SPIRIT OF THE GAME >> By Suzanne Wentzel

The intersection of sports and spirituality can transform college athletics

Odds are that a round of word association with the term intercollegiate sports would yield responses such as scholarships, teams and tournaments, but spirituality? Probably a long shot. Can the holy be found in a bump-set-spike? Transcendence experienced by pounding a track? The common good set-spike? The conference at Villanova in June to explore the intersection of faith and the uniquely American phenomenon that is intercollegiate sports. This two-day event was the first fruits of the Vatican’s 2016 global conference “Sport at the Service of Humanity.” Led by the Pontifical Council for Culture, the Rome gathering recognized the potential of faith traditions and sports to unite and transform people in mind, body and spirit. The council’s aim was to initiate a worldwide movement to encourage sports organizations and athletes to follow six guiding principles: compassion, respect, love, enlightenment, balance, joy.

Parterns were needed to put those principles into play. Villanova stepped up to the plate, organizing and hosting the first Vatican-sanctioned regional follow-up. The context: faith-based colleges and universities in the US.

The conference at Villanova in June to explore the intersection of faith and the uniquely American phenomenon that is intercollegiate sports. The more than 100 delegates on the final roster hailed from faith-based institutions around the country, from Providence to Pepperdine, from Baylor to Marquette. They represented all NCAA divisions and the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics.

“We wanted to put people who work in athletics in touch with the people who work in spiritual development,” Dr. Janosik says. Thus, coaches and chaplains came to the table. They listened to insightful speakers and tackled worthy questions. How can we implement the values of their faith traditions into athletics so that student-athletes can learn about the spirituality of what they do and integrate it into their lives.

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“All On the Same Side” Barbara Wall, PhD, vice president, Mission and Ministry, and her colleague Christopher Janosik, EdD, director of Planning and Research, captained the team that planned the conference. Vatican officials, Villanova leaders, including Athletics Director Mark Jackson; and Big East Commissioner Val Ackerman provided crucial assists.

“The classical idea that play is integral to human development is embedded in the Catholic intellectual tradition,” Dr. Wall says. “Our goal was for schools to look at how they implement the values of their faith traditions into athletics so that student-athletes can learn about the spirituality of what they do and integrate it into their lives.”

Issues of inclusion, involvement and inspiration rallied attended. Claire VeNard, assistant athletics director of Student Welfare and Development at Notre Dame, was pumped up by the exchanges. “It was clear from our conversations that sport is uniquely positioned to emphasise our common humanity and to enable people to grow in the ways outlined in the six guiding principles,” VeNard says. “The conference challenged us to examine how we might create more opportunities for those in our communities to experience that.”

YES, IN OUR HOUSE Attendees’ eagerness to adapt ideas to their institutions gladdened the hearts of organizers. Bishop Paul Tighe, now the secretary of the Pontifical Council for Culture and a speaker at Villanova’s forum, was especially pleased. “It was edifying to observe the commitment among the participants to promoting the highest standards of fair play and integrity in sport,” he says, “even if, at times, these values will not necessarily lead to instant results and success.”

The conference did lead to one instant result. As it wrapped up, Bishop Tighe invited the representatives to continue their task collectively, and he tapped Villanova to lead the effort. The University has begun collaborating with the other schools on next steps.

On its campus, Villanova continues to support the diverse spiritual needs of student-athletes. Between classes, practices and road trips, the more than 550 varsity players can’t always attend prayer and service opportunities on campus. The game plan: bring opportunities to them.

One such means is David Walsh ‘15 MA, the University’s first campus minister for Sports and Spirituality. As comfortable discussing the interior life as he is driving to the net, Walsh understands the preplay bond. Whether he is facilitating an afternoon reflection, customizing a team retreat or meeting one-on-one for coffee, Walsh helps individuals and squads “to find deeper richness and a sense of meaning—not just as athletes but as people.” He says, “It’s a privilege to walk with students as they strive to be their best selves.”

Discovering one’s best self is a spiritual threshold, and sports can help people cross it. In his sophomore year, Edward Hastings, PhD, ’13 CLAS told his ACL. The Wildcat faced the possibility that he would never play basketball again—and be stripped of what he saw as his defining trait.

Frank Allocco, senior associate athletic director, External Relations, at the University of San Francisco, and the Rev. William Rickle, SJ, campus minister, Athletics and Student Life, at St. Joseph’s University, share their experiences.

Crystal Sullivan, director, Campus Ministry, at the University of Dayton, discusses the intersection of sports and spirituality.

“The injury rocked my world, but then it led me to realize that my true identity is rooted in God, not in performance,” says Dr. Hastings, who ended up going to the 1971 national championship. Now an assistant professor of Theology and Religious Studies, Dr. Hastings shares his expertise on sports, spirituality and character development with Villanova students, noting how Augustinean it is to “go deeper into yourself to find out who you are.”

Spiritual growth is not a footnote in Villanova’s playbook. It is central to the comprehensive development of every runner, rower and receiver. “Our No. 1 objective is to graduate complete, well-rounded students,” Jackson says. “Being able to connect sports and spirituality can really help with the process.”

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The conference at Villanova built on the six principles guiding the global faith and sport movement.