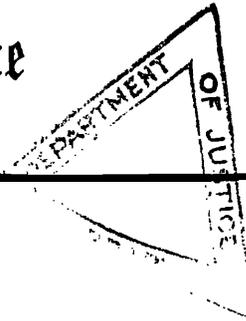




Department of Justice

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ADDRESS
BY
ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY
"DINNER OF CHAMPIONS"
ASTOR HOTEL, NEW YORK CITY
OCTOBER 17, 1961

Colonel Eagan, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends of the People-To-People Sports Committee. Congratulations on the task that you have undertaken.

Standing here, surrounded by so many athletes, I feel I ought to present my credentials. I come from a family that has always emphasized and enjoyed sports -- golf, tennis, football, baseball and the rest. Last year, for instance, we did considerable running. So I come naturally by my interest in sports.

But I think we all recognize that today sports, athletics and physical fitness are a cause as well as an interest. As a Nation we have come too near forgetting our tradition of physical vigor and stamina. We have been spending too much of our time in the stands and not enough on the field. To put it bluntly, we are in danger of getting soft.

Some of the facts causing us concern were pointed out by the President in an article in "Sports Illustrated" last year. Consider these examples:

Between 1950 and 1957, 5,200,000 Americans were called up for the draft. Of that number 2,100,000 -- or approximately 40 per cent -- were turned down because of moral or physical deficiency.

A 15-year study by a New York group showed that, despite the highest standard of living in the world, American youth lag far behind their

European contemporaries in physical fitness. In six tests for strength and coordination, 58 per cent of the American children failed one or more of the tests, while only 8.7 per cent of the European youngsters failed.

At Yale University in 1951, 51 per cent of the freshman class passed their physical fitness tests. In 1956 it was down to 43 per cent, and in 1960 it was down to 38 per cent.

We can do better and we will do better because we must. That is why I am so pleased to be with you this evening, for it is to that important task that you are dedicated.

Sports, athletics and competition are indispensable in this country.

Just consider for a moment what we achieve from athletics. First of all there is the sheer fun of playing -- whether it be tennis, swimming, baseball or football. Beyond that, and the building of a healthy body and the assistance in the formation of a healthy and alert mind, we develop stamina, courage, unselfishness and most importantly, perhaps, the will to win.

What a difference these characteristics make in our later lives, no matter what we do -- no matter what our vocation might be -- even if it be just in small things. You have all seen the small boy watch an older brother or friend hang and drop from a jungle-jim and then muster the courage to give it a try himself. What a cry of delight and pride follows. When he makes the drop, he has achieved something that is important in his life, something that is necessary in the making of a man. He holds himself a little straighter. He feels himself a little stronger.

The will to win is so important to us as individuals, and as a Nation, that without it we are lost. Without doubt, we learn it best as individuals in athletic competition. We have seen it in games that we have played

ourselves. I know for I have seen it at home. I am ashamed to report that my father who is 73 has never been beaten by any of his four sons in golf. We have all become resigned to the fact that he has determined that he won't be beaten.

We have seen it in teams, the New York Yankees, and the Notre Dame Football Team under Rockne and Leahy. We have seen it in individuals. On October 13 in Rome, Jon Douglas, of the American Davis Cup Team, refused to give up. A former quarterback at Stanford University, he lost the first two sets to his Italian opponent and trailed 5-2 in the third. He was dead, but he refused to lie down. He won five straight games and took the third set, 7-5; the fourth set, 10-8; and won the last set, 6-0 in 15 minutes.

The pride we take in performances like that of the Yankees or of Douglas shows another side of sports. It does something for all of us as well as for those who play. The fine University of Washington Football Team of the 1959 and 1960 seasons gave the entire State of Washington a lift, not only by winning most of its games in a dramatic way, but by its splendid spirit, courage and character.

A third-string guard on that team told how his wife became disgusted because he didn't play often.

"She asked me why in the world I didn't give up," he said. "I had to think for a minute. Then I told her I couldn't walk away from this team. When you stand among them, you feel like a man yourself."

The United States Hockey Team gave the entire Nation a sense of pride and vigor by upsetting the Russians and going on to win the 1960 Olympic championship from the favored Canadians. The characteristics that man most admires in man come through in performances such as these and they also have great meaning for the future.

I think General Douglas MacArthur summarized it in about the best terms. He said: "Upon the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that, upon other fields, on other days will bear the fruits of victory."

What is learned on the athletic field is not forgotten nor are the lessons of character that are forged there ever lost. Consider the contributions in the field of public life, business, law, medicine, and the military of those who actively participated in athletics. We need look no further than Colonel Egan himself, an Olympic lightweight champion and one of our country's most respected and dedicated citizens.

Another example, one who is close to me, is Deputy Attorney General Byron White, who was an All-American halfback at the University of Colorado, an all-pro back from the Pittsburgh Steelers, a Rhodes scholar and now one of the Nation's outstanding lawyers.

Going back in our history - the exploits of Theodore Roosevelt are known to all of us, but the interest in the vigorous life did not begin with him. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson used to ride more than 20 miles each day. Abraham Lincoln walked four miles to school at the age of 7. Becoming more contemporary again, the President of Finland, who is now a guest in our country, headed his country's team at the 1932 Olympics and still often skis cross-country more than 35 miles at a time.

These men have set the finest examples of sportsmanship -- and of stamina, courage, unselfishness and the will to win. Now it is up to us to create similar opportunities for the youngsters of today.

All of us have a tremendous job to do and that job starts at the level of the family and the school. It is up to us to see that athletics are an integral part of the program in our high schools and junior schools. And it is also up to us to see that space is saved in our rapidly spreading urban areas for playing fields, and that equipment and leadership is made

available.

In too many neighborhoods in the past the short-term claims of the adults have taken precedence over the long-term claims of our young people, and of our future. There isn't much sand lot baseball anymore -- no sand lots.

This is one place where our modern, complacent society could have done better. Playfields can't substitute for a proper parent-child relationship and a secure family life. But recreation areas can be helpful and we need more of them.

Some months ago I visited a neighborhood here in New York and talked with two of the gangs. One of the great heroes in one area was a gang leader who had been convicted of murder. He had served a sentence and was back in the neighborhood -- probably exercising the kind of leadership that will bring him to my attention again.

I found that the heroes in this neighborhood were not the traditional ones like George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, Mickey Mantle, Johnny Unitas or Rufus Johnson. The heroes were hoodlums like Vincent Allo and three-finger Brown.

The causes of juvenile delinquency are complex. However, environment certainly plays a big part and a good environment certainly includes plenty of places where hitting a baseball rather than kicking a kid when he's down is the cause for self-satisfaction.

But even with playing fields, gyms and equipment, something more is needed. That something more is family and community encouragement and interest in athletic programs for all our children and young people.

I'd like to stress the word -- "All."

There still are plenty of schools that pour all their resources into a few varsity sports, and leave little or nothing for the young people outside these programs.

Last Spring, in an address to his council on physical fitness, the President said: "We do not want in the United States a Nation of spectators. We want a Nation of participants in the vigorous life."

If we are to recapture our tradition of stamina and vigor, if we are once again to become a Nation of players rather than spectators, our sports programs must be for all our young people and not just for the few.

Here is one of the places where the People-To-People Sports Committee is making an invaluable contribution.

The effect of the work being done by this Committee, which must be joined in by all of us, is two-fold.

By encouraging American participation in international athletic and sports competitions, the Committee gives a push to American participation in all forms of sports.

By giving more opportunities for players and teams in this country to entertain players and teams from other lands -- or visit them in their home lands -- the Committee increases the area of friendship, good will and understanding, so indispensable in all of our lives today.

The world of sports knows no religious, racial or political differences. Athletes, from whatever land they come, speak the same language. The lessons of competition are lessons for life. The Athletic Arena is the ideal place for our contemporaries to meet.

For this kind of courage, competitiveness and respect for others that is so evident among our athletes is what is needed so much today by all

Americans -- by all people who cherish freedom. The problems we face are immense. The challenges are so enormous that they are often difficult to comprehend. But admitting all that, ladies and gentlemen, the future for all of us in this room and for our children can be bright and promising.

The President has expressed the challenges ahead by invoking the image of our pioneer ancestors. He spoke of a new frontier which today reaches across the seas and even into the vast reaches of space, and on January 20, he said:

"We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans -- born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage -- and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

"Let every Nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty."

As the President has said, this is the most dangerous period in the history of man. Let us face this future, perilous though it may be, with stamina, courage, unselfishness and with the will to win. And, ladies and gentlemen, win we shall.