

# When Winning Is The Only Thing

by

Jim Checkley

## READING:

*Excerpted from the New York Times, Sunday, July 4, 2004, Sunday Business, page 4, editorial by Eduardo Porter, Corporate Greed? The Other Guy Started It.*

What drives executives to cook the books seems painfully obvious: it's greed, isn't it? That cupidity—well oiled by stock options—would appear to be the principal cause for the spread of creative accounting during the 1990's, provoking executives from Computer Associates to Enron to inflate sales, mask debts or embellish profits, enhancing their own incomes along the way.

Despite the moral tidiness of greed as a motive, there is another powerful incentive helping to spread mischief in the executive suite. Competition, a primal force of capitalism, can steer even the nongreedy executive down an unethical path. Andrei Shleifer, an economics professor at Harvard, argues that if unethical behavior drives down corporate costs, rivals will be compelled to do the same just to stay in business. In other words, companies will find the cost of ethical behavior too high.

"I really don't believe the saints-and-crooks theory," Mr. Shleifer said of the tendency to demonize business executives who engage in creative accounting. "Evidence tells us very clearly, even the most saintly C.E.O.'s were involved" in such accounting because of market pressure.

The principle works equally to explain accounting fraud, bribery or the use of child labor, Mr. Shleifer says. \*\*\*

From a regulatory standpoint, it may not make much of a difference if executives are motivated by greed or survival. From a legal standpoint, though, Mr. Shleifer's argument may provide some executives with an interesting avenue to explore: "Your honor, the market made me do it."

## SERMON:

I'd been thinking of doing a sermon on the effect of sports on society for a long time when I was finally inspired to do so by an article my friend John Sanders sent to me. The article concerned a Little League baseball player who had broken some rules at home and whose parents had grounded him. Pretty typical. But then a strange thing had happened. Once the child explained to his friends that he was grounded and was going to miss a game or two as a result, the parents of the other children on the Little League team began calling and complaining to the grounded boy's parents that his punishment wasn't fair. The calls were many, frequent, and some were quite angry.

Why all the fuss? Well, the grounded child was the best player on the Little League team. Without him, it was much more likely the team would lose the games he was going to miss. This

was so upsetting to the other players and their parents that they called to complain. So the parents of this child, in the aftermath, had written to one of those columnists who write about ethics to ask if they had done the right thing. Or was grounding their child wrong because the other children might, as a result, end up losing a Little League baseball game?

The columnist reassured the parents that they had done the right thing and spent most of his column complaining that the preoccupation with winning that seemed to grip the country had gotten out of hand. He lamented that the need to win, the desire to win, almost at any cost, and at any level, had become increasingly rampant and was becoming a real problem in our society.

The first thing I thought of in reading this article was Green Bay Packer's coach Vince Lombardi's famous quote that "winning isn't everything, it's the only thing," the quote from which I took the title of the sermon. There are several sources on the Internet that claim that Coach Lombardi did not actually utter these words. But it doesn't matter. Did Humphry Bogart say "Play it again Sam?" Did Carl Sagan say: "Billions and billions and billions?" Did Marshall McLuhan say: "The media is the message?" No, none of them did. But all these expressions are American icons.

And while many individuals would dispute Coach Lombardi, and there are hundreds of articles claiming that winning is not the only thing, I think that the expression "winning isn't everything, it's the only thing" has taken on a life of its own over the last 40 years. And while I do not blame Coach Lombardi directly for the escalation in the competitive environment in America and the obsession with winning that has accompanied it, the notion that winning is the only thing is, I believe, at the heart of many of the dilemmas we find in sports, business, culture, and society generally. Because I believe that we, as a society, have bought into that expression, and that it lies behind much of who we are and what we do as a culture.

As I prepared this sermon, I realized that this is a huge topic, one that crosses many disciplines and aspects of culture. Indeed, it was a struggle to try to synthesize just a few aspects of this issue into a twenty-five minute talk. For instance, I have neither the time nor the inclination to explore how American culture got to the point where winning a Little League game is so important it is worth challenging your neighbors' choice of discipline or allowing a boy who was 2 years overage to play in order to win the Little League World Series, something that happened just a couple of years ago. Instead, I'd simply like to make a few observations on the effects of elevating winning to the status of the only thing and look at how this phenomenon is not limited to sports, but affects all we do.

I grew up in the 1960s and early 70s, a time when sports were not nearly as important or as available as they are today. Most people were content to deal with sports on the weekend on TV and check on the progress of the season in the paper or listen to the home team on the radio. Those of you under 30 might not believe it, but 40 years ago, one couldn't just pop the TV on any given night and have a smorgasbord of sports waiting for the watching. There was no Monday Night Football, no superstation cable outlets, and, best of all from my point of view, sports had not yet degenerated into 24/7 sports talk radio and TV. Look, I love sports, played baseball and basketball and ran track and cross country, but all this gossip about sports has really pushed me over the edge.

Now I realize I'm in a Unitarian Church, so this might not be obvious, but sports are a

gigantic part of American culture. Since the creation of ESPN in 1979, sports have developed into one of the most powerful and dominant aspects of our culture. ESPN stands for the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network—although I often call it the ETERNAL Sports Programming Network—and is the single most important thing that happened to sports since the invention of the television. Major sporting events like the Superbowl, the World Series, the NBA Finals, the Stanley Cup Finals, Grand Slam tennis and Major golf events, the Triple Crown of horse racing, the Olympics, the World Cup, all these events and many more produce an almost continuous current of competition, triumph, and defeat that is at once iconic and in a sense, religious. If religion is that which binds us together, well, little binds the country together more than sports.

Today players are paid hundreds of millions of dollars to play kids' games for a living. Millions of fans metaphorically live and die by the success of their teams—and by success I mean winning and losing. And because of the proliferation and growth of sports, seasons have become extended, overlap, and never seem to end. Even when the teams aren't actually playing, they are being talked about on thousands of outlets across the country. Sports in America have grown to the point where the personalities are almost as important as the games, where the culture is almost as important as the scores, and where, at every level, winning seems to be the paramount concern.

It is very different from the days when I used to go to the Boys' Club of Clifton and there was a huge sign on the wall in the gym that said: "It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game." While everybody, including me, tried our best to win, and winning was important to us, make no mistake, my coaches for the most part displayed the attitude that if you gave your best, then the final score was not what was most important. I visited my old Boy's Club—now the Boys' and Girls' Club—about 10 years ago and that sign was gone. And I frankly don't expect them to put up another one any time soon.

Jacques Barzun, the great Columbia University historian, commented years ago that to understand the American character one should understand baseball because that sport encompassed so much of what made America unique. I submit to you today that to understand the American character one should understand sports generally because our attitude towards sports reflects our attitude towards the rest of our culture. The attitude that winning is the only thing has infected us like a plague. In fact, social critic Jerome Holtzman claims that "Losing is the great American sin." And while it may have started in the sports world, this attitude has spread to every aspect of culture, including business, law, and politics.

We as a culture, as a society, have bought into the Vince Lombardi attitude about winning. American society, already highly competitive, already individualistic, has become obsessed with winning and it has infected everything—and I mean everything—we do. American culture has become, to an extent that I frankly have difficulty putting up with, a culture absolutely dominated by competition for everything and the attitude that winning is the only thing.

But while winning is great and I love to win as much as the next guy, when we are only focused on winning eventually everything else about the game—whatever it is—becomes secondary or expendable. If winning is the only thing, how can there be room for anything else? Sportsmanship is eventually sacrificed to winning; civility is sacrificed to winning; respect is sacrificed to winning; character is sacrificed to winning; playing by the rules is sacrificed to winning, honor is sacrificed to winning. Like the heel of a shoe that wears down only gradually, so

gradually that we don't even realize it until we try on a new pair, all other aspects of competition—and life itself—slowly erode when winning is the only thing.

I think that erosion is largely responsible for turning us into a much less civilized society. When winning is the only thing there is a tendency to break the rules, to cheat, to develop an us/them attitude that leads to disrespect, meanness, and unsportsmanlike conduct. We see the evidence every day in the newspapers, on television, in our own lives. Just in the last few months there have been loads of fights in professional and college games, for instance, with the Detroit Pistons/Indiana Pacers incident being the worst. There, the rage erupted into the fans and players having a brawl in the stands. It is the worst fight ever, but is only one of an increasing number of fights and other acts of uncivilized behavior. When winning is the only thing it is simply much less pleasant to play the game, be it sports or life.

Let me give you an example from my own experience. It happened at a Westlake football game. I forget who Westlake was playing that day, but I will never forget how a vocal group of parents and fans behaved. There was a player on the other team who was quite good and doing quite well. These Westlake fans, who were used to steam rolling opponents, were literally yelling for the Westlake players to hurt this kid so he could no longer participate in the game. I, like most of you, I'm sure, have heard foul mouthed fans at a game before. But for some reason, this particular behavior touched me more deeply. I was both angry and depressed and sat there thinking: this is one of your neighbor's kids. He's one of us, a part of our community. And you want him hurt because he's a good player and Westlake might possibly, God forbid, lose a game?

There are hundreds of stories like this from Little League parents who scream at the umpires, the coaches, and the players, to my own experience in the practice of law, which has become much nastier over the 22 years I have practiced, to the escalation of road rage that we have all heard about if not experienced.

And just to vent for a second, this lack of civility on the road really disturbs me. Tens of thousands of people die on the roads each year and you'd think we could be civil to each other when our very lives are at stake. But that doesn't happen as much as it should. I mean, wouldn't you think you were dreaming if some day you were driving to work during rush hour and all the people driving SUVs, Hummers, oversized pick-up trucks, and other urban assault vehicles yielded when the lanes were merging or didn't speed up when you needed to change lanes, or just gave a wave of the hand in thanks when you yielded?

Not to be dramatic, but I am coming to the conclusion that we do not actually live in a civilization anymore—at least it doesn't seem to be civil to me. Some years ago I coined a word for what I think our society is becoming: I call it a “competitization”—a society where competition is the single most important and paramount feature of the culture, one where, increasingly, only winners matter and losers are soon forgotten. Nobody remembers whose is Number 2, except that whoever it is, he or she was the last to lose.

People complain that there is no sense of community anymore. Competition and the win at all costs attitude has, in my view, simply swamped cooperation, and with it our sense of community. How in the world can we have a strong sense of cooperative, caring community when we emphasize

so strongly the success of the individual, individual competition, winning, and have established such a strong win/lose and us/them society that we often don't even act civilly to one another? I don't watch them, but I am reminded of the proliferation of all those so-called "reality" shows where watching people lose one by one until all that's left is the sole survivor is most of the fun of the show. Winners and losers, us and them, it has been perfected on TV.

I'd like to shift gears here and look at another aspect of sports that I think has made its way into our culture, and not for the better. This is in the area of personal responsibility. I've not heard anybody else talk about this, but I think it is important.

All sports have a referee or an umpire. In a sporting event, the players are used to allowing somebody else to take responsibility for what is right and wrong in the game. In this sense, in sports, the responsibility for playing by the rules has been externalized from the players to the referees. While the player is required for playing by the rules, he is not responsible for enforcing those rules. That role is delegated to the official.

As a result, players are expected to accept the judgement of the official and move on. I think this externalization of responsibility has evolved to the point where players, ever eager and needing to win, have a mind set that allows them to feel comfortable if the official misses a call or botches a call that is in their favor because that is simply part of the game and the player need not take responsibility for it. And fans accept it too. So while players, coaches, and fans will rant against calls that hurt their chances of winning, nobody complains when a blown call is in their favor. In fact, how weird would it have been if John McEnroe, infamous for his obnoxious arguments with officials who made calls he disagreed with, had argued just a vociferously if the umpire made a call that worked in his favor, even if he and everybody on his "side" knew it? That's not his responsibility. If a call is missed, that responsibility lies with the official, not the player. And that's the point: the decision has been removed from you—for good or ill—and you're not supposed to speak up even if you know the call was wrong.

You can ask about sportsmanship, and in the movie *Bagger Vance*, the golf pro calls a foul on himself, and thus costs himself the match, but when winning is the only thing, how can an ordinary person afford to call a foul on him or her self? Especially in the modern era when millions upon millions of dollars are at stake, if a receiver catches a game winning touchdown in the Superbowl, and he knows he was out of bounds, but the referee didn't see it and the instant replays don't show it, how can we ever expect him to fess up? In fact, lots of people would think he was an idiot to fess up. Moreover, even more insidiously, it is not his job, don't you see, to make that call. It's the referee's job and the player not only can, but must, abdicate personal responsibility to that referee. *It's not the player's fault, it's the referee's.*

I believe we have expanded this externalization of responsibility for our actions that is required on the playing field to encompass culture in general to the point where we no longer see ourselves as the primary enforcer of the rules of the game, and moreover, if we break the rules and are not caught, it's not our fault. The fault lies with the referees, as it were, for failing to catch us.

I'd go so far as to say that in many ways, we have, as a culture, externalized responsibility for our actions to the point where many people act as if unless one is caught, then there is no harm. I mean, if the umpire blows a call, or misses a call, we accept it and move on with the game and it's

not the player's responsibility to fix it. So why not in life? After all, it's the job of the police, or the SEC, or the FBI, or our boss, or our spouse, or somebody else, to discover our flaw, mistake, error, or violation. If they don't, well, then let the game go on.

I have an expression for this phenomenon as well: I call it "no foul, no harm." Anybody who has played pick-up sports knows the expression, "no harm, no foul." It means that even if you technically broke the rules, we won't stop play because what you did, did not affect the play. But now, many people seem to act like the rule should be no foul, no harm. Unless we are caught, and a foul is called, then there is no harm—it's just part of the game. No need to feel bad, no need to call foul on yourself, it's just the way the game is played.

This concept is at work in the expression: "his big mistake was getting caught?" What's up with that expression? It implies that it's OK to cheat, to do whatever it takes to win, so long as we don't get caught. Everything is OK because we have externalized our responsibility for our choices and it is up to somebody else to call the foul. Everything is OK because winning is the only thing and this will help us win. And besides, everybody is doing it—only an idiot would play by the rules and lose.

The dilemma created for all of us occurs when others are playing by a set of rules that implicitly condone the notion that winning is the only thing. The question we all face is what to do if winning means having to cheat, or behave belligerently, or hurt some kid from up the street, or ignore the rules? As was noted in the reading today from the New York Times, the business world views this issue as very real and very troubling. So what does an honest person do when competition gets out of hand, then whatever gives you a competitive advantage is OK, unless you are caught? If everybody else is doing it, then what choice do you have?

Look, what the writer of the Times' editorial is saying is no different in theory from one of us telling a policeman who has pulled us over for speeding that we were just going with the flow of traffic. The traffic made me do it, you say, externalizing responsibility for your actions. And you have a point—especially if all that traffic swooping past you makes you feel unsafe or, and this is more subtle, creates a feeling of either inequity or stupidity that they all get to go fast why you obediently go 55. But let's raise the stakes. How is this excuse, and we've all heard it if not used it, any different from a CEO who complains that his company's very survival depends on him matching the actions of his competitors, even if that means breaking the law? Are you willing to cut that CEO the same slack you cut yourself on the highway? Probably not. But all he was doing was conducting business with the flow of ethics and doing what was necessary to win.

Given these challenges, what do we do if we care about winning but don't have any desire to compromise our principles and integrity in the process. That's a tough question. I'll be blunt with you. In the absence of a cosmic umpire, it is sometimes very difficult to justify playing by the rules when nobody else does. After all, one of the single most potent images of fairness in our culture is

the notion of the level playing field. And if everybody is cheating, and everybody knows it, then cheating somehow becomes fair because it levels the playing field. But it also perpetuates and tends to escalate the cycle.

How any of us behaves depends on what we believe is important and where on the list we place external success versus internal success. I'm not saying they are necessarily incompatible, but it is often that case that taking a stand, choosing to honor other things that matter just as much if not more than winning, can cost you—sometimes a lot—especially when everybody else, or nearly everybody else, is cheating and not just getting away with it, but is somehow, in a perverse way, encouraged to cheat by the very competitive environment we ourselves have created.

Those of you who know me, know I can't do a sermon without a pop culture reference. So if you want to know what price sometimes has to be paid for doing the right thing, then I'd suggest you watch *Spider-Man 2*. The first hour of that film is about the question: when you have great power and you take great responsibility as a result, what are the consequences? We see in the movie that being Spider-Man, of doing what's right, takes a great toll on Peter Parker, who is failing school, being fired from his jobs, and has pushed the love of his life to the breaking point. Peter has a miserable life being Spider-Man, but he does the right thing, even at the risk of his life and happiness.

But because I simply cannot let myself end a sermon on a down note, let me conclude by suggesting an analogy. I think of being ethical and of doing the right thing in the same way that I think of recycling. No one person can make recycling work. But if everybody recycles even as little as one can a day, then suddenly, we have mountains of cans. Almost nobody ever sees the mountains of cans; we simply have to have faith that they exist and thus resolve to do our part. I think the same thing applies here: we each have to make our small contributions to doing what's right, being ethical, whatever that might be in any situation, and have faith that it matters in the larger scheme, even though none of us may ever see the mountain of cans.

But more than this, even if there is no mountain of cans, even if nobody else follows, we might just free ourselves a little bit from the damaging belief that winning is the only thing. It isn't you know. But it sometimes takes real courage to find that out. It takes being willing to "lose" once in a while for a deeper cause—including giving honor to the champion who lives inside each of us—and winning beyond the scoreboard for our hearts and souls.

Presented January 23, 2005  
Wildflower Unitarian Universalist Church  
Austin, Texas  
Revised for Print

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