let it run...

BY PROFESSOR ALAN STAM

THE BEGINNING OF A new academic year often brings with it a debate about athletics proper in colleges and universities. Some folks, including many academics, believe that competitive sports like rowing detract from students' educations. They therefore presume that admissions officers face a stark tradeoff between budding poets and philosophers and recruited athletes, a tradeoff whose outcome threatens to degrade the entire enterprise. The conjecture that guides the critic of college sports is that student athletes bring less to the table than their presumably more academically oriented colleagues. In my view this belief is deeply flawed for at least two reasons.

First, to assert that recruited athletes bring less value to the university we must assume that they cannot also be budding poets or philosophers. Second, even if the first is true, we must also assume that budding poets and philosophers add more to other students' educations and future value to their communities than do the athletes on campus.

Regarding the first assumption, while the students I rowed with at Cornell University have since moved on to successful careers, at the time, we spent countless evenings theorizing about the nature of the perfect rowing stroke. I do not see any difference in the value of discussions dissecting the views of Plato versus the most efficient way to move a boat, although the results of the latter will be subject to an empirical test on Saturday morning while the former will simply vanish at dawn's first light.

As for the second assumption, the bankers, doctors, architects, builders, foresters, and writers I hang out with today were football players, track stars, soccer players, oarsmen, and skiers back in the day. To be fair to the critic of intercollegiate sports, it is true that our academic performance likely suffered because of our shared commitment to being the best athletes we could. The time we spent training came from somewhere, but there's far more to a university education, than what one learns in the classroom.

The self-discipline I had to develop in order to train year round serves me well today, where in my second career as a professor I rely on the work habits I developed in order to compete for a seat in Cornell's varsity eights. In those countless hours of extraordinary physical effort shared with 26 other young men, I also learned things about life that those meeker souls cloistered in the library still do not understand. To accomplish exceptional things in life, very often one must work harder than one could ever imagine, and do so in cooperation and absolute trust with other like-minded people.

That sense of shared mission, sacrifice, and achievement simply cannot be gained from reading about it in a book. To learn that you can rise to the most difficult occasions and challenges that life will throw at you, you must actually do them rather than simply contemplate them. Only my prior service in the U.S. Army Special Forces better prepared me for life's real challenges—as compared with imagined ones—than did my experiences preparing for and racing in eight-man shells.

In my life I have known real fear only twice. Once during a parachute jump gone bad, and once in a 2000 meter race against Princeton's JV. In that race, I went out much too hard from the start. At 500 meters my pulse was racing, my lungs were burning, I could not feel my legs—and there were still 1500 meters to go. I was terrified. Not that I would fail, or lose the race, but that I would let down the other eight men in the boat.

Conversation later that evening revealed that everyone in the boat had suffered a similar spasm of doubt and fear at some point during the race. Along with the others, I conquered my fear and hung on to the finish line, expending a level of effort I previously thought impossible. We won the race that day and I learned something about myself and others that I have never set aside.

Which way of spending time in college better prepares students for their future roles in our community? Through the shared sacrifice and exultation found in sports like rowing, or in the solitary study needed for the life of the mind? If forced to choose, I'd take the athletes over the navel-gazers any day. I'd like to believe though, that there's room for both groups under the tent. I often wonder if the loathsome dismissiveness with which so many of America's intellectuals view athletes lies in their own insecurities rather than any better sense of judgment they might have than the rest of us.

Got your own rowing story or personal essay to tell?
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