Deciding How You Are Going To Keep Score

Fr. Robert Hagan, OSA
Associate Director of Athletics, Villanova University

June 8, 2017

Our men’s basketball team was playing an away game in a sold arena in front of a most animated crowd. I was walking out of the tunnel with legendary Fox and CBS sports broadcaster Bill Raftery. Just as we approached the court a fan spotted my collar and shouted: “Hey, Father you have to pray for both teams!” Without hesitation, Bill, a good faith-filled man, shouted back with an Irish twinkle in his eye: “He is praying for both teams. He’s praying for his team to win and your team to lose!”

We come here this week praying for many intentions. Saint Augustine says, prayer is conversation with God. We talk to and listen to God in the midst of our busy lives… at home… at work… on the court… in the locker room… in this conference… in this liturgy… and we trust those conversations offer us wisdom.

A New York Times reporter once asked San Antonio Spurs five time world champion coach Greg Popovitch: “What do you look for when you recruit a player?” Popovitch replied… “We look for people who are over themselves.” Note he says people not just player… “We are looking for people who are able to sacrifice pieces of themselves and fit into our system.” Humility and Ego-less-ness… so much of what we have been talking about this week. The foundation for things that last.

We had a player on our 2009 Final Four Team who was very much “over himself.” Russell Wooten was a ‘Walk On’. You know what a walk on is. A person who is not on scholarship. Who is not the best player. Who will not find him or herself on the cover of Sports Illustrated or ESPN, but is no less a part of the team. In Jay’s program a “walk-on” is told up front: You will not play and don’t expect to play. Work hard in practice, set an example, be a good teammate, get good grades, and help others become better.

Russell Wooten did all of those things and more, and was a big reason we had the good team chemistry that propelled us forward in the NCAA Tournament. It was mid-March, and all we had left to do was beat Duke and if we could get past them, then beat Pitt to earn Villanova’s first trip back to the Final Four since 1985. On the morning of the Duke game, at breakfast, just before a film session, Russell got sick right in the dining room. Our team doctor was concerned for Russell, as well as for the rest of the team, and consequently Russell was quarantined from the rest of the team. He was moved to a private room and could not participate in further team activities. That night we went on to beat Duke and Russell missed the whole experience. The next day he was absent from all meals and practice sessions, and the following day he was left back at the hotel for the Pitt game which ended in dramatic fashion with Scottie Reynolds making a last second lay up for the victory! Everyone was overjoyed! Russell again...
missed it all. At the end of the game out came a ladder and scissors to cut down the nets in commemoration of reaching the Final Four. Each of us got to climb up and cut a piece of the net, it was a great thrill. But what I remember most is what I heard like a song refrain in the background. As people climbed the ladder if I heard it once, I heard it 25 times: “Cut a piece for Russell!” “Make sure you cut a piece for Russell!” “Make sure Russ gets a piece!”

When we returned to the hotel Russell was in the lobby for the return and they put the net around his neck. You should have seen the radiance of that smile. I promise you, years from now and for the rest of his life, when Russell thinks back on our trip to the Final Four, he will not think of being sick, he will not dwell on what he missed, he will remember and know how much his teammates loved him!

In a way we are all “walk-ons” aren’t we? In life we all want a chance to be on the team...to belong... and use our gifts and talents to make a contribution and be part of it all... to make a difference... become part of something bigger than ourselves.

In today’s gospel we see in addition to Jesus’ many talents, he was an excellent coach. He is challenging His disciples and all of us to decide just how it is that we are going to keep score. Don’t let the world define what greatness is. Remember, Jesus never said don’t aspire to be great, He just made sure we remembered what true greatness is: Service... Sacrifice... Giving of self in ways that may not show up in the box score...pay check...may not result in “tweets” or “likes’ on face book... may not put one on the front page.

In a word He was summing it all up for us: LOVE...Love God with all your mind, heart and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself. These two Commandments existed in the Old Testament, but Jesus goes out of His way to link the two for us. So you want to discover God and find your peace, destiny and happiness, then look no further than to your left and your right and see in the faces of one another (teammates, coaches, friends co-workers, family, strangers, even enemies or opponents) ...opportunities to encounter me and my love.

Socrates says: “We are what we repeatedly do.” Just as we practice over and over to get the play right, the same is true with our daily life. Love is our true identity and true calling and when we try to do the loving thing in all situations, we find what we are truly longing for.

We come here today blessed with an incredible platform and opportunity to show the world how to keep score and to remember what winning really means:

We all want to sell out our arenas, but maybe we leave one chair open in the front row to remember a fallen Veteran service woman or man who is no longer with us and paid the ultimate price for the freedom that we all enjoy... that’s a win!

To celebrate the student who struggled through a subject to a passing grade with a mentor or tutor who inspired and uncovered passion within that lay beneath the surface... that’s a win!

To recognize that teammate, friend, co-worker or maybe some in this church today may be wrestling with fear and anxiety and to look them in the eyes, let them know that someone cares and that all things can be overcome with faith, love and friendship... that’s a win!

To invite those who feel disconnected from their native countries of origin to find in us the warmth and welcome of hospitality in a new home... that’s a win!
Saint Augustine spoke to communities 1600 years ago with the same problems we have today. He challenged them and us when he says: “Change hearts and the times will be changed!”

We thank God today for the spirit that unites us...A spirit that calls us to find passion and meaning in all that we do. A spirit that calls us to stand up and welcome all the “walk-ons” in life, and to remember that everyone has a role to play. We trust that God’s grace is within all of us, and makes up for the talent that we all lack from time to time. Let love always be the first play we call, and when we do this everybody wins!