On Weiss on Records, Athletic Activity, and the Athlete

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by

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Professor Weiss would appear to think that what athletic activity is really all about is the achievement of certain noteworthy results through the deployment of an excellent body. Thus he says: "An athlete seeks to make maximal use of a trained body to attain an outstanding result in particular situations." The specific kinds of results in question obviously differ from one sort of athletic activity to another; but they all are conceived by Professor Weiss to be a matter of achievements of a sort that may be "objectively judged" in "severe, public tests." It is for this reason that he devotes so much attention to "athletic records"; for, as he observes, "Athletic records purport to report what was accomplished." The main thrust of the first half of his paper is that athletic records are not entirely satisfactory indicators of achievement or accomplishment in athletics; and I have no quarrel with him on this count—although I would observe that athletics is by no means unique in this respect, and that the reasons why athletic records fail to convey adequately "what was done" in athletic events are by and large simply the well-known reasons why historical records of any sort fail to convey adequately "what was done" in historical events generally.

I do find myself very much at odds with Professor Weiss, however, over the importance of achieving the kinds of results he has in mind in athletic activity; and it seems to me that the position he takes on this matter is closely connected with a number of things he says in the latter part of his paper, which I find very strange, and in some cases, rather disturbing. It seems to me to indicate that something is wrong with his analysis, when he reaches the conclusion that "the athletic goal rarely allows a man to work toward the achievement of anyone but himself, except incidentally and as means." A majority of the forms of athletic activity most commonly engaged in are team athletic activities; and teamwork (defined by Webster as "Work done by a number of associates, all subordinating personal prominence to the efficiency of the whole") is so central to every kind of team athletic activity, so vital to team athletic achievement, and so intimately connected with nearly everything each team member is supposed to do, that it cannot be as much at variance with anything which might properly be termed "the athletic goal" as Professor Weiss here suggests it to be. I cannot even make sense of this statement when I try to apply it, e.g., to an offensive guard or tackle on a football team, or to a basketball player whose forte is playmaking and defense. Have Wilt Chamberlin and Oscar Robertson abandoned "the athletic goal" and become lesser athletes, now that they have become team players? Did Bill Russell never really understand what "the athletic goal" required of him? If what Professor Weiss says here is true, both questions must be answered affirmatively. And I

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ON WEISS ON RECORDS, ATHLETIC ACTIVITY, AND THE ATHLETE

take this to show that what Professor Weiss says here is in need of modification.

Again: It seems to me to be a sign that something is wrong when Professor Weiss is led to say: "He who does not try to make maximal use of his body is playing at and not in a sport . . . . And if he does not make an outstanding effort in particular situations, publicly watched and judged, he will remain in a state of preparation, not yet engaged . . . ." Since by "making maximal use of his body" Professor Weiss means devoting oneself singlemindedly to some sport, it would follow from this that one for whom athletics is subordinate to other concerns, and who does not participate or no longer participates in organized athletic events, does not really engage in athletic activity at all, even though he might appear to play basketball or squash (or whatever) fairly frequently. Now, I am perfectly willing to allow that it would be inappropriate to term such a person "an athlete" if one were asked what he is. But I am quite certain that the question of whether a person may or may not truly and properly be said to engage in some form of athletic activity (e.g., to "play basketball") is to be settled by criteria which are much less strict than those which determine the answer to the question of whether a person may or may not truly and properly be said to be an "athlete" (e.g., "a basketball player"), in the sense in which other people may be said to be "scientists," "musicians," and so forth.

I believe that Professor Weiss is led to say such things because of the importance he assigns to the achievement of the kinds of results which athletic records are at least intended to capture and record—and more specifically, to the sorts of results with which athletic records for individuals are concerned. If what athletic activity is all about is the accomplishment of results which constitute (in Professor Weiss's terms) "the most men have been able to achieve through the agency of matured, trained bodies", then of course the team player, who takes no thought of achieving outstanding individual results, is not a true "athlete"; and of course the noon-time squash player isn't either, even though he gives the game all he's worth three times a week at the gym. But is aspiring to equal or surpass "the most men have been able to achieve" in some sport really what athletic activity is all about? I do not think so.

Professor Weiss and I agree in denying that the "end" or "goal" of athletic activity can be adequately characterized in terms of setting records, or even compiling a respectable "record" over a period of time. But Professor Weiss's reason for denying this is simply that records are not an adequate measure of what he takes to be the truly important thing—namely, what he terms "the results attained by the athlete." Mine, on the other hand, is that I consider the achievement of the kinds of "results" he has in mind to be incidental to the fundamental nature of athletic activity—and moreover, incidental to the attainment of the sort of satisfaction which athletic activity as such is capable of affording to most people who engage in it.

At the risk of banality, I would suggest that athletic activity consists in engaging in some sport the rudiments of which one has mastered; and that the only "athletic goal" of which it makes any sense to speak, at least where all but the very finest athletes are concerned, is simply that intrinsic enjoyment which
one may derive from engaging in the activity in question, through winning and/or playing to the best of one’s ability and/or playing well. Professor Weiss may wish to respond that there surely is more to it than this where “the athlete”—as opposed to “the scientist,” “the musician,” or “the philosopher” who engages in athletic activity—is concerned. And I would agree. “The athlete” must possess considerable ability for the sport in question, must be highly trained in it, and must have a strong commitment to it, in order to merit the designation. But I can see no good reason to regard these traits as jointly necessary conditions of engaging in athletic activity at all. And I can see no reason to add a fourth—a determination to equal or surpass “the most men have been able so far to achieve” in some sport—even in the case of “the athlete.”

The title of Professor Weiss’s paper is “Records and the Man”; and he contends that it is necessary to “go beyond the records toward the man.” It seems to me, however, that a more appropriate title for his paper would have been “Records and the Athlete”; and that, in “going beyond the records” as he does, he at most moves “toward the athlete,” while moving “toward the man” scarcely at all. This is suggested most clearly when he remarks that “the end to which an athlete is dedicated is narrower than that appropriate to man at his best.” This remark is certainly true of “the athlete” as Professor Weiss characterizes him, since Professor Weiss’s “athlete” strikes me as a kind of fanatic, who surely is a far cry from the sort of human being Professor Weiss seems to have in mind when he speaks of man “dedicated to the attainment of complete, fulfilled lives.”

It is this which I find most disturbing in the latter part of his paper; and I would like to suggest that it is necessary to “go beyond the athlete toward the man,” in order to achieve a proper understanding of the nature of athletic activity as a possible and potentially significant component of a truly human life—a form of praxis which does not involve the relinquishment of one’s genuine humanity, but rather contributes to its attainment. It would perhaps be well at this point to recall the classical ideal of mens sana in corpore sano—a sound mind in a sound body: an old horse, to be sure, but one with a good deal of life still in it. This ideal is one which, in Professor Weiss’s terms, “demands for its realization the use and preservation of an excellent body”—or at any rate, a well-developed body—but not only that. And it seems to me that if what Professor Weiss calls “the athletic goal” is cut loose from this balanced human ideal, and is conceived both as narrowly as he conceives it and as the supreme goal in an athlete’s life, the athlete becomes a rather demonic figure. It may be that “a maximal result is attained” in athletic activity only by demonic figures of this sort; but that argues neither for the human desirability of the attainment of “maximal results,” nor for the necessity of treating dedication to the attainment of “maximal results” as a criterion of genuine engagement in athletic activity.

Human beings are creatures having the capacity to engage in various sorts of activities, to acquit themselves more or less well in doing so, and to derive satisfaction from doing so. Further, their lives are incomplete if they engage exclusively in one, to the complete neglect of others. Some such activities are pervasively physical, while others are predominantly mental. Athletic activity
ON WEISS ON RECORDS, ATHLETIC ACTIVITY, AND THE ATHLETE

is one such activity, in which the use of the body figures more importantly than in most. And if we are to speak of “the goal of athletic activity” where this signifies the proper end of athletic activity as a component of a complete and fulfilled human life, it seems to me that it ought not be conceived in such a way that it excludes activity along other lines, or requires that other men be treated only as means to one’s own achievement, or makes the attainment of satisfaction depend upon excelling over everyone else. “The goal of athletic activity” cannot be anything like winning a Gold Medal in the Olympics or being named Most Valuable Player of the Year or surpassing Babe Ruth or Wilf Chamberlin in the record books, even if that is what some of the very best athletes may do or aspire to do. Rather, it must be something like attaining satisfaction through the skillful deployment of a sound body under conditions in which such skillful deployment is required. This characterization may require modification or refinement; but I believe it to be a step in the right direction. And it has the virtue of neither dehumanizing athletic activity nor placing “the athletic goal” beyond the reach of all but the most exceptional of human beings—or, for that matter, of all but the young.

Before concluding, I would make one further point. Up to now in my discussion, I have gone along with Professor Weiss’s characterization of athletic activity as being primarily a matter of the skillful deployment of a sound body. It seems to me, however, that this constitutes something of a distortion of the nature of athletic activity. My football coach in high school used to tell us that football is ten percent physical and ninety percent mental. This may be a bit of an exaggeration; but it brings out something that is importantly true, not only of football but of most forms of athletic activity. A good athlete uses his head as well as his body, and must do so if he is to play well. This is true not only of quarterbacks and pitchers, but also of linemen, hitters, basketball players, wrestlers and golfers, to cite only a few examples. And in saying that a good athlete uses his head as well as his body, and must do so if he is to play well, I am thinking of thinking—sizing up situations, anticipating difficulties, weighing probabilities, choosing between alternate strategies, and so forth.

A very few athletes are so in tune with a given sport that they consistently do the best thing in particular situations by a kind of instinct; but most athletes must think in order even to approach doing so, and they cease to perform at all well when they revert to the level of mindless exertion. To be sure, Professor Weiss is correct in asserting that “If [an athlete] is not trained, his mind... will not appreciably further his athletic activities.” But there is another side of the coin: namely, that in most athletic activities the employment of one’s mental powers is necessary to enable one to deploy the excellent, well-trained body of which Professor Weiss speaks even adequately.

This does not mean that the good athlete per se turns out to satisfy the ideal of mens sana in corpore sano after all; for the kind of mental functioning under discussion here is much too narrow to satisfy the former condition at all adequately, at least by itself. But this does mean that an account of the nature
of athletic activity is incomplete if it does not make reference to the fact that the skillful deployment of a sound body in an athletic activity commonly is inseparable from the exercise of considerable practical intelligence.

Professor Weiss has done philosophers (and perhaps also physical educationists) an important service by directing attention to athletic activity as an important sphere of human life, which demands philosophical investigation no less than any other—and is more in need of it than most, if only because it has been so long neglected. While he has opened the debate, however, I do not believe that he has also closed it; for as I have tried to suggest, the issues to which he has directed our attention in his paper require further discussion.