

While there's nothing wrong with competition, sometimes as humans we can all have a preoccupation with honor, which can lead to pride. And on the one hand a blue ribbon or a trophy is something to celebrate, it can also lead to problems when this becomes the focus of our lives, or we think that it matters above and beyond other things. As I sometimes will say at a school Mass, odds are people might not remember how you played a particular game, and God certainly won't ask you how many trophies you have, but what we will be asked is what kind of character did we have, and how did we leave this world a better place than it was when we came into it. As the sports cliché goes, "it's not about the me it's about the we."

Another sports cliché is "It's now whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game," and for Larry Baltz, who became a professional speaker, trainer and consultant, he heard those words many times growing up. But in spite of those constant positive affirmations, he didn't believe it. The real world taught him the importance of winning. Finishing first at whatever he was doing became a priority, and if that didn't happen, "how I played the game" he says was meaningless. In his mind, second place meant first loser.

He has since learned though that this winner-take-all attitude ultimately leads an individual in any phase of life to frustration and misery. And it was the world of sports - specifically as a fan of competitive wrestling - that opened his eyes to the value of doing his best and taking pride in the results, regardless of the outcome.

His son Kevin loved wrestling when he was growing up. Larry remembered taking him to his first practice when he was only 10 years old. On a warm spring afternoon, they walked into the wrestling room at Father Ryan High School, and he immediately wanted to know what was on the back wall. As they walked closer, he could see that there were 15 or 20 plaques, each bearing an individual's picture. Larry explained to him that everyone on the wall was a Father Ryan wrestler who had won a state championship.

Years later, when Kevin entered high school, it was clear that he was blessed with a lot of athletic ability. Even as a freshman wrestler he showed promise, and he continued to improve each year. As a senior, he was captain of a team that compiled an incredible record, and he went into the state tournament ranked number one.

He won his first match, he won his second match, he won his third and fourth. And now here they were ready to claim their championship, Larry reflected. Unfortunately the next match didn't go well. Larry didn't know if it was the stress of the season, the level of competition, or just plain bad luck, but Kevin fell behind early in the match and he never recovered. As Larry watched the clock wind down in the final period, it was obvious that Kevin wasn't going to win.

His season had ended, his high-school career was over, and they didn't have a state championship. Larry was devastated. He felt horrible, and he knew it was going to hurt for a long time. Larry says he believes that at that moment you could have smacked him

across the head with a two-by-four and he wouldn't have noticed. Larry stood there in shock, unwilling to believe what had just happened and unable to accept it.

He painfully watched Kevin as he slowly took off his headgear, shook his opponent's hand, and stood calmly in the center of the mat as the referee raised his opponent's hand in victory. Then he quietly walked out of the gymnasium.

A few weeks later, Larry received a newsletter in the mail from Holy Rosary Academy, where Kevin had attended grade school as a young boy. The school's principal wrote the following words:

*One of our more recent graduates has been the subject of our daily newspaper's sports section. In two of the articles about Kevin Baltz, his prowess in the sport of wrestling was discussed. While Kevin enjoys an impressive reputation statewide in the sport of his dreams, it is his noble character that is the focus of the newspaper articles.*

*We who knew Kevin as a boy at Holy Rosary are not surprised that he should be honored. We enjoyed that same quiet heroism in him here. The impeccable courtesy now described by sportswriters was a hallmark of Kevin Baltz five years ago. His self-sacrificing manner, his respectful approach to peers, his devotion to friends and his spirit of cooperation were all very evident.*

*We are proud that Kevin's character has left its mark at Father Ryan High School, and in the sport of wrestling in Tennessee. We are grateful he was part of our lives here. May his spirit continue to bless those he will touch in all his life's journeys.*

When Larry read this, he writes that he sat down and cried. For Kevin, they were tears of joy, for wouldn't any parent be proud after hearing comments like those about their child. For Larry though he says they were tears of disappointment not in his son but in himself and where his priorities were.

He had watched every single match Kevin had wrestled in high school, but he hadn't noticed all the outstanding qualities that the sportswriters and his principal recognized. He was focused on the wins, the victories, the championships. And when he didn't get the final win, Larry was hurt and disappointed. He'd failed to recognize though that Kevin was diligently working to achieve victories, but always performing with character regardless of whether he won or lost. In that moment, Larry writes that his 18 year old son became his mentor. He taught him that pursuit of victory is a noble goal, but that winners in life appreciate the pursuit more than the victory itself.

Though he wishes his son won the title and got his plaque on the Father Ryan wrestling room all, he says in reality he got so much more by not winning. And that's because his championship plaque would be forever nailed to that wall, visible only to the eyes that walked into that room. Now, every second of the day, regardless of where Larry is or who is he's with, he carries a much bigger announcement across his chest which he is sure most people see and it says "I'm proud of my son."

Larry writes how he applauds his son's effort and accomplishments, and his fortitude to accept that he had done his best. He taught his dad a valuable lesson about the game of life that has had a profound impact on him, and he notes that he is so grateful for his son's wisdom, for he has now achieved an inner peace by refusing to accept losing as an outcome, rather recognizing that it is only a step in the process of growing.

He closes by writing that in reality all of us face adversities throughout our lives, some that can destroy us physically, emotionally and financially. Our challenge is to stay in the game and enjoy the competition, whatever the outcome. We will experience obstacles, and setbacks and defeat. These are inevitable; but winning is not based on the final score, it is indeed measured by how we play the game.

Kevin never did get his name on the wall of the Fr. Ryan gym, but it's safe to say he aspired for something greater and this isn't the most important thing in his life. So how about for us? If we aspire for the crown of eternal life, a little humility can go a long way in getting us there.

Sometimes in life we can preoccupy ourselves with honor, or wanting to be noticed or win at all costs. However, our second reading reminds us this is not the way of Jesus. Rather we are told "he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" and "he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

In the Gospel we meet two sons; one says that he will go and work as his father asks but does not go, and the other says no at first but then goes and works. The sons symbolize two different groups of people Jesus would meet; the tax collectors and prostitutes who at first say "no" to God but then have the humility to realize they need God and should choose a better way; and the Pharisees and chief priests being those who give lip service to God, but lack the humility to admit they are sinners too.

Jesus of course as Divine could have made what happened at the Transfiguration known to all; He could have revealed Himself, But instead He chose to be humble and a servant, and in his actions, He teaches us much about the path to sainthood. As Saint Augustine wrote "The way to Christ is first through humility, second through humility, third through humility." He also said "It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels."

Practically speaking, a few things I think that we can do include praying for it and also with that examining our conscience every day. Sometimes as we do this, we might become aware of situations where we were expectant, or not serving others as we should have; or also situations where we were arrogant. A great prayer is the Litany of Humility - too long to pray in a homily - but look it up as each part of the prayer deals with things we battle, and the prayer asks for help and being delivered from such things as the desire of being honored, praised and approved, and delivery from fears of being humiliated, forgotten, ridiculed, wronged or suffering rebuke.

With this, we can also ask for help. We can't do it alone; and sometimes with sin, we do not want to see it. But remember admitting a struggle is a sign of strength; sometimes we need to seek out a friend, a confidant, a professional who can help us through something we battle.

We can also obey legitimate superiors. The sin of the devil was pride; he refused to obey God because he wanted the glory. As kids we obey our parents at first out of not wanting to get in trouble or grounded, but ideally gradually because we love them and want to do the right thing. Generally no one is going to force you to do something once you are a "grown up," but how easy it can be to rebel. To say that the Church isn't going to tell me what to do, or to think that we know it all with respect in faith and morals, or to ignore our conscience, or our loved ones in family like our parents or even spouses. I'd never say a spouse is a "superior" but more of an "equal," but if in a marriage a person isn't listening to their spouse who loves them and is trying to help them, then it's a pride problem. God gives us many people to guide us, that does not end when we move out of the house. May we seek these people out and heed them.

It's also helpful to rejoice in the gifts of others. Kevin stood there and shook hands with his opponent; it wasn't easy, but he was saying you won today, you were the better wrestler.

Related to that, we can remember it's important to serve others; Jesus says the Son of man came to serve, not to be served. He washed the feet of others. How easy it can be to become expectant of a spouse, of our parents or our kids. If a husband or wife puts themselves ahead of their spouse, the marriage suffers; but in those who think of the other first, the marriage flourishes. So how are we serving the people in our lives?

Contrition is also a big help. Can we admit that we are not perfect? How hard it can be to say "I'm sorry" or "I made a mistake." But when we do, it teaches so much; it shows a child their parent is human; it shows a loved one that we care for them and are human, and teaches others that sanctity is always something we are growing at.

And lastly, remembering we do it all for the glory of God. Every little thing we do makes such a difference. The sacrifices for loved ones, the acts of charity and kindness, so many things we do aren't seen - and that is OK. But they make a difference to people and make this world a better place. As the sports writer put it regarding Kevin, he had a "quiet heroism" along with a "self sacrificing manner," and that mattered so much more than a plaque on a wall. Hopefully it does for us too.

Earlier this week Brooks Robinson, the Baltimore Oriole's longtime Third Baseman, died at the age of 86. 1970 World Series Legend (alas helping to beat the Twins in the ALCS that year), 16 gold gloves. Mike Rowe, who is known for the show "Dirty Jobs" and who writes a lot about the working man, shared a story about how he met Robinson. It was when he was in his early 20s, and he was reminiscing how as a teenager at 15, he was convinced he might be the next Brooks Robinson. He turned a triple play, catching a rocket down the line from a kid named Josh Schaffer. The coach nicknamed him Mike

Rowebinson. It was a pivotal game. But reality set in a couple of weeks later when a routine ball passed through his legs and he blew the game.

A few years down the line as a young man and aspiring actor, Rowe got a part in a corporate movie, one of those training films employees watch. It was for Crown Central Petroleum and he was to play the "bad" employee about how not to act at work. Brooks Robinson was in the movie as he was the spokesman. Starstruck he tried to share the story of the triple play to impress Brooks a bit or relate, and said he'd never forget the triple play he started catching the ball from Josh Schafer. But to Rowe's surprise, Brooks said nothing about his triple plays he started; just that he triggered four - more than he had started. He said to him:

"It's a heck of a thing, Mike, to hit into a triple play. You're up there at the plate with no outs and at least two men on. Your team is excited. The crowd is excited. But then, with one swing, you become the ultimate rally killer."

Brooks paused and then said, I'll tell you something else. You might never forget that day, but neither will Josh Schaffer. Take it from a guy who has hit into more triple plays than anybody in major league baseball."

"You're kidding," I said. "You?"

The greatest third baseman of all time nodded and smiled ruefully. "Four," he said. "And I remember them all like they were yesterday."

Mike was too stunned to respond. For all his interest in the game, and Brooks Robinson in particular, he had no idea he was the "greatest rally killer of all time". All he remembered, were the impossible catches on a hot corner, the impossible throws to first base from foul territory, and the clutch hits that won so many big games.

Mike had other questions, but happily for all concerned he says, the director called him away to rehearse the scene they were about to shoot, and Brooks turned his attention to another fan who wanted to share another memory, leaving Mike to wonder about the things we choose to recall, and the things we can never forget.

In the baseball field of life, we will likely at times hit a home run, and start a great play. But we'll make many mistakes too. Sometimes we'll be late to work like the one son. But with a little bit of humility, we can come to our senses and know the vineyard owner loves us so much. So let us humble ourselves and come to Him, knowing that when we do, we will be greatly exalted by God, and can truly grow into the saints we aspire to become.