

Educating through sports

Crepaz Paolo

sports physician and journalist, Sportmeet coordinator, Rome – ITA

Sports as an educative program

Education could be defined as an itinerary which enables individuals, groups or communities to achieve a target which is beneficial for the individual and the whole of humanity, with the help of one or more educators. In this perspective, the itinerary can be prepared in various ways, able to accompany an individual or a group through a part of one's existence or through one's entire existence: through art, work, research, nature, sickness and suffering, friendship and affection. Each one of the above and other circumstances provide education; the same goes with sports.

Sports is nowadays being given a particular pedagogical value, and is regarded as “one of our society's essential components”¹, able to transmit “all the fundamental rules of social life”² and a bearer of fundamental educational values such as “tolerance, team spirit, loyalty”³.

However, sometimes one tends to forget that sports did not accompany the whole of the history of mankind, since for centuries there had been no trace of it at all: the fall of Greek civilisation - which was a symbol of athletic competition, as well as an ongoing debate in the philosophical field, both perceived within their cultural context as a cult - coincided with “the decline of sports as a public activity held for honour”⁴ and the games which were invented in the Middle Ages were, after all, merely locally held episodes limited to an elite class. It was only at the end of the XVIII century and at the beginning of the next that cultural development and civilisation led to an anthropological transformation, aiming at ideally reviving the Greek model.

In reality the most direct push towards the development of modern sports came from politics and industry, the two fields which mostly mark modern times, of which sports, as we know it today, is a consequence: without the pressure of nationalism and economic profit, maybe modern sports would never have emerged. Therefore sports essentially expresses modernity, but it undoubtedly⁵ even expresses today's negative aspects as it contributes to the emerging of primordial, physical, clearly archaic behaviour, releasing basic instinctive energy. When evident doubts about the certainty of the evolution of human civilization appeared a century ago, there was a change in the hierarchy of values, which were based on rationalization, with the consequent ascent of play as a form of compensation (playing, wasting time, not looking for profit), as activities which help to break the usual routine⁶ and as a safety valve which helps regain self esteem.

However, even if sports may seem to solve some problems, it is not itself deprived from them, and sometimes carries with it dangerous and uncontrollable tendencies which pollute its worth: when it becomes a daily routine, an excessive show, violence, doping. There is also the risk of accepting and moreover contributing towards the idolatry and commercialisation of one's own body: the justified target towards achieving a healthy lifestyle, partly due to sport activities, risks placing good physical condition as an end rather than as a means of acquiring a holistic type of health. The dream of eternal youth reduces the physical form simply as a means to use what a consumerist society⁷ offers. Is it

¹ www.eyes-2004.info

² Graf C., *Children's Health International Trial (CHILT)*, Introduzione, Istituto Superiore di Educazione Fisica, Colonia, 2002, p. 1 e seg.

³ www.eyes-2004.info

⁴ Ravaglioli F., *Filosofia dello sport*, Armando Editore, Roma, 1990, p. 8

⁵ Ravaglioli F., *Filosofia dello sport*, Armando Editore, Roma, 1990, p. 8

⁶ Elias N. – Dunning N., *Sport e aggressività*, trad. it., Il Mulino, Bologna, 1989, p. 91

⁷ Ufficio Nazionale CEI per la pastorale del tempo libero, turismo e sport, “*Glorificate Dio nel vostro corpo*”, ed. Paoline, Milano, 2000, p. 17

therefore justified to consider sports as an educational programme, and moreover, as some retain, a privileged educational programme?

Sport as an expression of the body:

It is necessary to make an initial consideration as regards the concept of corporeity. Sport gives value to the body, an aspect which does not necessarily mean it gives it simply materialistic value. It however requires that it is given the right place and is “used” rightly in educating towards the personal ego and the community. In the past, especially Christians, used to criticise corporeity in answer to two philosophical tendencies of the time: the Apollonic isolation of the spirit in respect to the body, and the Dionisic isolation of the body from the spirit⁸. The body is not an object but a subject, a person. “Man is not a fragment of corporeity, inhabited for an instant by a spiritual spark. He is above all a spirit, a free and unique person, and it is through the body that his spirit opens up to an experience in matter and history. The soul does not come to live in an already existing home, but it establishes its corporeity specifically through matter. In this way the human body becomes the exteriorisation of the soul: a totally different thing from a dress which is simply put on.”⁹

The expression of sports in its use of sign language is to be considered in this perspective. In each gesture stands my personal relationship with the world around me, my way of looking at it, of experiencing it, my inheritance, my education, my environment, my psychological constitution. In the violence or in the delicateness of my gestures, in my decisiveness or in my indecisiveness stands all my biography, the quality of my relationship with the world, the way in which I donate myself. Across the whole of existence, gestures create that unity which we call a “body”, which uses gestures to bring to life a body made of flesh.

“Expressiveness by gestures is not an enactment, but is life itself which expresses that which cannot be said by words: in fact children are educated by gestures before words, because words are not capable to represent the multifaceted environment, the experience which produces space which we recognise in every gesture”¹⁰.

Educating the body implies enabling corporeity to put in evidence and arouse the spirit. But when is sport able to arouse the spirit? This happens when it is able to give self dominion to those who practice it, mastering all their selves -which is always a goal to be achieved – and when it is capable to give every action of the athlete a sound moral commitment, that is loyalty, generosity, self denial, solidarity, courage, discipline, a sense of responsibility, of fair-play, a sound aesthetic direction, an appreciation for nature, for life and spiritual values.

The Creative Value of Sports.

One might ask whether sports educates automatically, whether it contributes substantially towards the complete development of a person according to the methods with which sports is practiced and the targets that one intends to reach.

“Like other activities, sports is multiform and ambivalent: it is a release of latent psychophysical energy, but also a form of idolatry with regards to prestige and money- earning; it is the giving of self but can also foster egoism and oppression; it is a place for meeting others but also for confrontation.”¹¹

The challenge of the educator of sports starts with bringing a consciousness of the values of sports to athletes without hiding the problematic aspects, giving preference to integrate it into their lives. This can be brought about through subsequent steps. It is necessary and possible to help athletes to participate critically in competitive events, making it possible for them to know the limits and the positive aspects with the aim of passing from sports as an impulsive event to sports as a cultural and spiritual value. And sports becomes a cultural event when it is capable of revealing man to himself: the

⁸ idem, p. 15

⁹ Danneels G., *le stagioni della vita*, Queriniana, Brescia, 1998, p. 231

¹⁰ Galimberti U., *Il corpo*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2003, p. 171

¹¹ Peri V., *Anno europeo 2004, educare attraverso lo sport*, in *Settimana* - 11 gennaio 2004/n.1, p. 9

person behind the character, the face under the mask, the man beyond the athlete. This is possible keeping in mind that sports, even sports, expresses needs - love, freedom, creativity, autonomy, justice, happiness and so on - which form the profound mystery of mankind.

Sports is, substantially, much more than mere amusement or a difficult task before reaching victory. It is, in reality, a privileged time of knowing oneself and others, of living with others, and also opening up to an integral vision of man. However, it is not enough to know all this: it is necessary to bring this to a level of human and spiritual consciousness and work for its realization.

In fact, sports does not only have the capability of revelation. It has a creative value. It brings to consciousness human values and, in a certain way, re-creates them, placing them in the existential sphere by way of experience through which the educational message is relayed. Confucius used to say: "Give me and I will forget; show me, and I might remember; involve me and I will understand". To be understood, any message necessitates cultural expression, language, symbolic representation, and, above all, experience. "Few other human activities contain such richness as sports activities: creativity, courage, solidarity, enthusiasm, strength, respect for rules and fellow athletes, social activity, group work, strife for quality, fun, friendship, joy of living and so on."¹²

Between play and competitiveness.

Whilst practicing a sport, one might not always manage to perceive fully the values and significance of the sporting fact: one might play for fun or because it suits him; because he might feel the need to compete, without asking himself many questions. But he who works with the intention of educating in the sporting world, especially youngsters, knows that the two essential elements in sports - play and competitiveness - might become the starting points in the holistic development of the person. Play is the revenge of the *homo ludens* over the *homo faber* giving back to sports its connection with pleasure and promoting its gratuity means helping mankind to free itself from the vice of utilitarianism, from its idolatry attachment to work, and moreover, to unwind to the needs of the spirit. Favouring the entrance of play into the folds of existence may not seem a marginal aspect for the reality of today's world. It is the competitive dimension of play and sports which pushes one to go beyond the limits of former performances and beat one's adversaries. But only a part of competitiveness is resolved in the fighting against rivals: the other, bigger part, consists in fighting against the thousand negative forces hidden in the heart, like the antics to elude rules, easy victimization, verbal aggression against antagonists, rebellion against refereeing decisions, doping, etc.

The non-educated agonistic urge drives one to seek to obtain results at all costs, to search for victory as a value in itself, to play "against" rather than "with" rivals and even make them look like enemies. It is an extremely provocative fact that Christian teachings¹³, sometimes mistakenly thought of as weak and condescending, invite one to binding and elevated tasks. Yet this very indication might give the agonistic push the right orientation: to change it from mere technical results, even though these should be tenaciously followed, to more far-reaching results, unknown to referees or supporters. One can reveal, even thanks to physical and sports activities, the wider horizons of the holistic development of oneself, up to the discovery of God's own project through one's own experiences in games, in sports and agonistic experiences.

That is why we must exclude a vision of sport, present even amongst Christians, as a mere hobby, or simply a means of keeping our children off the streets, or as an occasion amongst many others, to praise them. If sport "is a value of mankind, a place of humanity and civility"¹⁴ we must not succumb to the temptation of thinking that only a certain type of sports educates: that which is not agonistic, that which is of nature, that without classification, or without winners or losers. It is a very subtle temptation, understandable but is negated if we recall that "nothing is genuinely human which doesn't find an echo in the hearts of Christians".¹⁵

¹² *idem*, p.9

¹³ "siate perfetti, come è perfetto il Padre vostro celeste" *Mt* 5,48

¹⁴ Peri V., *Anno europeo 2004, educare attraverso lo sport*, in *Settimana* - 11 gennaio 2004/n.1, p. 9

¹⁵ *Gaudium et spes*, 1

Overcoming Fair-Play

The crises in sports today give evidence to the fact that educational activity cannot limit itself to recalling to the conscience of players abstract values and ethic principles. Evidently, neither a generic pan-sportive ideology, nor an ever increasingly unwanted facade of fair play can ever reveal to man, through sports, the significance and the ultimate aim of his very existence.

With the attention it gives to the highest values of human existence, sports reveals the essential dimension of mankind as a “finite” being (defeat, accidents, incapability of altruism or of accepting a negative verdict) as well as an “in-finite” being, capable of rising to the occasion in overcoming one’s own limits. It is not a question of adding new contents to sports, but to bring them to light and reveal them in the right direction. It is not a question of either condemning or running away from today’s sports, from its contradictions, from its desperate race towards omnipotence or immortality, from its slavery to money. Man is competition, victory, defeat, tendency toward perfection and an abyss of uncertainties, and that is how he wants to be accepted, understood, loved. To make oneself one with the others is an ambitious challenge, accepting without reserve, not so much today’s sports as much as the one who practices it, contributing to instil silently and patiently the seeds of everything positive.

Love educates.

But who knows how to educate in this way? To educate derives from the word *educere*, to bring out, a perspective that stimulates to extract truth from the student rather than to instil it from the exterior. The teacher himself must necessarily know how to obtain truth from within besides extracting it from others in order to be able to make an evaluation. But who is able to let the truth that exists in oneself and in others to germinate?

Spring has to arrive in order to see a garden in bloom. Likewise, in order to make truth germinate and grow, we think that a certain warmth is necessary, that warmth which springs from love. Pedagogic theories¹⁶, including sports theories, through the ages have felt the need to consider a fundamental dimension of the person that brings decisive consequences on education and learning: that is his social nature. This makes one understand that even education is built and achieved in a group and with helps us make room to complete what we know also by the knowledge of others. In fact nowadays no one can arrive at a knowledge that has an understanding of everything. Probably “it is not enough to work as a team, to put many ideas and a lot of knowledge together, to find a synthesis”¹⁷. When one manages to achieve a communitarian way of life, the educational process, formation, will be whole, complete, and is able to bind all our being and affect our life.

We are fascinated by the challenge of discovering what educational projects can come from people “who are themselves merged in unity”¹⁸, in an atmosphere of reciprocal warmth, in unity which enables a believer to experience how true the words of Jesus are: “Where two or three are united in my name, there I am in their midst”¹⁹. Consequently “Do not call yourselves teachers, because only one is your teacher.”²⁰ This is a strange but fascinating teaching. Whoever has experimented reciprocal love knows that this leads to the presence of the Teacher – Teacher with a capital T – in the midst of persons.

Whoever believes in human values, even without binding oneself with religious references, can share and experience a sincere and profound attitude of reciprocal trust that exists between he who educates and he who is educated through sport. It is a prerequisite for effective learning. It is important, for example, to learn to ‘waste’ time to listen to a boy who confides in you while training him in some discipline; or to dialogue with parents who are full of expectations, which at times are even

¹⁶ Comoglio M. *Insegnare e apprendere in gruppo. Cooperative Learning*, LAS Roma, 1996

¹⁷ Comoglio M. *Insegnare e apprendere in gruppo. Cooperative Learning*, LAS Roma, 1996

¹⁸ idem, p. 817

¹⁹ Mt 18, 20

²⁰ Mt 23, 10

excessive; or to make an athlete understand how much you appreciate his hard work, irrespective of the results he obtains; or on the other hand how important it is to trustfully give a coach the time he needs to cultivate talents so as to achieve results; or not to cultivate prejudices towards the judge during a match letting him carry out his important role at the service of sports without conditioning him; or to see how reciprocal trust becomes very concrete when members of a climbing team are roped with one another.

Love is in itself a concrete experience and sports offers this extraordinary educational opportunity: to be able to build, day by day, that essential unity between theory and practice, between expectations and achievements, between objectives and results, between more or less sound convictions and the impartiality of the stopwatch. Putting this into practice in the educational programme and on the sport grounds, is not only a means to get to know truth, but also a means towards the true and effective formation of a person. Work gives us a sense of reality; it helps us to leave books and their theories and find a way of thought that means life, being, humanity.

The role of the father in education

Whoever has, one can say, discovered God as Father, a Father who loves, knows that he/she is in a voyage and is following the first educator – the educator who takes the initiative, who accompanies, renews, regenerates as he moves along a very rich itinerary of personal and communitarian formation, with that intentional urge that guides a real educator. It was in observing the fact that we are all children of one Father, that Comenius, the first great theorist of modern pedagogy, founded his strong theory when he said: we must “teach everything to everyone”.

This rediscovery of this greatest paternity is an important source as respect to that certain culture that attempts to affirm, on the theoretical and practical level, that God is dead. It is all about an “eclipse” of the Father that has also brought about an eclipse of fatherhood, a loss of authority in human and educational relationships, in whatever is linked with morality; an absence of a code of ethics in one’s life, in interpersonal and social relationships²¹ – all this with the consequent tragic examples of violence, even in sports.

Dostojevski stated: “If God does not exist, then everything is permissible.” The real educator, even that of sport, who acknowledges man as being unique, who exalts the man, is also demanding²². He is demanding and educates towards responsibility, towards commitment, and knows that the educator above man is that God Love who loved men to the point of giving his life for man.

It is in giving one’s life that the identity of a father is revealed. How many times, however, have we been able to experience that simplicity in children and youth with whom we find ourselves working, shows us how true all this is. Often, the educator learns from them and discovers, to his amazement, that he has become their son.

Graduality and Fulfilment

To this first pedagogical foundation stone one can link yet another one which has been stressed by the same Comenius: the pedagogic rule of graduality. We know how fundamental this is in physical training and in sports, how important it is to live the present moment by moment, but in awareness of the whole; understanding the significance of the educational step of each day but at the same time being geared towards an infinite horizon; concentrating on the specific reality but aiming to the peak without anxiety. From our first commitment to live the present moment, one moment at a time, by living the Word to translate it into words, living a life made of a moment after another, discovering that

²¹ Mt 23, 10

²² "Spesso gli amici [...] insistono perché io scriva per loro un metodo, che io precisi i programmi, le materie, la tecnica didattica. Sbagliano la domanda, non dovrebbero preoccuparsi di *come bisogna fare per fare scuola*, ma solo di *come bisogna essere per poter fare scuola*" [Milani don Lorenzo, 1958, 235 ss.] in Pontecorvo C. *Manuale di psicologia dell'educazione*, Ed. Mulino, Bologna, 1999

in each moment there is all our life, comes the indication that we live in a way without caring for a past which is no more or for a future that does not depend solely on us. We know that as one walks towards the peak of a mountain, one does not continuously look at it, seeing how distant and difficult it is to reach, but one moves on step by step towards it.

We know how much patience it takes to cultivate sportive talents in young people, how prudent we must be in not embarking in specialization too soon, not only not to ruin specific talents but also to help a person mature as a person even before becoming a talented athlete.

We know how demanding it is to make others understand the link there is between endless repetition of a single movement and the harmony of a series of movements together: in this game of living “now and not yet” there exists the mystery and charm of the expression of the body.

Towards autonomous ethics

Normally in education from the necessary initial phase of dependence one gradually moves on to the autonomous morality of the person. Even in sports, adherence to another person’s will (whether that as expressed by the educator or by circumstances) leads to a perception of liberty that occurs after making that will one’s own. Whoever has made a direct experience that there is a Word of God that speaks to us in our life, has begun to discover a specific and not indefinite will on our existence: in other words, our educator has a project for us.

The journey in pursuit of the discovery that there is a will of God for us all, a will of Love, can help us and help those who we educate, to lose that negative personal will which so easily ties us to petty existential methods of self-centred egoism. In this way we will be able to go beyond ourselves and go as far as to reach out to the “You” (God) who enriches us and makes us free. The discovery of the other person, even in sports, helps us to consider him as an adversary but not as an enemy, to acknowledge his merits, to congratulate him, even to the point of being happy for his success, realising that without confrontation with him, my talents can become sterile and unexpressed to the point that, through this confrontation, we receive from him the gift of discovering qualities in us which we had not known of before. Thus the ethical challenges of today’s sports, especially doping above anything else, must certainly be dealt with on a repression level, but the way of educating towards a culture of knowing how to lose in order to know how to win, can succeed in offering that prevention which is nowadays so much advocated.

Difficulty as a launching pad

Limitations, obstacles, failures, injuries, delusions, defeats are the raw material of sports: our growth through sports depends on our attitude towards these difficulties. Should we run away from them, refuse them, turn them down or affront them, surpass them, love them? The key to an education capable to really help, to be something new and useful to confront the crises in sports as a spectacle, a business and one that accepts only victory, comes from an understanding of the mystery of limitations. What can come from Jesus who shouts abandonment?²³ He indicates to us the limitless limitations of our pedagogic work, and to which point and with which intensity it must be carried out. Jesus forsaken is the image of the ignorant. He asks: “Why?” His is the most tragic ignorance, his question is the most dramatic. He is the emblem of those who need to be educated: the misfit, the emarginated, the one who is not loved, the one who is defeated. He is the paradigm of he who, lacking all, needs everything: he is “the utmost limit, the parameter of the learner, who petitions all the responsibility of the educator.”²⁴ Jesus, however, overcame his infinite suffering²⁵, teaching us to look at difficulties, obstacles, trials, mistakes and defeats as a reality to be faced, overcome and loved.

In fact we try to avoid such experiences by all means. “Even in the educational field – in many ways – it is easy to lean on types of hyper protection, to protect, especially the young ones, from any

²³ “Dio mio, Dio mio, perché mi hai abbandonato?” *Mt* 27, 46; *Mc* 15, 34

²⁴ Lubich C., *Lezione per la laurea h.c. in Pedagogia*, in *Nuova Umanità*, XXIII (2001/3-4) 135 – 136, p. 349

²⁵ “Nelle tue mani, Padre, raccomando il mio spirito” *Lc* 23, 46

difficulty, thus making them accustomed to consider life as a downhill, easy and comfortable road.”²⁶ In reality, in this way, one leaves them in great difficulty when they encounter the inevitable trials of life, and this includes defeat in sports, making them become passive and reluctant towards themselves, their fellowmen, and society. When we are convinced that every difficulty must be faced and even loved, we can try and transform every difficulty into a launching pad.

“Educating to meet difficulties, as a commitment involving both the learner and the educator”²⁷ is another basic point of a new pedagogy, also in sports.

A pedagogy of sports towards building a community

De Coubertin, the father of modern Olympics, attributed to sport the ability to introduce three new and vital qualities in world affairs: democracy, internationality, pacifism²⁸.

While the history of modern sports struggles to open horizons for the coming together of peoples and towards peace, one may ask whether the unity of the human family is a distant utopia. A watchful eye sees that our planet, in spite of thousands of contradictions, tends toward unity, a sign and need of our times. It seems to be a utopian project, but education, in this perspective, is a primary means to achieve it. When we believe in the relational dimension of mankind and generously invest in the qualities of the other person, our goal seems more reachable: through reciprocal love we experience a more authentic sociality, a dynamics of a relationship which brings a wonderful synthesis between the pedagogic application of educating the individual person and the pedagogic application of building a community. This vision is in agreement with forms of educating to build communities recently developed, which state the need to combine promoting the individual with promoting the community. But that is not all. “The final aim that has always been attributed to education (to develop the person, his autonomy) is carried out, almost paradoxically, in the development of the person as a relationship”²⁹: the spiritual and educational procedure of reciprocal love is the main path in the building of the ‘utopia–reality’ of unity.

And the exercise of sports is a reliable and demanding field to test and experience our true ability and will to relate. “The first characteristic of the old as well as the new Olympic spirit, is that of being a religion,”³⁰ says De Coubertin. Sports cannot become the new planetary religion that unites the world, but it can reveal and recreate irreplaceable resources for the building of a united world.

²⁶ Lubich C., *Lezione per la laurea h.c. in Pedagogia*, in *Nuova Umanità*, XXIII (2001/3-4) 135 – 136, p. 350

²⁷ idem, p. 350

²⁸ Lombardo A., *Pierre de Coubertin*, edizioni RAI - ERI, Roma, 2000, p. 189

²⁹ Lubich C., *Lezione per la laurea h.c. in Pedagogia*, in *Nuova Umanità*, XXIII (2001/3-4) 135 – 136, p. 351

³⁰ De Coubertin P., *L'Idée olympique* (1935), Stuttgart 1967. Cit. in Brohm J.M. e Caillat M., *Le Dessous de l'olympisme*, Paris, 1984, p.146