of our purpose as a Christian society in the eschaton. God promises to reward us with rest (cf. Heb. 4:10-11). Because of this, theologians often recognize the significance of leisure as a pointer to Shalom. In recent years more writers have addressed this topic explicitly, which is a much needed foil to our workaholic culture.

Sports are a worthy leisure time activity for spectators. And to kick back and relax by watching a game can itself be a gesture toward our future Shalom. I say it "*can* be" because sometimes we take our games too seriously and turn our spectatorship into something quite the opposite of peace. We are all familiar with the tragic news stories of riots at soccer games, brawls between parents at little league contests, and the drunken rowdyism at football games. These are sad confirmations that in this fallen world sin has managed to corrupt even leisure and relaxation. Indeed, human depravity has left no activity untarnished by sin.

But the good news of the gospel is that Christ is a thorough redeemer. He has come to transform human nature itself and thus to redeem all of our undertakings, including our work as well as our leisure. By the power of the Spirit we can demonstrate how to be balanced and virtuous athletes and sports fans. And we can demonstrate grace even in athletic competition. That God has blessed us, even in this fallen world, with the privilege to engage in and observe athletic competition is an aspect of his common grace. We Christians should respond in kind by being gracious in competition and when rooting for our teams. Even in such apparently small ways, we can live redemptively.

*Jim Spiegel is a Professor of Philosophy at Taylor University in Upland, Indiana*

## Football, Baseball, and the Culture of Violence

Douglas Groothuis  
 Christian Thought Division  
 Denver Seminary

***Abstract:** I argue that football is morally objectionable because it is intrinsically violent and thus is conducive to vice in both its players and its fans. By way of contrast, I argue that baseball is only contingently violent, that it is not based on violence, and that it is, as such, a morally superior sport.*

My counter-cultural premise is that cultural forms are not neutral. Whether we are addressing communication technologies, art-forms, or sports, all must be exegeted and analyzed according to their form, nature, and structure. Television, for instance, is neither intrinsically good, intrinsically evil, nor neutral. It has a nature as a medium that makes it suitable for entertainment and generally unsuitable for edification and instruction. It tends to foster intellectual impatience, a sense of unreality, and an image-orientation to life that “humiliates the Word” (Jacques Ellul). Goth music and culture, for example, is inextricably rooted in the symbolism of death, decay, and destruction, however skillful the musicians may be. It celebrates and generates darkness and despair. Therefore, the notion of “Christian Goth” is oxymoronic in the extreme. The cultural form is not redeemable. It must be condemned and replaced with something better. And, yes, we must do all we can to communicate the truth in love to Goths (if there are any left).

Cultural forms shape our sensibilities and our mindsets in countless and typically covert ways. As a culture riven with senseless violence and mayhem, as evidenced at Columbine High School, we need to discern the cultural forces that pull people away from God’s shalom and toward the abyss of rage, revenge, and the devaluing of human life made in God’s image. Sin lies in the heart, but it also becomes institutionalized and systemic in many cultural forms. These must be exegeted and exposed to the light of truth. Now on to sports, a topic that is virtually never discussed in terms of cultural form, whether moral or aesthetic. Whatever features unite all instances of sport, each sport differs from every other sport in some distinctive ways. Rather than give a detailed ontology and ethical assessment of the major team sports, I want to draw from comparisons between football and baseball in relation to cultural violence and entertainment.

I will not be discussing the ethical character of players, managers, owners, and fans. This is incidental to a formal or structural analysis of these



two sports. We find “good Christians” playing baseball and football and “good Christians” watching both sports. This is a trivial point, however, if we endeavor to discern the nature of these two sports. The argument is brief, sharp, and probably unpopular. Baseball is both aesthetically and morally superior to football as a cultural form. Moreover, football is not only inferior to baseball, but possesses deficits that should cause Christians to consider their participation in the sport—whether as players, managers, owners, or fans—in principle. As an ideal, a team sport should evince aesthetic beauty, moral virtue, and intellectual value. Now consider baseball and football.

1. Football is *intrinsically* violent. It cannot be played without heavy padding and physical punishment. Professional players typically undergo multiple surgeries for repeated injuries. Many of these injuries are permanently debilitating. The nature of the sport encourages a toleration for, and even promotion of, violence. Players attempt to injure each other to take them out of the game. Many young men are seriously injured while playing football. Why risk the damage to a growing body? If the body is “fearfully and wonderfully made” and the temple of the Holy Spirit for the Christian, why should anyone treat one’s own body and other’s bodies to so much physical abuse? We were not designed for this kind of punishment.

2. Baseball is not intrinsically violent, but only contingently violent; it is much less violent than football overall. No physical contact of a brutal nature is required of the sport. No pitcher must bean (intentionally hit) a batter, although there is a risk of this happening accidentally. No batter tries to injure a fielder with a hit. No fielder intentionally throws the baseball into a runner, although this may happen by accident. And so on. Yes, there is physical contact between offense and defense. A runner barreling home from second base on a single to the outfield may need to collide with the catcher in order to attempt to score. However, this is not necessitated by the game as such, and the catcher is well-protected by his pads and mask. Many games are played where this kind of contact never occurs. Further, many runners will try to avoid the catcher entirely with a hook slide.

3. Baseball is intellectually superior to football, because of the degree of strategy, finesse, and intelligence required to play it well. Football knows of many plays and patterns, but most of them reduce to speed, strength, and coordination--as opposed to intelligence. In baseball, a pitcher with less than a cannon arm (such as Greg Maddox) can be one of the best pitchers in baseball in light of his intelligence in pitch selection, control, knowledge of batters, and fielding ability. Nothing analogous is the case with football, to my knowledge.

Historically, intellectuals have been drawn to write and reflect on baseball. A recent example is columnist and author, George Will. I doubt there is anything of this nature to be said of football. (This, of course, does not imply that no intellectuals like football or than only unintelligent people do.)

4. Aesthetically, baseball is superior because of its unique sense of time. There is no clock in baseball. Time never runs out, only opportunities do. When Yogi Berra famously said, “It ain’t over till it’s over,” he was not uttering a tautology. Since the game is not terminated until the final out is made, it is always possible to come back or to blow a huge lead. In football, the game is often over (determined) before it is over (temporally), rendering the final minutes meaningless and pointless. In baseball, as in the Christian world view, a measure of hope is always alive until the game is over. Near-miraculous comebacks are possible. When they occur, there is no greater drama in all of sports.

5. The pace of baseball is far more deliberate and delicate than football, given that there is no time clock. It is thus more conducive to patience and reflection. This assumes that you are not watching on an evil television network where commercials are now jammed in between batters; thus violating the ontology of the game itself.

6. Both baseball and football require athletic skill for their performance, but I venture to say that an expertly turned double-play, a diving catch in the outfield, or a deftly stolen base (particularly of home) demonstrates more athletic and aesthetic excellence than anything in football. Moreover, nothing in any sport has the dramatic effect of a grand slam home run, especially in a close game.

7. No one can hog the ball or exclude other players from play in baseball. This is largely because baseball is the only team sport where the defense controls the ball. The defense never knows where the ball will end up after the next pitch. This adds an element suspense and intrigue that is lacking in football. The batter or base runner has no possession of the ball. The ball must be outsmarted by being hit (by the batter) or avoided (by the runner).

8. In baseball, apart from the aberration of the designated hitter (a recent perversion only used in one league), all the players must function on both defense and offense. Pitchers are not expected to be excellent hitters, but they can contribute in this way and also need to know how to bunt and run the

bases. This adds depth to the athletic performance. Football players play either defense or offense, but not both (with possible rare exceptions).

More could be said, but if these reflections are correct, baseball is superior to football as a cultural form. It is much less violent, more artful, and more intellectually stimulating. The intrinsically and inextricably violent nature of football makes it suspect morally, especially for Christians who ought to prize gentleness and peace as fruits of the Spirit. Despite my apologetic for baseball, I can find no moral imperative to be involved at any level of baseball. Any goodness or excellence found therein can be found, at least analogously, in other areas of life. Nevertheless, the moral implications of the argument are as follows:

1. If one participates in a team sport, baseball is a worthy choice, as is softball for similar reasons. One may play well or poorly, with good motives or bad motives, but the nature of the game is itself good.
2. Given the formal deficiencies and defects of football, one ought not play it or coach it or watch it or own it or support it (through stadium taxes, etc.). (This does not exclude touch or flag football, which are not intrinsically violent, though still aesthetically and intellectually inferior to baseball.) Football reinforces and perpetuates the culture of violence, which must be resisted in every form if we are to regain a measure of sanity and civility in our increasingly violent world.

One may wonder, then, if I am very involved in watching baseball. I am not. Television has nearly destroyed the sport (as it destroyed just about everything). I did not watch the World Series last year, nor did I watch a single game. My argument is not a justification for any habit or addiction I may have; it, rather, addresses objective properties related to form. Attending an organic form of baseball, such as youth league, is another matter. That would be blessedly unmediated.

*[Doug Groothuis](#) is Professor of Philosophy at Denver Seminary, and he frequently writes at his blog, [The Constructive Curmudgeon](#).*

## **The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: My Response to Matthew Roberts, Jim Spiegel, and Doug Groothuis**

Michael W. Austin  
Department of Philosophy  
Eastern Kentucky University

***Abstract:** In this paper, I consider the points raised by Professors Spiegel, Roberts, and Groothuis concerning the moral, physical, intellectual, and aesthetic value of football in particular, and sports in general. I consider how one might appropriate their points as a fan, participant, and parent of children involved in sports. I argue that there ways in which the follower of Christ can and should seek to redeem life in the sporting realm.*

First, I would like to express my appreciation to Jim Spiegel, Matt Roberts, and Doug Groothuis for taking the time to read, reflect, and respond to my paper, “Football, Fame, and Fortune.” Given the amount of literature produced in the world these days, as an author I appreciate it when someone takes the time to read something I’ve produced, and my appreciation is increased when they also take the time to reflect upon and respond to it.

Let’s consider some of the points raised by Professor Spiegel. As a Kansas City Chiefs and Royals fan, I sympathize with the suffering that he endures as a supporter of the Chicago Cubs and Detroit Lions. But the present pain we feel now as fans will only sweeten the joy we will one day feel when these franchises are able to win championships (hopefully!). We’ll have an experience that no Yankees or Steelers fan can appreciate, spoiled as they are by their team’s success.

Jim’s discussion of the value of excellence in the kingdom of God and the application of this ideal to sports is very helpful. I agree that this value includes the excellence that professional athletes can demonstrate. Even those athletes who have less than stellar moral characters offer something of limited value via their athletic excellence. We need to appreciate and encourage excellence wherever we can find it—in the classroom, auto shop, concert hall, or the gridiron—a need which is underscored by the fact that excellence in one’s endeavors and character is not as highly valued today as it should be. Too often we seek the path of least resistance, rather than the more arduous path which requires the pursuit of excellence. His words concerning the hard work of spiritual formation are especially appropriate; I for one need to take them to heart in my daily life.

Jim's observations regarding the beauty of sport are worth considering and applying as a participant, coach, and fan. My own appreciation of sports at every level has been deepened by the recognition of these instances of beauty. This is one reason I have come to have a much deeper appreciation for soccer in recent years. Teams are not evaluated solely by their wins and losses, but also by the way they play the game in terms of beauty and skill.

One way to redeem sports fandom is to watch sports and support our favorite teams for reasons beyond mere fun and entertainment, though this is part of the story. We should also engage at a deeper level by looking for, valuing, and appreciating the athletic, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic excellence on display. When we participate we ought to make use of the opportunities to develop in these ways, rather than ignoring a significant avenue for personal growth. Sports are fun, but they are not merely fun.

Turning to the points raised by Professor Roberts, let me first express my friendly concern regarding his preference for the Kansas Jayhawks over the Kansas State Wildcats. In this fallen world, such things are to be expected, though my hope is in the fact that once all has been fully redeemed, he will don the purple of my alma mater. At least he is not entirely lost, as he rightly supports the Kansas City Chiefs.

More seriously, I think that much of what Matt has argued is at least to a degree correct. Anecdotally speaking, I've witnessed some of the elements of football he describes as intrinsic bads. Several years ago I was discussing with a college football player the appropriateness of seeing a football game as a war, and one's opponents as enemies. He told me that he played better when he was able to generate anger towards and distaste for his opponents. I also recall being in the locker room with a team prior to a game, and the coach leading them in the Lord's Prayer. After the "Amen," the coach proceeded to exhort the team to go out and get those [insert profanity here].

But is all of this *intrinsic* to football? I don't think so. In fact, one can play this and other heavy-contact sports without the accompanying hostility or warlike mentality. How much this in fact occurs, however, remains a very open question. And yet I think that Matt's point is well taken insofar as we must consider whether the nature of football necessarily includes and fosters some morally regrettable attitudes and their resulting acts on the field by virtue of the heavy-contact present in the sport, (with the corresponding physical risks such contact involves).

Doug Groothuis argues that the violence in football *is* intrinsic to the sport, and that football both tolerates and promotes violence. Before I address this issue, I would like to point out some areas of agreement. First, I wholeheartedly agree that cultural forms are not neutral, and that they must be analyzed with respect to their form, nature, and structure. I agree as well that

television is harmful to sports in a variety of ways. During a game I was watching this past season, due to technical difficulties, the graphics disappeared from the screen and all that was transmitted was the game itself. I loved it, as I tire of the scrolling text at the bottom of the screen, the various lines added into the field of play, and so on. It's nice just to see football played on the television without all of the distracting bells and whistles of contemporary sports broadcasting.

Regarding my areas of disagreement with Professor Groothuis, I'd like to start with a minor correction. There is in fact a vast body of philosophical literature, some of it quite good, which addresses the moral and aesthetic aspects of sports. The *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* and *Sport, Ethics, and Philosophy* are two of the premier academic journals which address these and other issues related to sport.

Football evinces aesthetic, moral, and intellectual virtue. To be honest, it is not clear to me whether baseball or football is superior with respect to these criteria. I tend to think that soccer is superior to both, but I'll leave that as a mere assertion for now. But Professor Groothuis is too hard on football, I think.

First, while there is something aesthetically valuable with respect to baseball's sense of time and the possibility of near-miraculous comebacks, I think that there are valuable aesthetic properties present in the "now or never" aspect of the two-minute drill at the end of a football game when a team needs a touchdown to win. I also would like to call into question the claim that an expertly turned double-play or diving catch in the outfield demonstrates *more* aesthetic and athletic excellence than anything in football. Consider the acrobatic catch of a timing pattern in the back corner of the end zone, a perfectly timed interception by a defensive back, or one of my own favorites from the 1990's: Kansas City Chiefs outside linebacker Derrick Thomas rushing the corner, getting to the quarterback and causing him to fumble by "chopping" the ball out of his grasp.

There are moral virtues present in football as well, which may be developed via participation in the sport, including courage, humility, unselfishness, and a cooperative spirit, to name a few. I leave it to the reader to consider how these traits may be developed in football, with the caveat that the potential for moral development is under-realized in all of sports (and life, I might add).

The intellectual aspects of football are underappreciated. In a book I edited, *Football and Philosophy: Going Deep* (The University of Press of Kentucky, 2007), Doug Geivett discusses the intellectual demands of the game on the players. Most people recognize the intellectual demands of crafting a game plan or playing quarterback. But other players on offense and defense are under

such demands as well. For example, on any given play, a running back must know the down and distance, time on the clock, when to go out of bounds and when to drive ahead for more yards, the defense's assignments and skills, the protection scheme for the quarterback, all of his team's offensive plays, all the pass routes within those plays, and more.

I agree with Groothuis that football contributes to our culture of violence, and I think that the influence runs the other way as well. However, I don't think that immoral violence is an intrinsic part of the sport, or that this contribution to the culture of violence is a necessary one. Football is a physical sport, and it is a contact sport, but I think that an assumption present in much of Groothuis's critique with respect to violence in football is that all violence is immoral or bad. I reject this assumption. One of the fruits of the Spirit is gentleness, but it does not follow that there are times when something different than gentleness is appropriate. Given this and the other points I've raised, I reject the claim that one ought not play, coach, watch, or support football.

Yet if one of my children wanted to play football, I would be more hesitant to allow them to do so compared to baseball, basketball, or soccer, for some of the reasons discussed by Professors Roberts and Groothuis. I must add that these other sports can also take a toll on the knees, ankles, and other parts of the body, though the risk of cognitive injury seems to be less compared to football. I would consider and assess the intrinsic goods and bads involved in football, discuss them with my child, and then make a decision with their present and future well-being in mind.<sup>3</sup> I don't have a principled opposition to participation in football. My parents allowed me to play as a child, and rightly so. But as a steward of my child's present and future life I would have to think very carefully before allowing them to participate, given the emerging science concerning the impact of playing football on the brains of players. Professor Groothuis is right to point out that we are to treat our bodies as temples of God, and that taking part in a sport in which it appears more and more likely that life-altering or life-ending brain damage can occur is morally problematic. Perhaps new protective technology will one day lessen the risk of such damage. One can hope.

Finally, I will continue to watch and as possible participate in many of the sports I love. In fact, if given the choice between watching and participating, I would usually choose to be a participant. This is somewhat countercultural, as there are many more *fans* in the world than there are *participants*. There is much to be gained from both, as this discussion has shown.

---

<sup>3</sup> Many moral and aesthetic forms of excellence are available in other pursuits, such as music and the arts, and we ought to encourage our children in these realms as well as seek to grow in our own appreciation of them.

And yet while the forms of athletic excellence I can develop and demonstrate as a participant on the soccer pitch or on my bicycle are of course vastly inferior to the excellence of athletes in the English Premier League (Go [Arsenal!](#)) or the Tour de France, I can still grow morally, help create beauty, and experience shalom as a participant, rather than a mere spectator. So can anyone who puts forth a bit of effort.

Perhaps in the new heavens and new earth you and I will be able to play with some of the very best athletes who have ever lived in a joint pursuit of all of the forms of excellence available in the realm of sports. One can hope.

*[Michael W. Austin](#) is an associate professor of philosophy at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, KY.*

*For more of his work on this topic, see:*

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/ethics-everyone>

*Wise Stewards: Philosophical Foundations of Christian Parenting* (Kregel, 2009), pp. 156-167.

“Why Winning Matters,” *Think* 9 (2010): 99-102.

“Sports as Exercises in Spiritual Formation,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 3 (2010): 66-78.

“Magnanimity, Athletic Excellence, and Performance-Enhancing Drugs,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 26 (2009): 46-53.

“Do Children Have a Right to Play?” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 34 (2007): 135-146.