

## COLLEGES &amp; UNIVERSITIES



Joseph Glass (standing at center), a professor of communications and media arts, supports basketball student-athletes in his role as team chaplain at Neumann University in Aston, Pa., in January. —Hunter Martin

## Triple play: linking sports, spirituality and Catholic higher education

By MICHAEL GALLIGAN-STIERLE and LEE M. DELLEMONACHE

**I**n front of a capacity crowd of 48,613 at Yankee Stadium on a late September night, Derek Jeter played his last home game. He began the game in the same way he began every game in the Bronx over his remarkable 20-year career in baseball: He ran to his position at shortstop, crouched down on the edge of the outfield grass with his back to home plate, bowed his head, offered a word of thanks to God, and made the sign of the cross.

From the earliest days of competition through modern day, athletes have called upon God to assist them in their accomplishments. Sporting events, full of ritual and pageantry, were looked upon as a way to deepen the relationship with God. Today, the Catholic community continues to foster the connection, with Curia offices dedicated to church and sport within both the Pontifical Council for the Laity and the Pontifical Council for Culture.

Catholic colleges and universities recognize the importance of this connection for young adults, many of whom are asking the big questions of life: Who am I? What is my place in this world? Taking the time to deepen an awareness of self, others and God is how one begins to answer these critical questions in the context of Gospel values. In this way, collegiate sports provide opportunities for students to connect with their “inner lives,” to sharpen their skills for coping with adversity and celebrating accomplishments, and to develop virtues like selflessness and leadership.

Simply participating in sports is not enough to fully realize the trans-

formative power of the experience. A deliberate, mission-based approach to programming and resources provided to college student-athletes is needed to bring about powerful development of faith, leadership, character and spirituality. Consequently, many Catholic colleges and universities intentionally advance sports as a way to facilitate a deeper connection with God through leadership development, promoting the common good, connecting with the transcendent, and facilitating meaning-making. Here are a few examples.

■ Neumann University in suburban Philadelphia views the opportunity to minister to college student athletes as a sacred calling and established the Institute for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development in 1999 as a means to fulfill that obligation. Through the lens of athletics, the institute’s purpose is to transform perspectives and inspire behavior that reflects an awareness to God’s presence in our lives. Team chaplains, leadership development, evenings of reflection, and commissioning rituals are but a few of the experiences this Franciscan university provides its student athletes in order for them to deepen their awareness of self, others and God.

■ Through a partnership with the Institute for Excellence & Ethics, Le Moyne College in Syracuse, N.Y., has created a reflection tool for its athletes and coaches titled “Inside the L: A Distinctly Jesuit Approach to Intercollegiate Athletics at Le Moyne College.” Jesuit Fr. David McCallum, executive assistant to the president for mission integration at Le Moyne notes, “The sense of purpose, meaning, and the ‘ways of proceeding’ that guide us came from a deep reflection

on our experience of what inspires our desire for excellence in athletics and scholarship, how we desire to treat one another as players, coaches, and educators, how we want to define success, and how we seek to realize our full potential.”

■ At the College of St. Scholastica in Duluth, Minn., sports teams have been actively engaged in community service projects since the inception of intercollegiate athletics in the early 1970s. In 2005-2006, the National Association of Division III Athletic Administrators recognized the college for its commitment to community service with the Josten’s Community Service Award. The college also points to increased emphasis on “promotion and recognition of student-athlete excellence” through activities such as the initiation of the John Baggs Sportsmanship Award, “stressing a deeper substance of winning and losing with class, loyalty to teammates and coaches, and placing the team’s success before individual accolades.”

Many other Catholic universities find additional teachable moments to link spirituality to sports. Recently at Wheeling Jesuit University in West Virginia, the campus chapel was nearly filled to capacity for a Mass to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the death of Kevin Figaniak, a school lacrosse player.

In his remarks to those gathered, Jesuit Fr. Michael Steltenkamp, a theology professor, spoke of Figaniak as a teammate returning to God. “Kevin is speaking to us from his place with God, calling us together this night to ask God for help in becoming the person God calls us to be — a man or woman for others.” After the service, the lacrosse coach remained and

spoke to his players to enable further reflection.

Clearly, Catholic universities have opportunities at significant moments for teams and athletes to help them reflect on issues of life and death, reason and purpose for existence, and ultimately, meaning-making.

There is a reason why these occasions can be such effective conduits for building faith. Researchers have uncovered a connection between sports and spirituality that is in part connected to how our brains are wired. The positive psychology concept of “flow” was developed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a pioneer in the study of happiness. Csikszentmihalyi helped bring about the realization that the region of the brain used when an individual engages in deep prayer is the same region that athletes tap when they are “in the zone.” Both activities bring about a feeling of well-being, of “optimal experience,” even in the face of challenge.

Perhaps those who find spirituality in sport — from students to professional athletes — are making a connection (whether consciously or not) to something that has been true since creation: God is present in all things. By striving to make that connection explicit to all those involved in athletic programs, many Catholic colleges and universities offer an education that engages the whole person, resulting in better citizens of our church and our world.

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