

# Storytelling Essential to Develop Moral Reasoning

Sports can help people reach a conventional stage of character development, but storytelling is a necessary ingredient in the journey to become a truly moral person. In separate presentations and in very different ways, two experts at a May conference hosted by the Institute for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development advocated this thought-provoking proposition.

Clark Power of the University of Notre Dame and Valerie Gin of Gordon College believe that participation in organized athletics can assist individuals in developing a socially acceptable and fairly standard code of conduct. Both PhD's also posit, however, that some form of storytelling experience is essential if student-athletes are to reach the highest level of moral reasoning.

The conference, entitled "Story, Sport and Spirit: Exploring the Theory and Practice of Storytelling in Athletics," drew more than a dozen experts to campus to share research, experiences and insights. Power and Gin were among a handful of speakers who seriously addressed the topic and gave the conference its intellectual depth.

Power believes that the concept of character development is complex. It involves,

he says, philosophy (What is character?), psychology (How do children acquire virtue?) and education (How can adults teach virtue?). He notes that children usually tackle moral issues in a straightforward manner. "Children have empathy," he told a small break-out session. "They're concerned about fairness, and they ask serious questions about right and wrong."

Children's curiosity about morality is one reason that sports can help them progress from "pre-conventional" morality (obedience to avoid punishment) to "conventional" morality (be good because it's the right thing). According to Power, early participation in organized sports may actually inhibit children from developing a "post-conventional" morality (a social contract orientation, based on universal ethical principles).

Organized sports provide little value for moral development, according to Power, because when adults serve as coaches and referees, "there is no opportunity for the children to think about fairness and apply their decisions to the rules of play."

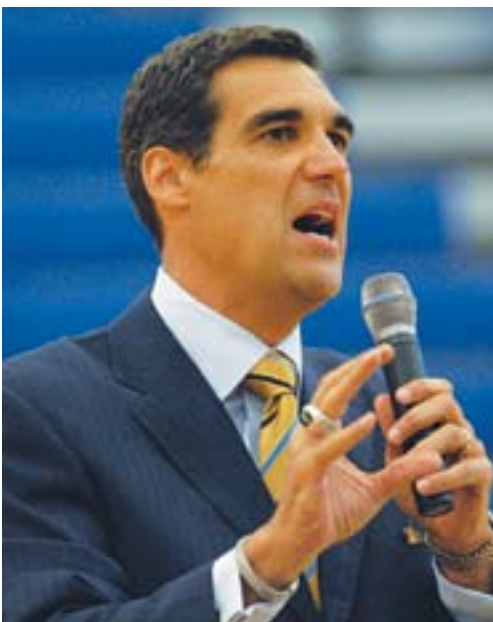
One way to help children and young adults to continue their moral develop-

ment, Power explains, is through storytelling. Parents, teachers and coaches can promote morality by asking student-athletes to think through moral dilemmas presented in story form.

"Narratives can develop reasoning about justice," says Power, "and moral reasoning can shape a life."

Research done by Gin supports one aspect of Power's theories. In a study that involved several faith-based colleges, she found that there was a negative relationship between sportsmanlike behavior and the number of years that students participated in athletics. Put simply, the longer college students played sports, the less sportsmanship they displayed. She was surprised and disappointed at the results, believing that the study would buttress the widely accepted notion that sports build character.

After extensive discussion with colleagues, Gin concluded that, without proper guidance, the world of sports can teach values that are the antithesis of accepted moral behavior: deceit, cheating, violence, aggression, ego and winning at all costs. Of course, coaches and parents have noted



Jay Wright told the conference audience that he emphasizes attitude more than winning at Villanova.



Wright poses with the members of the Institute for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development: Lee DelleMonache '05, Sarah Brazill, Stephanie Taylor '08 and Ed Hastings.

for decades that sports can teach loyalty, sacrifice, dedication and teamwork. Gin believes, however, that a similar emphasis on honesty, responsibility, fairness and social justice is necessary to ensure that athletic participation contributes to the development of truly moral individuals.

Her test was to launch a discussion group, called “Stories from the Heart,” for student-athletes. Fourteen young men and women from various teams gathered once a week to share the sports-related issues that were on their minds. In line with Power’s theory, the students asked serious questions about right and wrong, and posed their own moral dilemmas in story form.

Gin’s findings were that these 14 students grew in moral reasoning, bucking the trend that her study had discovered. She admits that the sampling is very small and requires more research. Still, the theory that student-athletes need to discuss difficult moral dilemmas — either guided by an adult or on their own — to develop high moral standards is an intriguing concept that could have significant implications for youth, high school and college athletic programs across the country.

Star power at the conference was supplied by Ronan Tynan and Jay Wright. Tynan, former member of the Irish Tenors, and Wright, head men’s basketball coach at Villanova University, spoke at the Mirenda Center for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development on consecutive evenings.

Tynan charmed the audience with self-deprecating humor as he told the story of his lifelong battle to live life to the fullest, despite being born with severe medical problems in both legs. He lost his legs at age 20. Despite this personal tragedy, he won 18 gold medals as a paralympic athlete, graduated from medical school, and gained international fame as a member of the Irish Tenors. He has sung at the funeral of President Ronald Reagan, the White House, Yankee Stadium, and numerous benefits for police and firefighters who perished on 9/11.

“My physical challenges have allowed me to take risks,” he told the audience. “We cannot become what we need to be by remaining the way we are.”

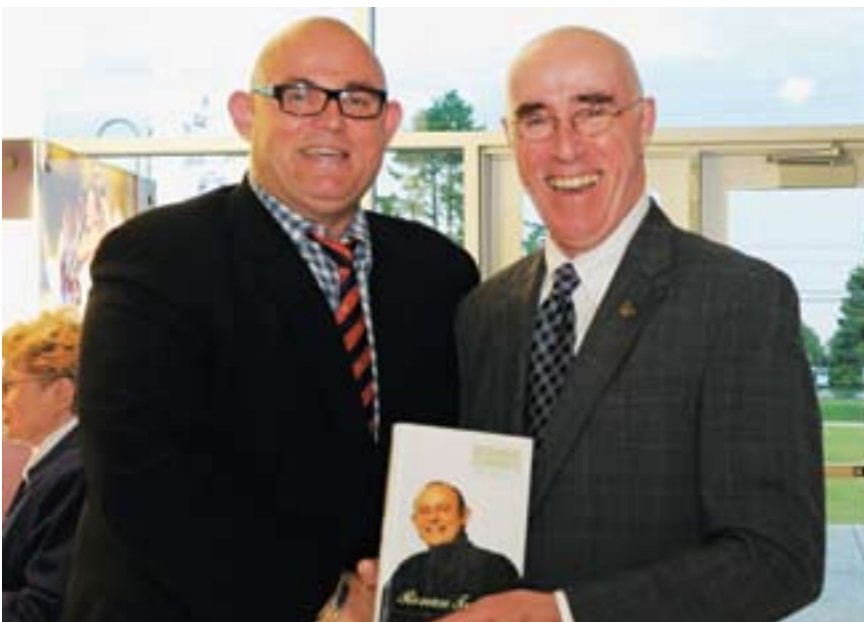
In his eight seasons at Villanova, Wright has been named Coach of the Year

in the Big East twice and in the Big Five once. Under his leadership, the Wildcats have produced six consecutive 20-win seasons and have appeared in the NCAA tournament in each of those years, reaching the Final Four in 2009.

At the opening of his presentation, Wright paid tribute to the Mirenda Center for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development. “There’s so much more to sports than the game,” he admitted. “We all try to build character, but we’re afraid to say it. But Neumann puts it right out there, on the front of the building.”

At the opening session of the three-day conference, Dr. Ed Hastings, director of the Institute for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development, and Rosalie Mirenda, president of Neumann University, explained the reason for the Institute and the 2010 conference. “We want to show the world that God is alive and that we can find Him through sports,” said Hastings.

“Other areas of the University are beginning to see the wisdom of what’s happening here,” said Mirenda. “We want to bring this notion to the world.”



Ronan Tynan shares a laugh with Bill McLaughlin, a University trustee.



Ronan Tynan spoke and sang at the Mirenda Center.