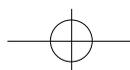
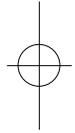
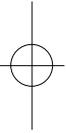
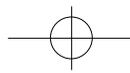
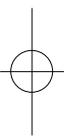
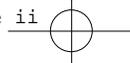




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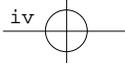




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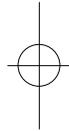
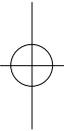
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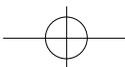
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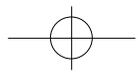
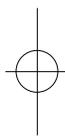
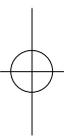
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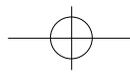
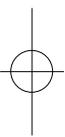
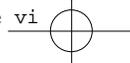
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To My Students





Contents

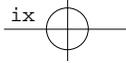
Preface: What Is a Philosophical Athlete?	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
Introduction	3
What We Can Learn from Sport	3
Four Characteristics of a Philosophical Athlete	11

Part One Discovering Your Self

Section Preview: “Know Thyself”	13
Chapter 1 Discovering Yourself as Unique	17
Chapter Preview: The Art of Being Who You Are	17
1.1 Moments of Challenge: A Lived Question	20
1.2 Alone with Oneself	24
1.3 Confronting Oneself from the Inside-Out	28
Chapter Review	33
Chapter 2 Discovering Yourself as Embodied	35
Chapter Preview: My Body, My Mind, Myself	35
2.1 Athletic Bodies: From Divine Images to Lab Specimens	38
2.2 Have Athletes Lost Their Minds?	43
2.3 The Athlete’s Embodied Self	48
Chapter Review	53

viii CONTENTS

Chapter 3	Discovering Yourself as Free	57
	Chapter Preview: The Experience of Freedom in Sport	57
	3.1 Freedom from Physical Reality	60
	3.2 Freedom from Psychological Limitations	66
	3.3 Freedom Is a Matter of Choice	70
	Chapter Review	74
Part Two		
Taking Responsibility		
	Section Preview: “Choose Thyself”	77
Chapter 4	Responsibility for Actions and Attitudes	79
	Chapter Preview: Mind Games	79
	4.1 Athletic Free Agency: Responsibility for Action	81
	4.2 Adopting a Stance on Sport: Responsibility for Perception	85
	4.3 Adopting a Stance on Oneself: Responsibility for Self	90
	Chapter Review	94
Chapter 5	Taking Responsibility for Life and Death	97
	Chapter Preview: Risking, Losing, Dying	97
	5.1 Risking in Sport	100
	5.2 Losing: A Metaphor for Death	105
	5.3 Dying	110
	Chapter Review	116
Chapter 6	Taking Responsibility for Values and Meaning	119
	Chapter Preview: Finding Meaning in the Athletic Life	119
	6.1 Getting the Big Picture	121
	6.2 Deciding What Matters: Purpose and Worth	126
	6.3 Mapping Out a Meaningful Future	132
	Chapter Review	136



Part Three
Showing Respect

Section Preview: The Ethics of Performance Enhancement	139
Chapter 7 Showing Respect for Your Self	145
Chapter Preview: Victory and Virtue in Sports	145
7.1 Getting Clear About Goals (Head)	148
7.2 Motivation (Heart)	153
7.3 Discipline and Desire (Gut)	157
Chapter Review	162
Chapter 8 Showing Respect for Others	165
Chapter Preview: Sport, Violence, and Respect for Others	165
8.1 Competitors	168
8.2 Teammates	174
8.3 Coaches	178
Chapter Review	182
Chapter 9 Showing Respect for Your Sport	185
Chapter Preview: Can High-Tech Equipment Harm a Sport?	185
9.1 The Rules	188
9.2 The Culture	194
9.3 The Internal Goods	200
Chapter Review	205

Part Four
Working with Others

Section Preview: Drugs, Sport and the Just Society	209
Chapter 10 Liberty and Authority	215
Chapter Preview: Freedom of Expression or Excessive Celebration?	215
10.1 Sport as a Social Contract	218
10.2 Negative Freedoms in Sport	223

x CONTENTS

10.3 An Athlete's Obligation to Sport	228
Chapter Review	234
Chapter 11 Equality and Difference	237
Chapter Preview: White Men Can't Jump?	237
11.1 Equality in Sports: Ideal and Real	240
11.2 The Hidden Power of Social Inequality	245
11.3 Equality in the Sports Contract	251
Chapter Review	255
Chapter 12 Fairness	257
Chapter Preview: Title IX	257
12.1 Fair Play in the Sports Contract	260
12.2 Rewards, Merit, and Entitlement	266
12.3 What Are the Limits of Fairness?	271
Chapter Review	277
Conclusion	279
The Game of Life	279
Twelve Questions for the Philosophical Athlete	281
Selected Bibliography	283
Index	293



Preface

What Is a Philosophical Athlete?

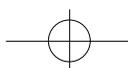
The concept of a philosophical athlete goes back to ancient Greece and a young wrestler named Plato who would go on to be counted among the greatest thinkers of all time. Plato liked to describe philosophical dialogue in terms of wrestling moves and strategies.¹ To him, and many others in ancient Greece, the philosophical struggle for truth was absolutely akin to the athletic struggle for victory. Sport and philosophy were for Plato, as they are for this book, the twin pillars of education.

So it's not merely coincidence that western philosophy and competitive athletics have a common origin. Ancient Greek society provides a real-world model for how the synthesis of sport and philosophy can fuel the pursuit of personal excellence (*areté*) and the dynamic, thriving happiness the Greeks called *eudaimonia*. Education was for them, as it is for us, aimed at achieving a good and happy life. The problem is that in modern society we've retained our athletic programs but lost sight of the connection between education, excellence, and happiness.

Of course, few modern athletes are more than vaguely aware of their connection to Plato and the ideals of ancient Greece. As a collegiate cyclist churning out lonely miles in the hill country around Charlottesville, Virginia, I thought little about such matters—beyond their obvious connection to the Olympic games. For me, cycling was more than an escape from the books and lecture halls of the university, it provided a formidable challenge—a set of tangible standards by which I could test my personal mettle.

I dreamt, like so many others, of an Olympic medal.

1. See, for example, *Euthydemus* 277d.



xii PREFACE

But as I pedaled along, imagining myself atop the Olympic podium, head bowed to receive a cold disc of gold, my visions were less about the medal than about the “I” capable of winning it. The real task was to create the Olympian self, to cultivate the virtues—the discipline, the courage, the self-knowledge—I believed all Olympians had.

Somehow I sensed that happiness would come not from the wealth or adoration victories can bring, but from *being the kind of person* who is capable of winning in the first place. On those long painful climbs or the cold wet mornings when I knew others stayed in bed, I hoped ultimately to become the kind of person who deserved a medal—this much more than the medal itself.

Now, as a middle-aged college professor who never did stand upon that Olympic podium, I can nevertheless say that sport brought me a long way toward being the kind of self I hoped would win a medal. Looking back at my early athletic career through the lens of my academic training, I now see the connections to Platonic ideals, Aristotelian virtue-ethics, and Stoic self-creation. I can say I was a philosophical athlete before I understood Plato, or the Greek conceptions of excellence, education, and happiness.

I can also say that, at the time, I felt alone as a philosophical athlete. People understand the goal of an Olympic medal, college scholarship, or professional career, but no one seemed to fathom the sheer beauty of conquering a challenge and experiencing, if only for a moment, the dynamic perfection we so doggedly seek.

Even athletes avoid talking about such moments among themselves. It’s easier not to deviate publicly from what one is expected to say. So I kept my personal thoughts about sport and the intoxicating struggle for excellence to myself. Professors couldn’t understand my devotion to sport and coaches derided my emphasis on academics. I felt like I was the only person in the world who saw the connection.

It wasn’t until I began teaching a course in the subject that I realized I was far from alone in my philosophical approach to sport. Reflected in my students’ eyes (many of whom are active athletes harboring the same lofty goals I once did) I see the desire for personal excellence shine through the frustration of being asked to articulate their reasons for participating.

Initial responses to the question ‘Why sport?’ cluster around extrinsic rewards such as wealth or admiration from others. Students cite their scholarships, hopes for professional careers, or desire to please parents, coaches, and peers as their reasons for playing sport. As the

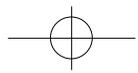
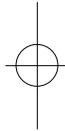
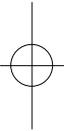
class wears on, however, they talk more freely about such intrinsic rewards as self-knowledge, individual accomplishment through hard work, and personal confidence.

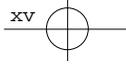
Obviously not every student who takes my class ends up a philosophical athlete, but nearly all gain a healthy perspective on the practice to which they devote so much of their time and energy.

I am writing this book in the hope that many more can benefit from taking a philosophical approach to sport. After taking my class, students often end their post high school hiatus from sport. Others persist past collegiate team-sports to begin individual athletic activities such as running, swimming, or cycling.

Misguided motivations such as wealth, fame, or pleasing Mom and Dad sputter in the high school and college years as our childhood dreams fade and the reality of adulthood sets in. But a philosophical athlete focuses on the intrinsic rewards of sport such as self-knowledge, ethical virtue, and learning to work with others as a team. These rewards pay off endlessly in terms of useful living skills and personal happiness.

This book will try to cultivate the philosophical perspective that empowers sport to enhance life. The philosophical athlete knows that the greatest opponent is the self, the greatest challenge personal excellence, and the greatest reward true happiness. By taking a philosophical approach to sport, athletes of all ages, shapes, and sizes can reclaim the educational value of athletics as it was championed in ancient Greece by such great thinkers as Plato, the wrestler.





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