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## Sport and the Denial of Death

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE  
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References to death are frequent in the language of sport. "Sudden death," ends the overtime period. Winning teams often "kill," "wipe out," or "bury" their opponents. In baseball you are a "dead duck" when thrown out at the plate.

In the folk wisdom of coaching the claim is that when you lose you die a little. There are those who find losing worse than death because if you lose you are still alive and must endure the devastating reality of losing.

While watching a Senior League baseball game one evening with a veteran sportswriter, I asked him why athletes would compete after their skills had slipped below the level of excellence that they had once achieved. The writer replied without hesitation, "Oh, that's easy. It's all about death. They're afraid of it and this is the way they avoid their own mortality."

In the past few weeks the world of sport has dealt with an unusually high number of deaths of prominent athletes dying before their time. Beginning with Wilt Chamberlain who died unexpectedly, to the death of Payne Stewart in a dramatic air accident, to the deadly crash of Greg Moore on the CART circuit, and then the death of Walter Payton a victim of cancer and liver disease. All were men who died young and two of them were still active competitors. Each came as a shock to their fans and to the general public. Payton's death was particularly devastating to many NFL players who regarded him as an indestructible contemporary.

When athletes die young, especially when they are still in competition or are such superstars that they are thought invincible, it is a moment of shock that strikes everyone. Mortality becomes a reality, and it is a reality for us all, even the strong, the young, and the glamorous.

In modern society youth is highly valued. The body is nurtured by massive industries designed to keep it lean and healthy. Wellness Centers have sprouted up like mushrooms on a damp forest floor, workout videos threaten to outsell the Bible, and vitamins and dietary supplements are enjoying unprecedented use. The search for immortality among the masses is a quest more compelling than that for the Holy Grail in centuries past.

In such a society the glorification of the body through sport seems inevitable. When the hero of sport proves mortal, it challenges the fundamental workings of our mythic structures surrounding the body. If Walter Payton's body is ravaged at age forty-five, what of our quest for immortality through the Farrah Fawcett workout?

In part then sport is about immortality and defeating death. When death intrudes on or near the arena it grabs our attention. A.E. Housman's poem, "To An Athlete Dying Young," speaks to a complex set of feelings which we all share. In the opening stanza Housman recalls the victor in the race hoisted on the shoulders of the townspeople and carried through the center of town as befitting the local hero. In the second stanza the same runner is hoisted on the shoulders of the same townspeople now quietly resting in a coffin. The contrasting images are impressive because they speak to the power of both fame and death, one fleeting, the other final. It is a poem of elemental human concerns.

One of the goals in sport is perfection, achievable only in an infinite and timeless state where immortality dwells. Perfection can be approached in sport and when it is it inspires awe. When perfection is near, the infinite is glimpsed. This is the sporting version of the Beatific Vision in the spiritual world, a state only achieved after death. It is found in an infinite realm, unavailable to those of us caught in the finite world of the body.

Much of the beauty of sport is associated with this quest for perfection that functions simultaneously as a search for immortality. In this context failure is a form of death and you really do die a little when you lose. Of course you also die a little every moment of your life, and sport is one way of resisting that reality. The body seeks to transcend the mortal world but in the end the body betrays us and death comes to us all.

Youth is encapsulated in athletic achievement and we all know that the prime years for most athletes end around the mid-thirties. This is why so many people struggle to maintain their youth through sport: middle-aged tennis players struggle to win at all cost; parents seek to win through their children; and fans idolize the athletic hero.

These themes roll through sports literature and they roll through our fascination with the heroes of sport. When our

heroes are cut down, it is a blow to us all, a reminder that we are all finite beings in a finite world.

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