

## FORGING LIFELONG BONDS: THE POSITIVE VALUE OF SPORTS

I spent much of last Sunday afternoon in planning our 10:00 a.m. procession today, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. It only rarely falls on a Sunday, and our music staff and I desired a memorable procession and blessing of candles. Only later did I turn on the news to see the reports of NBA 18-time All Star **Kobe Bryant's tragic death** in a helicopter crash. Later reports indicated his **13-year old daughter, Gianna** also perished. They were traveling to one of her Basketball tournaments. Obviously, this story rocked the sports world, but even beyond. Just the night before his crash, LeBron James passed him in **all-time career points**, where Kobe had held the **#3 slot**. He was a mega-star who would have been eligible for induction to the Hall of Fame this year, following the required three-year waiting period after retirement.

To me, Kobe Bryant was one of the good guys, a true **ambassador** of the game. The father of four daughters, he was married in 2001 in a Catholic parish in the Diocese of Orange. After a serious moral transgression early in his marriage, he recovered, changed and emerged a much stronger man and husband. He **credited a priest** for helping him through this dark period. The couple worked through difficulties and remained together. He began to take his **Catholic faith** more seriously. Kobe's father had extended his professional career after the NBA by signing onto the Italian league. There Kobe lived from age 6 to age 13. He spoke **fluent Italian** and it was amazing to watch You Tube videos of him in Italian language interviews when travelling abroad. Entering the NBA directly from High School was almost unheard of in 1996, but he flourished.

Catholic News Agency related a story about Kobe Bryant's attendance at a daily Mass. "Singer **Cristina Ballester** posted on Instagram Jan. 26 a story of her encounter with Bryant at Holy Family Cathedral in Orange, California at a weekday Mass. 'As we went up to communion, [Bryant] waited for me to go. If you grew up in the Catholic Church, you understand this is a respectful thing men do in church as a sign of respect to women. He said I have a beautiful voice.'" There is much more to Kobe than his amazing career stats. He was a **devoted father** who coached Gianna's team, **attending the 7:00 a.m. Mass** with her at Our Lady Queen of Angels in Newport Beach just before boarding the helicopter. The Kobe & Vanessa Bryant Family Foundation helped to fund **youth homeless shelters** and other initiatives for the poor. "In life, we all make mistakes and to stand back and allow someone to live that way and kind of wash your hands of it ... that's not right," he said.

I never played basketball, nor did I especially follow it until I was drafted. Not to play— heaven's no! I was drafted to coach. While teaching in a 7th-12th grade Catholic School, I was begged to take over the 7th Grade team, as they had no coach. "Don't worry," Father, I was assured. "It's just one game each Friday and a few weekend tournaments." Instead, I voraciously read books, **diagrammed plays** and realized just how competitive I was. The other coaches got a real kick out of it. When necessary, I gently explained to a **referee** his misapplication of the "3-second lane" rule, and only received **one technical foul** in three years! No, it was not for arguing, but for **calling a timeout** when our team had already used all four. It cost us the playoff game, though twice we won the CAA Championship.

I share this vignette because my coaching helped me **forge a unique bond** with players beyond the classroom. Six years ago, while celebrating a wedding here, I glanced up to see that three groomsmen were former players of mine. We reminisced at the reception, and one asked, "Father, I'm curious—how old were you when you coached us?" I replied, "How old are you now?" He responded, "I'm 30." I then remarked— "That is exactly how old I was when I coached you— time flies, doesn't it?" Sports has a unique capacity to unite people. Each squad was but a snapshot in time, yet these memories remain vivid and the friendships forged, sturdy as ever.

For fans of all stripes, they easily remember the highs and lows of their favorite teams, and how a championship can **bring together a city** in joy and celebration, just as we experienced here with the Minnesota Twins in 1987 and 1991. On the day when **100 million Americans** will tune into the **Super Bowl** and \$1 billion stadiums are the norm, many will opine that athletics occupies an inflated place in people's lives; athletic heroes have become more akin to gods. I'll leave that discussion for another day. Suffice it to say, there is no disputing that Kobe

Bryant positively affected countless lives and was devoting “Act II” of his life to giving back to the very community that gave him so much. Our prayers are with the Bryant family in this devastating time. *Requiescat in pace.*

- This past Monday marked the 75th anniversary of the **Liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau**. I watched online. Approximately 200 survivors attended the commemoration. When I was 19, several of us spent 30 days backpacking through Europe on a budget of \$25 per day. When in Munich, we initially declined to visit Dachau— after all, we were on vacation. But in the end, we realized that we needed to see first-hand the reality of the Nazi Death Camps. It was a sobering visit and one that made me understand quite viscerally the power of evil in the world. One million were killed at Auschwitz.
- Hearing the survivor’s stories during the ceremony was riveting, powerful and painful. We mustn’t allow ourselves to forget—ever. One speaker (weighing just 70 pounds on liberation day) acknowledged the “fatigue” of the stories of suffering. Instead, he reminded to the young generation that the core attitudes leading to the camps “did not fall out of the sky.” Never forget. **Never again!**
- Could you possibly spare 15 minutes of your time? I encourage you to participate in an **online survey** as part of the preparations for the Archdiocesan Synod. It is intended to focus on how we at the Cathedral parish can better **fulfill our mission**. Paper copies are also available, though the online instructions are so easy to follow. Click the link on our parish homepage **[www.cathedralsaintpaul.org](http://www.cathedralsaintpaul.org)**. \*See the sidebar and use the QR code to access the Parish Survey on your smart phone or tablet.
- The **Kansas City Chiefs** last played in the Super Bowl fifty years ago in **January of 1970**, against the Minnesota Vikings. I am amazed to say that **I remember Super Bowl IV**— at least the end. I can still hear my mother calling me to come down for dinner, saying that the game was (effectively) over and it was time to eat. The favored (+13) **Vikings** were **upset 23-7**, and I distinctly recall turning off the TV set in disappointment. I think I am rooting for the Chiefs, just for old-time sake.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector