

Gold Fever, Athletic Fervor

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When the Savior appeared to the Nephites on this continent, He told them:

Those things which were of old time, which were under the law, in me are all fulfilled.

Old things are done away, and all things have become new.

Therefore I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect.

[3 Nephi 12:46–48]

Later, emphasizing the importance of His theme, the Savior asked, “What manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27).

The Savior’s advent did away with the outward appearances of the law and established a new law of a broken heart and contrite spirit. It is within the context of a broken heart and contrite spirit that I will address the Savior’s question “What manner of men ought ye to be?” as it applies to our culture’s preoccupation with athletics. Since I have been associated with BYU athletics for 36 years, much of what I will say comes as a result of my observation at BYU.

A sportswriter asked Val Hale, then BYU sports information director and now athletic director: “Does God care if BYU wins football games?” I’ve given this question a good deal of

thought in the broader arena of all sports, but the question remains unanswered.

Indicative of some national interest in the question is the fact that this query was presented to President Gordon B. Hinckley by a member of the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., in March of this year. In a question-and-answer session, he was asked, “If you’ll forgive the levity, someone here really wants to know whether God has forgotten about BYU football.”

President Gordon B. Hinckley answered, “That comes from an alumnus. I don’t know. I hope not.” (From *Deseret News* transcript of Q&A after President Gordon B. Hinckley’s 8 March 2000 speech at the National Press Club, Washington, D.C.) The president of the Church, in his good wisdom, refused to be suckered into a direct response.

You have heard the expression “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread” (Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism* [1711], pt. III, l. 66). I suspect it is foolhardy to attempt to answer the question; nevertheless, I will express my

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feelings by sharing some events and personal experiences. I address these comments to all who have a loyal interest in a winning athletic program at BYU.

Because we are a religious institution yet nevertheless take winning seriously, do the media assume there is a godly interest in our performance or do they delight in needling us when we lose? Whether the Lord cares or not is unknown, but one thing is clear: athletics has become a religion. Some sports at BYU have been raised by fans to the level of idol worship. In the minds of these fans a winning program is more important than the principles upon which this institution was founded.

Although the audience at the National Press Club laughed about the question addressed to President Hinckley, to many BYU alumni and fans it is no laughing matter. In fact, so intense is the interest in athletics in general that many American families are hoping their sons and daughters will find the legendary pot of gold as professional athletes. It is for this reason I have entitled my presentation “Gold Fever, Athletic Fervor.”

Today gold fever persists in the belief that almost every child can be raised to earn more than was ever dug out of the gold mines simply by signing a contract in a professional sport. Youth are ferried to sports camps throughout the summer—some hundreds, even thousands of miles apart. Moms run their kids from morning till night from one athletic activity to another. Parents fuss over their children’s activities at these camps as if they were more critical to the children’s future success than learning English, history, math, or even attending church.

I was fascinated recently when BYU golf coach Bruce Brockbank told me of calls from parents about his golf camps. One parent complained that her son does *not* shag golf balls. Coach Brockbank told her that kids at his camp *do* shag balls. Another parent called to complain that her son didn’t walk the golf course;

he rode the course in a golf cart. Funny, I thought golf pros walked the course.

At the 1996 BYU Annual University Conference, President Bateman quoted President Faust:

“Brigham Young University is a continuing experiment in whether a university whose board of trustees comprises prophets, seers, and revelators can remain a first-class university and not become secularized.”

In response to this, President Bateman’s thoughts were:

“Of course the test will be successful! The sacred and the secular have coexisted on this campus for more than 120 years. The merging of the two parts will not only continue but will improve.”

President Bateman then cautioned:

The divine mission of BYU is always at risk. The experiment will succeed only as long as the vast majority of the BYU community believes in and is committed to the university’s divine mission. [Merrill J. Bateman, “The Mission of Brigham Young University,” in *Addresses Delivered at the 1996 Annual University Conference*, Brigham Young University, August 26–27, 1996, 10]

I will not focus my remarks on academics at the university. My focus will be athletics at BYU. I echo President Bateman’s comment that the divine mission of BYU is always at risk, and I add that this is especially so in athletics.

Why do I say this? Let me paraphrase President Bateman’s words: Athletic programs will succeed as long as coaches, a majority of team members, and supporters are committed to the dual nature of BYU’s mission. Coaches must not be so single-minded that they forget the sacred and spiritual nature of their endeavors. In recent years there have been some

athletes who *have not* been committed to the dual nature of BYU's mission.

Sometimes coaches are convinced that one or two athletes are indispensable to their team's success. Can we be justified in overlooking flagrant violations of BYU standards in order to protect such athletes? If so, we make a mockery of the values that underpin the university.

Perhaps this can be put in perspective by an event that took place in 1954. BYU's basketball team was 3-11 in the early season and going nowhere. Our most outstanding player was dismissed from school. When this athlete left the team, attitudes changed, discipline was restored, and another player, Herschel "Bones" Pederson, replaced him. The season was turned around: the team finished second in the conference with a 10-4 record. How could this be? Interestingly, "Bones" was one of those, rare for his day, returned missionaries.

It is clear to me that it is appropriate at times to dismiss athletes who will not abide BYU's standards, notwithstanding the condemnation of the press. Upholding the Honor Code will not result in unsuccessful seasons. I remember when Coach Clarence Robison dismissed an All-American from our track team. This athlete's removal from school happened because a coach was committed to BYU standards. Coach Robison asked the young man to leave because his behavior clearly demonstrated he would not change.

President Hinckley wrote:

The problem with most of us is that we are afraid to stand up for what we believe, to be witnesses for what is true and right. We want to do the right thing, but we are troubled by fears. [Gordon B. Hinckley, *Standing for Something* [New York: Times Books, 2000], 168]

For coaches, this fear is the fear of losing.

President Faust has written that too many people expend precious energy protesting rules. Some feel that since they did not make

the rules they should not be restricted by them. Protesters often express the feeling that they need to be "free of all . . . confining standards . . . , unrestrained by government or law." Although President Faust was not specifically addressing the conduct set by the Honor Code at BYU, an appropriate parallel can be seen here. He expressed the belief that "young men can learn to express themselves better through excellence in the classroom or on the playing field" than in testing the rules to see what they can get away with. "For each of us, a transcendent blessing is available when we make the right moral choices." (From James E. Faust, "The Need for Balance in Our Lives," *Ensign*, March 2000, 2.)

Because there are so many distractions pulling at students, it becomes increasingly important that we have athletes who are committed to the dual aims of education at BYU. It is too easy for a pocket of noncommitted athletes, along with those on the fringes of the university, to violate the Honor Code. And eventually the facts become public knowledge.

In January of 1980, at a banquet given for the football team, President Dallin H. Oaks referred to football as the bellwether sport for BYU athletics. Football along with other sports provides important public relations programs that have the potential to bring positive publicity to the university.

President Hinckley, speaking to the priesthood session of general conference last fall, said that BYU "athletic programs have . . . brought honor to the university and the Church" (Gordon B. Hinckley, "Why We Do Some of the Things We Do," *Ensign*, November 1999, 53).

As I've watched our teams perform, I've been impressed with the excellent level of play and generally impressed with the conduct of our athletes. However, in recent years I have been increasingly distressed by the inappropriate behavior of fans.

This season I attended a BYU basketball game and was very disappointed to hear our fans in the student section yelling “That sucks!” when they disagreed with the call of an official. The officiating didn’t upset me, but I was disappointed by the jeers of our students.

I remember playing at BYU when then President Ernest L. Wilkinson took the mike and asked fans not to boo officials. This seems almost laughable today. Who in his right mind would challenge a crowd’s behavior? Over the years the behavior of BYU fans has deteriorated and now mimics the behavior seen in arenas around the country—although it is a bit less obscene.

Sportswriter and columnist Lee Benson wrote:

Say what you want collectively about Mormons, but—and I think I speak here for the vast majority—we tend to reserve our anger for basketball.

We do not shine playing basketball, in church leagues especially, and even watching it we are capable of a fairly decent Latrell Sprewell imitation. [Lee Benson, “Bush at BJU? LDS Only Get Mad in Hoops,” *Deseret News*, 5 March 2000, B1]

Everyone is concerned about the behavior of athletes. Sportswriters rarely write about fan behavior, although they did write about a BYU fan who tackled the Ute cheerleader in last fall’s football game. We should not only ask our coaches and athletes “What manner of men ought ye to be?” (3 Nephi 27:27); we should ask the same of our fans, both the students and the general public.

Athletic administrators on other campuses are also concerned with the increase in unruly crowd behavior. For example, Vern Keerbs, a superintendent in Corning, Iowa, said he was “tired of mean-spirited cheers and parents who yell, berate and challenge referees Dennis Rodman-style.” The school board instituted a two-strikes-you’re-out policy. Offenders would be barred from further attendance at school

functions. “Every year [Vern Keerbs] has watched the crowds get a little ruder and heard more curses and negative remarks. [He] puts much of the blame on professional and college athletics. People see poor sportsmanship on television and bring it home.” (From Rainbow Rowell of the *Omaha World-Herald*, “Sportsmanship Counts in Corning, Iowa,” reprinted in *NCAA News* 34, no. 16 [21 April 1997]: 4.)

Do BYU fans lose something as a result of poor sportsmanship? Yes! As we embrace the behavior of the secular world, we lose our distinctiveness regarding the sacred. More important, we individually lose the companionship of the Holy Spirit. We would do well to follow the counsel given by Steve Young at the recent women’s conference:

If you aren’t reminded you’re a Latter-day Saint by the secular world at least three times a day, you should be worried. My suggestion is to embrace our peculiarity. I think we should relish being different. [Steve Young, quoted in Jeffrey P. Haney, “Embrace Our Peculiarity,” *Deseret News*, 28 April 2000, B1]

I believe this peculiarity should be evidenced in the sportsmanship of coaches, athletes, and fans.

I would like to illustrate this association with the Holy Spirit by using the example of Boyd Jarman, a former BYU basketball player who is now an LDS patriarch. He recently described his experience as a fan. He told me he went to basketball games, yelled at the officials, and got mad at them, the coach, and players. He then talked about trying to give a patriarchal blessing. There was no inspiration, because the Spirit would not come to a man who had been temporarily angry. He realized that because of the current atmosphere he had to either stop going to basketball games, change his attitude and behavior, or stop giving patriarchal blessings. He stopped going to the games. I don’t believe it is necessary to stop

attending games, but we must control our appetites and passions.

To demonstrate that athletic programs are at risk as we try to mesh the sacred and secular, let me review history. Years ago there were great All-Church Tournaments. They are no more. What happened? I was athletic director of Zone 22, which included much of Utah County. Every ward had a team. Recruiting by ward coaches became commonplace. Stake champions came to the zone tournament, and the tournament winners went to Salt Lake City for the big—and I mean big—All-Church Tournament. The last year the tournament was held we played the zone championship game in the Pleasant Grove High School gym. Prior to the tournament we emphasized sportsmanship and noted profanity would not be tolerated. During the championship game one of the players ripped off a loud oath, and it wasn't the oath of allegiance to the flag. I immediately forfeited the game to the other team.

The nonoffending team played in the televised championship game in the All-Church Tournament. I'm told the behavior was so inappropriate that if the game hadn't been on TV, it would have been stopped. That was the end of All-Church Tournaments. Over time it became apparent that these athletic programs provided physical activities but did little to foster Christlike behavior.

Although the Church's support of programs such as the All-Church Tournament changes, the basic tenets and doctrines of the Church are unchanging. President Gordon B. Hinckley noted that the Church's primary concern is with the worship of Jesus Christ and testifying of His reality. He went on to say that the Church does many things that on the surface do not appear to be associated with this overriding pattern. However, he said, some of these business interests directly serve the needs of the Church. (See Hinckley, "Why We Do," 52–53.) Some of the enterprises and programs

of the Church clearly change as the meshing of the sacred and secular are evaluated.

Several changes come to my mind. The Church gave away the great hospitals it owned in many cities in Utah. The recent sale of ZCMI is further evidence of ongoing changes. BYU joined the national trend of downsizing men's athletic programs by dropping wrestling and men's gymnastics. All of this demonstrates that enterprises and programs can be viewed as experiments. They are subject to change as sacred and secular are in contact.

President Hinckley said:

We shall continue to support BYU. . . . We shall keep these . . . flagships testifying to the great and earnest commitment of this Church to education, both ecclesiastical and secular, and while doing so prove to the world that excellent secular learning can be gained in an environment of religious faith. [Hinckley, "Why We Do," 53]

If we are to continue to merit the support of the board of trustees, it is our responsibility to hire coaches, field teams, and admit fans who are worthy of the title "flagship." There cannot be a great chasm between theory, practice, and reality.

It is implicit that administrative officials and admission officers, as well as coaches, athletes, students, and all supporters, not lose sight of the divine mission of BYU. No conference championship, no individual or team NCAA title, no bowl game is worth forfeiting the integrity, the goals, and the ideals of this institution. This would indeed be a hollow victory.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks wrote:

Jesus taught his disciples that their ways should be different from the ways of the world. "Ye are the salt of the earth," he told them. "Ye are the light of the world." (Matt. 5:13–14.) Again and again he taught that his followers should be different. [The Lord's Way (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 8–9]

But are we different? Are we the salt of the earth or just salty!

At this point I'd like to address the appropriate use of language. Profane language, language with sexual innuendoes, and demeaning language should not characterize those who represent BYU. The Savior told His disciples:

Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man. . . .

But those things which proceed out of the mouth come . . . from the heart; and they defile the man. [Matthew 15:11, 18]

I assume part of my duties at BYU include directing men in the paths of righteousness. I assume it is my responsibility to counsel individually with the athlete who profanes. I have told my team that profanity and vulgarity is totally unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

Elder Robert S. Wood of the Seventy noted in October general conference:

Our words and external expressions are not neutral, for they reflect both who we are and shape who we are becoming. . . .

What we say and how we present ourselves not only betray our inner person but also mold that person, those around us, and finally our whole society. Every day each of us is . . . called . . . to sanctify ourselves and edify others. [Robert S. Wood, "The Tongue of Angels," *Ensign*, November 1999, 83–84]

In his general epistle, James detailed the control of language and conversation. Improperly employed, the tongue "defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature" (James 3:6). How, he asks, can blessings and curses proceed out of the same mouth? (See James 3:10.)

Paul in his letter to the Corinthian Saints wrote, "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners" (1 Corinthians 15:33).

What would we think if one of our athletic teams were known as the trash-talking champion in the conference? I believe most of us would be disappointed; some might be appalled.

Regrettably far too many high school players are in programs where profanity is a major way of communicating. When these young men come to BYU, they should find an atmosphere devoid of profane language.

If there is a scripture that should serve as a guideline for our behavior at BYU, it is the scripture "What manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am." "What we say and how we act will create an atmosphere welcoming or hostile to the Holy Ghost" (Wood, "The Tongue of Angels," 83). We must be spiritual, and at the same time we must not be lily-livered blobs of human flesh. We must become hardened from the physical rigors of a disciplined program that combines the secular and the spiritual. This gives to our athletes the strength of the arm of flesh combined with the ennobling power of spiritual strength and courage. We are too inclined to rely on the arm of flesh and act like the profane world. The fact is, we must work as hard as other men to develop physical strength. Indeed, we would do well to develop and look like the idealized drawings of Arnold Friberg and Tom Lovell.

Our athletes cannot be like the athlete who years ago told me he had served a mission and therefore didn't have to work as hard as we were working. The Lord would bless him. I need not tell you about his success or lack thereof. The last time I saw him he was kicking rocks down the road.

We must follow Brigham Young's example. He prayed, asking for the Lord to bless his endeavors, and then worked as if success was dependent on his own efforts.

I have come to envision an athletic program like unto Helaman's stripling warriors: an army of young men and women of all faiths characterized by "truth and soberness" who

not only want to be great athletes but who are committed to keeping God's commandments (Alma 53:21). Helaman called them his sons, and they called him Father (see Alma 56:46). Yes, I envision coaches who would be to athletes like a second father. Am I caught up in a great fantasy? I don't think so.

Fikre Wondafrash is the type of nonmember I'm talking about. He was born in Ethiopia, a Greek Orthodox, and a member of the same tribe as Emperor Haile Selassie, descendant of Queen Bathsheba and King David. Fikre's mother moved to Belgrade, Yugoslavia, where she worked as an embassy cook. I learned of his athletic ability and contacted him. After great difficulties, he left Yugoslavia and with his fascinating story arrived at BYU. Time does not permit a greater account about this humble servant of God, but our youth would do well to emulate this young man who traces his origins to King David.

Again I ask the question "Does God care about BYU winning and losing?" The short answer is: I don't know that the Lord cares about us winning or losing, but He does care about the manner in which we conduct ourselves while winning or losing. Unequivocally He cares how athletes on the field and fans in the stands treat and influence each other. Although this fact is very important, I also believe there is another fundamental issue involved in "Does God care?"

The importance of the question can be seen if we ask: Does the Lord care about His church? Does the Lord care about BYU? Does the Lord care if BYU students live their Honor Code commitments? Does the Lord care if BYU alumni live and maintain the standards fostered at BYU? It seems to me that the answer is obvious.

Lest we be puffed up in our pride, I say the Lord is not indifferent to the efforts of other teams. In fact, among our fiercest competitors are members and nonmembers like Fikre. Remember the Lord has said that even the hair

of our head is numbered and we do not lose a hair from our head nor does a sparrow fall from the sky without His knowledge (see Luke 12:6-7). Having said that, it cannot be overemphasized that God cares about all His children. He will and does bless athletes on both sides of the playing fields and courts.

At BYU we claim the fullness of the gospel. In claiming the fullness of the gospel, we claim a greater understanding of His laws. If we claim greater understanding, then we are held to a higher standard of conduct and behavior.

Further, just because some high government official claims there is no ruling legal authority, vulgar or boorish behavior is not justified. And, quite to the contrary, there *is* a higher ruling authority. It is the moral code found in the Ten Commandments and in the teachings of the prophets.

When I first enrolled at BYU in 1952, if a prospective student had the body temperature of a hibernating lizard, he was admitted. As I recall, only two members of the basketball team I played with for four years had served missions. Since that time more and more student athletes are serving missions. We have 55 athletes on our track team. Forty-four are returned missionaries, and seven are awaiting mission calls. Three are nonmembers. Isn't it reasonable to expect exemplary behavior from these athletes? I happen to think so. These men have spent two years in the world preaching of Jesus Christ. It is not unreasonable to expect them to be a positive influence on their teammates. It is not unreasonable to expect them to exert a leadership that lifts the behavior of all who are on the team. I know they can, and as coaches we ought to expect that they will assume this role.

It is said that where much is given, much is expected. There is no question in my mind that the Lord expects BYU athletes to live up to the principles of the Honor Code that they have signed. And He expects the coaches to exemplify these standards.

President Gordon B. Hinckley said:

There is great loneliness in leadership. This is so because we have to live with ourselves even if it means abandoning other relationships. . . . We have to stand for the values and beliefs that we have embraced, adopted, and woven into our characters.

*It was ever thus. The price of leadership is loneliness. The price of adherence to conscience is loneliness. The price of adherence to principle is loneliness. [Hinckley, *Standing for Something*, 168–69]*

A coach at BYU is placed in a unique position. Although he is hired to coach, he is also required to support the Honor Code. In the latter role he becomes a spiritual watchman, or the watchman on the tower. The watchmen referred to in the scriptures watch over the Church.

Coaches have been given a more definitive role. They are to watch over the small group of athletes they have recruited. They are to encourage and insist on appropriate behavior.

When things are not right, coaches have a duty to correct the problem. It matters not what the athlete's religious preference is. We don't teach doctrine to our teams, but we have

a responsibility to hold all team members to the standard of behavior expected at BYU. If we do this, have we infringed on the teaching they received in their homes? Absolutely not! The parents of all BYU athletes expect that their children will not fall among thieves and cutthroats but will find a safe harbor at BYU.

President Spencer W. Kimball said:

BYU exists to build character and faith. This institution [BYU] has no justification for its existence unless it builds character, creates and develops faith, and makes men and women of strength and courage, fortitude, and service. . . . This institution has been established by a prophet of God for a very specific purpose: to combine spiritual and moral values and secular education. [TSWK, 395]

It is my view that athletics can and must foster the building of character, create and develop faith, and build men and women imbued with spiritual strength and courage. This is the role athletics at BYU can and does play. That the behavior of BYU fans, coaches, and athletes *can* become more Christlike is my testimony, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.