

Wit & Wisdom: We win some, we lose some

By Father Joseph Breighner

Since I often write my columns well in advance of their publication, it's difficult to be "timely" in my topics! For example, I'm writing this column the day after the Ravens' loss to the Patriots. Right now this is a "hot" topic. In a few weeks it may just be a game we fans want to forget.

But I think there are important things we can learn from sports. Perhaps the most important is that we all look for perfection. (Perhaps, we want perfection from others more than we want it from ourselves.) We want our players to catch every pass, to make every field goal. But we learned from the Ravens' loss that humans are human after all.

Where does this yearning come from? St. Augustine said it best: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in God." There is something in us that knows that there is more to us than mere flesh and blood. We have indeed been made in God's image and likeness. We yearn for that Oneness.

Then where does imperfection come from? Ah, back to the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve. As someone humorously said: "Original sin wasn't the apple in the tree, but the pair on the ground!" The pair on the ground made the wrong decision about the apple in the tree. (Actually, the Bible doesn't tell us what kind of fruit it was.)

But you and I inherited that tendency, that proclivity, to make wrong choices. My working definition of Original Sin is: “That which makes it impossible to always do the right thing.” No one on earth would want to be perfect more than I, and, yet, I know how short I fall of perfection. I know Original Sin when I see it!

So we learn from sports something important about life. We need to forgive our team’s imperfection, just as we hope to be forgiven for our own. From our own weakness we learn compassion for the weakness of others. A great line that I heard from the AA tradition is: “It’s too bad we didn’t get the other fellow’s problems. We all know what he should do!” All of us are experts on someone else’s life! We know what they should have done. But, none of us is an expert in our own lives. We all make choices we wish we could do over. Wouldn’t Billy Cundiff like another chance? Wouldn’t Lee Evans like another chance?

One of the nice things about God is that there is always a another chance. None of us change the past. All of us can change in the present.

A second thing sports teach us is that our pleasure comes at the price of another’s pain. We rejoice when our team wins. Someone else may be weeping on the other side. This time you and I are feeling the pain. (As an aside, one of the nuns at my Mass today whispered to me: “I’m from Boston. I’m happy about yesterday’s results! Others just glare at me if I say that.”) I smiled at her. When you’re a sports fan you have to accept both sides.

In life we do win some and lose some. Competitive sports do prepare us for a competitive world. But our faith also reminds us of compassion. St. Paul spoke of weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice. He reminds us that our oneness in God is more important than any apparent division. Our minds divide the world up into pieces. Jesus, in John’s Gospel, says that he came that “all might be one”. So, yes, we can cheer for our teams in our make-believe world of

competition. Compassion, however, moves us to a higher level.

Vince Lombardi was widely quoted as saying: “Winning isn’t everything. It’s the only thing!” What he actually said was: “It’s the only thing worth striving for!” If you live in a competitive world strive to win. But remember there is more to the world than competition. A lot of people have been successful in sports and business, but losers at what really matters: faith, family and friends.

When we live for eternity, we get the best of time and eternity!