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Jocks vs. Pukes

Robert Lipsyte | July 27, 2011

In the spring of that hard year, 1968, the Columbia University crew coach, Bill Stowe, explained to me that there were only two kinds of men on campus, perhaps in the world—Jocks and Pukes. He explained that Jocks, such as his rowers, were brave, manly, ambitious, focused, patriotic and goal-driven, while Pukes were woolly, distractible, girlish and handicapped by their lack of certainty that nothing mattered as much as winning. Pukes could be found among “the cruddy weirdo slobs” such as hippies, pot smokers, protesters and, yes, former English majors like me.

I dutifully wrote all this down, although doing so seemed kind of Puke-ish. But Stowe was such an affable *ur-Jock*, 28 years old, funny and articulate, that I found his condescension merely good copy. He’d won an Olympic gold medal, but how could I take him seriously, this former Navy officer who had spent his Vietnam deployment rowing the Saigon River and running an officers’ club? Not surprisingly, he didn’t last long at Columbia after helping lead police officers through the underground tunnels to roust the Pukes who had occupied buildings during the antiwar and antiracism demonstrations.

As a 30-year-old *New York Times* sports columnist then, I was not handicapped by as much lack of certainty about all things as I am now. It was clear to me then that Bill Stowe was a “dumb jock,” which does not mean stupid; it means ignorant, narrow, misguided by the values of Jock Culture, an important and often overlooked strand of American life.

These days, I’m not so sure he wasn’t right; the world may well be divided into Jocks and Pukes. Understanding the differences and the commonalities between the two might be one of the keys to understanding, first, the myths of masculinity and power that pervade sports, and then why those myths are inescapable in everyday life. Boys—and more and more girls—who accept Jock Culture values often go on to flourish in a competitive sports environment that requires submission to authority, winning by any means necessary and group cohesion. They tend to grow up to become our political, military and financial leaders. The Pukes—those “others” typically shouldered aside by Jocks in high school hallways and, I imagine, a large percentage of those who are warily reading this special issue of *The Nation*—were often turned off or away from competitive sports (or settled for cross-country). They were also more likely to go on to question authority and seek ways of individual expression.

This mental conditioning of the Jocks was possible because of the intrinsic joy of sports. Sports is good. It is the best way to pleasure your body in public. Sports is entertaining, healthful, filled with honest, sustaining sentiment for warm times and the beloved people you shared them with. At its simplest, think of playing catch

at the lake with friends.

Jock Culture is a distortion of sports. It can be physically and mentally unhealthy, driving people apart instead of together. It is fueled by greed and desperate competition. At its most grotesque, think killer dodgeball for prize money, the Super Bowl. (The clash between sports and the Jock Culture version is almost ideological, at least metaphorical. Obviously, I am for de-emphasizing early competition and redistributing athletic resources so that everyone, throughout their lives, has access to sports. But then, I am also for world peace.)

Kids are initiated into Jock Culture when youth sports are channeled into the pressurized arenas of elite athletes on travel teams driven by ambitious parents and coaches. A once safe place to learn about bravery, cooperation and respect becomes a cockpit of bullying, violence and the commitment to a win-at-all-costs attitude that can kill a soul. Or a brain. It is in Pee Wee football, for example, that kids learn to “put a hat on him”—to make tackles head first rather than the older, gentler way of wrapping your arms around a ball carrier’s legs and dragging him down. Helmet-to-helmet hits start the trauma cycle early. No wonder the current concussion discussion was launched by the discovery of dementia and morbidity among former pro players.

There is no escape from Jock Culture. You may be willing to describe yourself as a Puke, “cut” from the team early to find your true nature as a billionaire geek, Grammy-winning band fag, wonkish pundit, but you’ve always had to deal with Jock Culture attitudes and codes, and you have probably competed by them. In big business, medicine, the law, people will be labeled winners and losers, and treated like stars or slugs by coachlike authority figures who use shame and intimidation to achieve short-term results. Don’t think symphony orchestras, university philosophy departments and liberal magazines don’t often use such tactics.

Jock Culture applies the rules of competitive sports to everything. Boys, in particular, are taught to be tough, stoical and aggressive, to play hurt, to hit hard, to take risks to win in every aspect of their lives. To dominate. After 9/11, I wondered why what seemed like a disproportionate number of athletic women and men were killed. From reading their brief *New York Times* memorials, it seemed as though most were former high school and college players, avid weekend recreationists or at least passionate sports fans. When I called executives from companies that had offices in the World Trade Center, I discovered it was no coincidence; stock-trading companies in particular recruited athletes because they came to work even if they were sick, worked well in groups, rebounded quickly from a setback, pushed the envelope to reach the goal and never quit until the job was done. They didn’t have to be star jocks, but they did have to have been trained in the codes of Jock Culture—most important, the willingness to subordinate themselves to authority.

The drive to feel that sense of belonging that comes with being part of a winning team—as athlete, coach, parent, cheerleader, booster, fan—is a reflection of Jock Culture’s grip on the male psyche and on more and more women. Men have traditionally been taught to pursue their jock dreams no matter the physical, emotional or financial cost. Those who realized those dreams have been made rich and famous; at the least, they were waved right through many of the tollbooths of ordinary life. Being treated like a celebrity at 12, freed from normal boundaries, excused from taking out the garbage and from treating siblings, friends, girls responsibly, is no preparation for a fully realized life. No wonder there are so many abusive athletes, emotionally stunted ex-athletes and resentful onlookers.

At a critical time when masculinity is being redefined, or at least re-examined seriously, this sports system has become more economically, culturally and emotionally important than ever. More at service to the empire. More dangerous to the common good.

Games have become our main form of mass entertainment (including made-for-TV contests using sports models). Winners of those games become our examples of permissible behavior, even when that includes cheating, sexual crimes or dog torturing. And how does that lead us to the cheating, the lying, the amorality in our lives outside the white lines? It's not hard to connect the moral dots from the field house to the White House.

The recent emergence of girls as competitors of boys has also raised the ante. Boys have traditionally been manipulated by coaches, drill sergeants and sales managers by the fear of being labeled a girl ("sissy" and "faggot" have less to do with homophobia than misogyny). Despite the many ways males can identify themselves as "real men" in our culture—size, sexuality, power, money, fame—nothing seems as indelible as the mark made in childhood when the good bodies are separated from the bad bodies, the team from the spectators. The designated athletes are rewarded with love, attention and perks. The leftovers struggle with their resentments and their search for identity.

Of course, the final score is not always a sure thing. There are sensitive linebackers and CEOs, domineering shrinks and violinists. Who won in the contest between the Facebook Puke Mark Zuckerberg and his fiercest competitors, the Olympic rowing Jocks Tyler and Cameron Winklevoss?

"I don't follow that stuff these days," says Bill Stowe, now living in Lake Placid, New York, after retiring as crew coach and fundraiser for the Coast Guard Academy, a far more comfortable fit than Columbia. "And I have to tell you, I don't remember separating the world into Jocks and Pukes, although it sounds good. I liked good brains in my boats, as long as they were willing to concentrate and pay the price."

Stowe, at 71, is still a conservative Republican. But he doesn't like to talk politics. "It's time to give up the torch," he says. "People are still living in ignorance, but I'm not running it up the flagpole anymore. Life's too short to fight." He surprises me when we talk sports. "The big-league thing, that's a circus. I don't understand how anyone could look up to those guys. But the real issue is with the kids. Did you read where they're building a \$60 million football stadium for a high school in Texas? Just for the Jocks. Have you got any idea how much good you could do, even just in athletics, for all the other kids with that much money?"

I dutifully write all this down, which doesn't at all seem Puke-ish now. We're on the same page, the coach and I. There's hope.

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