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Athletic Heroic Acts and Living on the Moral Edge

William J. Morgan

Athletic heroism is a kind of decisive, no-holds barred action that contrasts markedly with the cautious, safe, and secure lives contemporary human beings seem—by design—to live. Our penchant to play it safe and to make sure that we satisfy our egoistic needs and interests while eschewing involvement in any larger venture that transcends those needs and interests explains why many social critics consider our age to be a decidedly unheroic one, lacking in passion and a higher sense of purpose. On the other hand, our great admiration for heroes both on and off the field suggests we are not as far gone as such critics suggest, as we are uplifted, if not awestruck, by the remarkable things heroes do. But of late, we are just as often morally troubled by heroes who fail us. This chapter considers the interplay between our ambivalence about athletic heroes and their choices to live on the moral edge.

What Is Heroic Action?

In trying to assess what counts as heroic action, I recount a paradigmatic event that received much press coverage in January 2007, the heroic status of which is beyond dispute. The main features of that event help understand how it received that status. In a Manhattan subway, Cameron Hollopeter, a young film student, suffered a convulsive fit and fell backwards off a subway platform to the tracks below. Wesley Autrey, a middle-aged construction worker, observed the event from further back on the platform. Without the slightest hesitation he jumped to the tracks and just as the lights of a southbound train appeared, proceeded to push Hollopeter down into a one-foot trough between the rails by lying on top of him. The train conductor applied the brakes immediately but was unable to stop the train before five of its cars screeched over the top of the two men, missing them by inches. Hearing terrified cries from the onlookers above, Autrey yelled that they were both okay and asked

for someone to tell his two young daughters—left behind on the subway platform—that their father was fine. The onlookers clapped spontaneously and thunderously while shouting to one another about the remarkable event just witnessed.

Indisputably, Autrey's actions rise to the level of the heroic. While surely paradigmatic, his actions fall into a special class of heroic acts as they called on him to risk his life. By contrast, athletic instances of heroism seldom (with the exception of some "extreme" sports) rise to this level, not requiring such extreme altruism or risk. As a paradigmatic example of heroic action, there are several overlapping features in Autrey's acts that illumine what kinds of action, athletic and otherwise, qualify as genuinely heroic ones.

The first thing to note is the decisiveness of Autrey's actions—he showed no trace of hesitancy or ambivalence. They were decisive because he was able to size up the situation and settle on a course of action in an instant. The short time he had to act influenced the decisiveness of his response, but the timeliness of his response was also crucial to its heroic quality. Another important sense in which Autrey's actions proved decisive is that they were unmistakably effective, determining whether someone lived rather than died. That Autrey's actions made this big difference further showcases their impressive decisiveness, and thus their heroic quality. By contrast, actions which we mortals take (whether voting for a political candidate, working for the betterment of others, or just trying to be a better person) seem to rarely make a difference in the lives of others or even our own.

The second notable feature of Autrey's actions is that despite their decisiveness and consequential effects, he was responding to events not entirely within his control. What he did was not in itself "out of control" in the sense used to describe someone who acts impulsively or in an addictive manner (i.e., in nonintentional or nonpurposive ways). His actions were self-determined and purposive, but they were also responses to the situation he encountered. As a hero he was able to do these remarkable, self-directed things only because the stimulus came from a force outside of himself (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011).

What makes these actions heroic, then, is not that they were at Autrey's exclusive beck and call, but that he was neither controlled nor otherwise rendered powerless by these outside forces—as addicts and compulsive eaters typically are. Rather, he was able to respond and meet them head on. For all the resoluteness and effectiveness of his actions, they were dictated by factors over which he had no control. Thus, no one can simply decide (in the sense of aim and plan) to be a hero. Rather, events must conspire to create just the

right conditions to make heroic action possible, and only if one is up, as Autrey was, to the challenge presented.

Yet a third important feature of Autrey's actions is the practical intelligence informing them. The thoughtfulness of heroic acts like this one—the amount of thinking that goes into them and makes them so effective—is often forgotten because they are not deliberate acts. It is only if we mistakenly run together deliberative reflection with thinking as such, however, that we will be misled into characterizing heroic acts as those that “have left the domain of thought altogether” (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, p. 9). That heroic acts are not, and could not be the product of deliberation is a given. There is no time to deliberate first and then to act when one is pressed to respond in a decisive and consequential way to an ongoing and dynamic situation. In such tension-packed moments, there is not only no time but no need to decide first what to do. That is because heroes like Autrey possess a heightened awareness of their surroundings, which, importantly, includes already knowing the right thing to do to resolve the situation. Because heroes are not vexed or otherwise unsure about what needs to be done, deliberation is not needed. They differ only in degree from other thoughtful persons, who, though they may not be capable of acting heroically, are similarly aware, in a lesser sense, of their surroundings and respond accordingly: the passerby who suddenly sees an elderly couple struggling to lift heavy luggage up stairs and, without pausing, lends assistance (Watson, 2004).

In this and Autrey's case, deliberation is superfluous because both immediately recognized what the situation demanded in the way of an appropriate response. But for all that, they did not just respond blindly, rashly, or in a foolhardy way that made a bad situation worse, but rather in a thoughtful way that made the situation better. This is practical intelligence at work, even if it does not involve “deciding” what needs to be done. It also does not involve the calculative weighing of benefits and costs that many automatically engage in when we are mulling over whether to undertake some venture. But to insist that “deciding” and instrumental reasoning exhaust what passes for practical intelligence, for being thoughtful, is a conceit we can do without, because if we accept this conceit then even fewer of us will be able to act heroically, let alone recognize heroes in our midst.

The fourth and last feature of Autrey's actions relevant to the heroic is that they are highly prized by all concerned—both by those directly affected and those learning of them after the fact. This explains why media characterizations of such actions are so important to their reception as heroic. Autrey's actions were considered worthy of acclaim because they touched on what we believe is valuable and meaningful in living. In contrast, the no less decisive,

effective, and intelligent actions a gang member might take to avenge a comrade's death in a street fight are seen as anything but heroic. Unlike the hero, the gang member's actions are not considered worthy of our acclaim because they speak to what is base rather than noble in the human spirit.

While other features of Autrey's actions could also be analyzed, the four features discussed here are the most salient and have special relevance for considering heroic actions in the athletic domain.

Athletic Heroic Action

This section analyzes heroic actions in sport, and considers why, notwithstanding their positive moral valence, we may find them morally tenuous if not morally suspect. The following example of a paradigmatic case of athletic heroic action sets the stage.

This example comes from the late writer David Foster Wallace (2006), who described a forehand winner hit by Swiss tennis player, Roger Federer, against his American opponent, Andre Agassi, in the fourth set of the 2005 U.S. Open finals. Writing in *The New York Times Magazine*, Wallace dubbed the intricately executed actions captured in his description as a "Federer Moment." Wallace began his account as Agassi had hit a scorching forehand deep to Federer's backhand and caught the Swiss player moving wrongly to the center line. Wallace continued:

Federer . . . somehow instantly reverses thrust and sort of skip[s] backward three or four steps, impossibly fast, to hit a forehand out of his backhand corner, all his weight moving backward, and the forehand is a topspin screamer down the line past Agassi at net . . . and lands exactly in the deuce corner of Agassi's side a winner. (2006, pp. 1-2)

Wallace described spectators erupting into rapturous applause at Federer's recovery and amazing forehand winner. Recounting and replying to color commentator John McEnroe's incredulous question—"How do you hit a winner from that position?"—Wallace noted that "given Agassi's position and world-class quickness, Federer had to send the ball down a two-inch pipe of space in order to pass him, with no setup time and none of his weight behind the shot. It was impossible. It was like something out of 'The Matrix'" (p. 2).

All four of the features identified earlier as necessary conditions of heroic action are present in Wallace's description of Federer's actions. What is missing in his description is the life and death scenario played out in the Autrey example, which showcased it as one important species of heroic action. But Wallace's account of Federer's athletic prowess offered the player's actions as an equally important but significantly different species of heroism. They both

fall under the genus of heroic action, with each one providing a vivid picture of larger-than-life humans pulling off larger-than-life feats that the rest of us can only marvel at (but scarcely replicate except in our imaginations). That a noted writer like Wallace portrayed Federer's tennis in such heroic terms and that he was published in *The New York Times* augments the plausibility of comparing Federer's actions to Autrey's, a connection that might otherwise appear strained.

Featuring on-the-court, rather than off-the-court, exploits of an athlete like Federer draws attention to sport as an arena for the expression of human nobility—a characteristic of heroic actions. Doing so, however, significantly brackets from consideration some of the most noteworthy sports heroes whose heroism has as much to do with off-the-playing-field actions as those on the field. Arthur Ashe and Roberto Clemente come to mind because of their noteworthy accomplishments in sports and in larger life. Ashe's heroism was evident in his work with inner city youth and on behalf of AIDS (that eventually claimed his life) victims. Clemente's heroism appeared in humanitarian work on behalf of his native Puerto Rico, which led to his death in a plane crash while delivering supplies to his homeland. By taking this internal vantage point on athletic heroism, no slight is intended against athletes like Ashe and Clemente, whose heroic acts deserve their own special treatment. Rather, the focus here is on heroic acts occurring within athletic competition.

The case for Federer's athletic heroism is fairly straightforward, as his on-court actions match those of Autrey in important respects. They are equally decisive, unbidden in certain important ways, practically intelligent, and highly esteemed by the sporting public. Moreover, given the prominence of sports in modern life, his actions are esteemed by a large segment of the general public as well, and importantly, by sports media eager to hype and normalize uplifting athletic stories as a counter to those about the dark side of sports.

To say that Federer's actions were decisive seems obvious, both with regard to their timeliness and their effectiveness. Part of the reason why is the way that tennis and all sports are internally constructed. Most important in this respect are the rules of sports, allowing them to function as relatively autonomous affairs governed by clear and ideal (fair) standards with respect to their goals and to standards of excellence appropriate to them. This is why sports are not plagued by what Lasch (1979, p. 181) referred to as "the normal confusions of everyday life" that make it difficult to determine what it is we are attempting to accomplish in our lives (be content, healthy, happy, well-off financially) and whether we have or have not accomplished what we set out to do (clear conditions of what counts as success or failure).

The artificial boundaries such rules put in play also establish the agonistic struggle that is a signature feature of sports. The rule-based actions and interactions occurring in a sport like tennis, to which its participants voluntarily subscribe, are all contrived. This is why the intense competitive interchange between Agassi and Federer that prompted the latter's heroism was quite intentional, while in the subway example, the heroism was unwittingly provoked by the involuntary actions of the film student. The timeliness and difference-making character of Federer's performance were, importantly, artifacts of the rule-structured environment in which he and Agassi operated, one in which both could unambiguously see the point of each other's responses and counter-responses and act in a clearheaded and robust manner. In sports, as opposed to everyday life, generating heroic moments of this agonistic kind is an important aspect of the game, and what goes on within the protected venues occurs because of the agency of the participants rather than happenstance.

Because sports heroism is ginned up partly by the rule-governed structure doesn't mean that athletes enjoy complete control over their destiny (heroic or not). That is because while sports are contrived social settings, they are not scripted ones. The same rules that frame sports and give them a clear and distinct purpose as well as a protected space for athletes to perform, also open up a wide range of possible actions, interactions, and countless permutations that defy control, despite the efforts of coaches and others. Because sports are not scripted affairs, much that occurs depends on unplanned and unforeseen contingencies—no athlete, even a Federer, can manufacture a heroic moment. No matter how well prepared, he must contend with events on the court over which he has limited control, forcing him to make choices, initiate actions, and react to the dynamic, competitive situation he has willingly embraced. Borgmann (1992) noted:

there is no way of predicting or controlling what will happen. No one can produce or guarantee the flow of a game. It unfolds and reveals itself in the playing. It inspires grace and despair, it provokes heroics and failure. . . . It is always greater than the individuals it unites.(p. 135)

Even within the carefully calibrated world of sports, therefore, genuine heroism is a rare occurrence, only slightly less rare than in everyday life.

The practical intelligence of Federer's heroic movements on court is another notable aspect of his performance. It is not the quality of his decisions that matters, for sports provide few opportunities for "deciding" to do anything, instead placing a premium on rapid-fire responding in the moment. Rather, the qualitative grasp he has on relevant actions occurring is key. As Lasch (1979, p. 181) bluntly wrote, "Like sex, drugs, and drink, [sports] oblit-

erate awareness of everyday reality, but they do this not by dimming awareness but by raising it to a new intensity of concentration."

John McPhee noticed the same quality when chronicling the remarkable basketball court sense of former NBA player (and former Senator) Bill Bradley. "During a game," McPhee wrote, "Bradley's eyes are always a glaze of panoptic attention, for a basketball player needs to look at everything, focusing on nothing, until the last moment of commitment" (as quoted in Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, p. 10). It was this same "panoptic attention" and focus that accounted for Federer's court sense.

As in the Autrey example, Bradley's and Federer's actions, although products of neither deliberation nor the weighing of alternative courses of action (and of costs and benefits), were neither blind nor foolhardy but intelligently on point. The practical intelligence intrinsic to athletic heroism teaches us the limitations of "deciding" and "instrumental weighing," as exemplified by the tragic example of major league second baseman Chuck Knoblauch. One of baseball's best infield players, Knoblauch in 1999 suddenly and inexplicably was unable to accurately make the short throw from second to first. One of his errant throws hit a fan in the stands (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, pp. 79-80). The harder he tried to regain accuracy by mentally rehearsing his throwing motion and tinkering with mechanics, the worse his accuracy became. What Knoblauch had lost in field sense and practical mastery of the game—he could no longer execute even a simple throw—could not be compensated for by reverting to a more deliberative, calculative mode of thinking and acting. His very deliberate and explicit efforts were the wrong remedy, blocking rather than enabling the practical intelligence stored away in his "panoptic" feel for the game that until 1999 served him well.

The fourth and final feature necessary to consider an action heroic—to be judged by others to be valuable—is evident in Wallace's enthusiastic treatment of Federer's besting of Agassi. Our local sports pages are full of praise for Federer-like athletic exploits. Adulation is freely and enthusiastically given by media (and many sectors of society) to high-performing athletes. They are often recipients of lavish praise about their exploits because of the important expressive function sports play in society. This can be traced in part to sports' grip on our culture and to athletes' unparalleled capacity to gather surprisingly large numbers of fans and followers.

Sports' impressive "gathering" capacity is matched by their equally impressive "focusing" capacity. Sports have the capacity to "focus" crowds' attention on the heroic qualities of athleticism in a way that can infuse our lives with larger importance and cultural meaning (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011). Heidegger called any social artifact or practice that performed this gathering and focusing

function a work of art, which he claimed “gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves” (1971, p. 43). In ancient Greece, he opined, it was the Greek temple housing their divinities that played a key role in most of ancient Greek life. The temple-dwelling divinities played this gathering/focusing/expressive role and helped citizens understand themselves and what they regarded as meaningful about their lives.

In modern times, it has been the arts in general (literature, music, fine art) and theater in particular that typically performed this function. But today, as Barthes (2007, p. 57) noted, sports and sports media have largely taken over this expressive function: “At certain periods, in certain societies, the theater has had a major social function: it collected the entire city within a shared experience: the knowledge of its own passions. Today it is sport that in its way performs this function. Except the city has . . . [become] a country.”

Fallen Athletes and the Media

If sports and the sports media do play this important expressive role in our culture—revealing those features of our lives that are heroic and deserving of our highest esteem—then such acts of athletic heroism must necessarily operate close to the edge of what we regard as morally and aesthetically praiseworthy. So close is this at times that they lose their heroic stature and are rebuked by the media in eager exploitation. Sports—through their “gathering” and “focusing” capacity—play such a key expressive role in culture that we place disproportionate value on their importance, leaving their moral and aesthetic status always open to challenge.

Because there is no shortage of media attention given to sports, what they express about us as a people, and, specifically, what they say about our sense of the heroic, sports are always a site of contestation. Consequently, what has constituted heroic athletic action in one context or time is not guaranteed to pass muster in another, as the history of sports reveals. In some cases, certain instances of heroism have been dismissed as anachronistic and quietly removed from the category, while in others, they have been openly repudiated and forcefully banished from the heroic.

To illustrate this point in a way that addresses our moral doubts about certain forms of athletic “heroism,” two elements of athletic success, and therefore, athletic heroism, loom large. The first, a contentious issue in the history of modern sports from the beginning, concerns how strenuously one should strive for athletic glory. At the turn of the twentieth century, when the amateur conception of sport still dominated, the answer to this question was

unequivocally "not too strenuously." The idea that sports was not a serious enough human affair to justify supreme effort extended both to training and competition. To be an athletic hero required demonstrating suitable restraint in one's actions—an athlete should try to win but should do so in a certain insouciant way that showed sports were not the "end all, be all." This explains, for example, why rather than dispensing praise, the British press excoriated the surprisingly dominant American track and field athletes in the 1906 Olympic Games for being "better athletes than sportsmen" (Dyreson, 1998, p. 138). The Americans tried too hard to win.

During the next decade, this quaint view was directly challenged by a burgeoning professional conception of sports in which achieving athletic success/heroism required one's total effort. This clash between the amateur and professional conceptions of the athletic hero was depicted in the film, *Chariots of Fire*, released in 1981, about the 1924 Olympics. One of the main characters, the sprinter Harold Abrahams, is severely reprimanded by his Cambridge dons (and many fellow athletes) for hiring a professional coach. He is criticized for following the coach's "expert" advice to improve his chances for winning by hurling himself headfirst at the finish line tape rather than, as convention demanded, breasting it in an upright position. Abrahams replied, "You know gentlemen, you yearn for victory just as I do. But achieved with the effortlessness of the gods. Yours are the archaic values of the prep school playground I believe in the relentless pursuit of athletic excellence" (Weatherby, 1981, pp. 91-92). For Abrahams and his like-minded professional compatriots, the British media's outrage at the success of winning-focused American athletes in the 1906 Games was viewed as sour grapes. In their contrary view, parroted by the press following professional sports, the better sportsmen could only be the better, winning, athletes.

Abrahams's relentless pursuit of excellence quickly became the norm for judging the heroic quality of athletic actions. But echoes of this earlier tension could be observed in the decades immediately following over such issues as specialization versus all-around athletic competence, and on technological advances in equipment. These historically shifting and heated debates in the public and media spheres reflected the differing ways people construed athletic heroism, and, therefore, whether certain athletic actions called for our esteem, our indifference (actions now viewed as prosaic rather than heroic), or our contempt.

Today athletic specialization is no longer considered a barrier to athletic heroism but a necessary prerequisite, as achieving extraordinary results can scarcely be accomplished any other way, notwithstanding baseball purists who disdain specialization by designated hitters. Technological improvements in

athletic equipment have become uncontroversial as well except in select cases like recently outlawed "slime" suits in swimming. But the same cannot be said for the undeniably important second prerequisite for athletic success and heroism: the matter of talent.

To be an athletic hero requires executing extraordinary athletic feats beyond the reach of most people. Athletic heroes may all be genetic outliers: they are, of course, much more than that, but the "much more" depends on their having first won the genetic lottery. In the past, this has been an uncontroversial part of athletic achievement because it was thought to be unalterable. Good genes were considered something a person was born with (or without), rather than something that could be manipulated and improved upon. But this picture began to change when athletes' surgical procedures began to look less like repair jobs and more like major, performance-enhancing, reconstruction jobs. A notable example is major league pitcher, Tommy John, who became a much better pitcher after undergoing extensive surgery on his arm than he had been before. The picture changed even more dramatically when performance-enhancing drugs became common in the 1960s. Today, advances in genetic engineering raise the specter that manufacturing athletic talent may overtake "practice makes perfect."

The prospect of the surgical, chemical, and genetic boosting of natural talent raises deep and troubling questions about athletic agency that are central to the changing conceptions of athletic heroism and of athletic success. These questions concern whether we think such modes of performance enhancement diminish players' status as agents *qua* athletes. Should such improvements in performance be credited not to the athletes but to the surgeons, pharmacists, and genetic engineers that are responsible for it? Do we fear that athletes will be turned into super agents responsible for everything taking place, such that, as Sandel provocatively put it, "Today when a basketball player misses a rebound, his coach can blame him for being out of position. Tomorrow, the coach may blame him for being too short" (2007, p. 87).

On the first interpretation, enhanced athletes have no real agency to speak of and thus cannot be counted as genuine heroes. On the second, athletes have too much agency to be considered heroes, because what we now regard as extraordinary achievement in sports (only the talented few are capable of such achievement) will become, rather than heroic, quite ordinary and prosaic. Talent will no longer be a limiting factor, and the athletic test as presently structured will not be much of a test for souped-up athletes.

Conclusion

Where does this latter set of complications lead? How the media handle them will largely determine whether high-performing athletes will continue to be accorded hero status. In the case of a Federer, his standing as a hero looks secure. But in the cases of baseball sluggers like McGwire and Sosa, the media have already delivered their verdict—these players no longer belong on our cultural pedestals. Similar verdicts have come to giants such as Lance Armstrong who have allegedly used chemical advantage to fuel success. Indeed, the media, taking stock of today's "un-leveling" of the playing field, ensure that notable athletic achievement is interrogated to assess whether it was accomplished "cleanly."

Such suspicions may be justified since athletes who take this chemical route can be accused of cheating. Yet for those who do not want their heroes transformed into drug-advantaged competitors, the press seemingly has acted more like executioners than impartial judges. The media often underplay the less compelling story that success or failure in sports is related to who wins or loses the genetic lottery. Focusing on this would make the athletic meritocracy they promote and which grounds their determinations of who warrants public adulation or rebuke look more like an athletic hereditary caste.

The media's role in identifying and making sense of sports heroes is an important focus of this book. How the media make sense of the infractions leading to an athletic hero falling from grace is also important in shaping how we think about sports. These are notably complex questions. Even thinking about the drug issue and how it plays into many sagas of the fallen athletic heroes can be challenging for a sports press better equipped to describe the big play and heroic deeds. In helping us think about the falling of the McGwires and Sosas and Armstrongs, the press will have much to sort out about drugs and what role they play in assessing heroism. If they continue to look the other way, to not explain the intricacies of drug testing and ways in which drug tests can be scammed, and to avoid discussing the routine practice of readying injured athletes with analgesic drugs, our understanding of heroes falling through drugs will not be complete.

Drugs, of course, are only one way that our athletic heroes fall. These diverse stories, seen in the chapters that lie ahead, present different challenges for the press. Ripped from the tabloids, these stories are about our heroes' transgressions. For the press, such stories bring short-term gain and long-term pain as these infractions sully the purity of sport and the attractiveness of its heroes as media product. These tales of sex, guns, and bad behaviors are not

just stories of our heroes going down, they are stories about where our moral lines are drawn. One wonders whether the sports press is up to the task.

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