



## **Wisdom and Cleverness**

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What is summer in America without baseball? And what is a baseball season without controversy? As we all know, this summer's controversy surrounds Barry Bond's remarkable, but possibly tainted, achievement of surpassing "hammering" Hank Aaron's record of 755 career home runs. While the jury is still out on Barry Bonds, doping is a major problem for the world of sports. For example, the reputation of the prestigious Tour de France has been severely injured by doping controversies. The entire culture of sports is currently experiencing something of a moral crisis caused by the covert use of banned performance enhancing drugs.

Athletic culture does not exist in isolation from culture at large: the ethical concerns in athletics point to ethical concerns in our culture. I think at least part of this problem can be attributed to focusing too much on achievement. In these brief remarks I will suggest that the problem with an "achievement culture" is that it promotes the development of cleverness over wisdom.

On the one hand, cleverness does not require making judgments of value. Merely clever people get things done; they are good at matching the most efficient and effective means to achieve a desired goal. The clever person may be skillful, talented, and intelligent, and at the same time be absolutely immoral. Clever people can acquire highly specialized knowledge and refined talents, but use them to achieve good or bad ends alike. The classic philosophers defined cleverness as the "ability to take [effective] steps to any end." The key point here is that cleverness does not require judgments about the moral worth of any particular goal, or the worthiness of the means used to achieve that goal. The sole function of cleverness is achievement. It is probably better to be clever than not, but cleverness without wisdom is dangerous and counter-productive. For example, it is hard for me to imagine that the athletes who cleverly avoid detection in their use of performance-enhancing drugs can really enjoy their achievements.

On the other hand, wisdom requires judgments of value. Truly wise people recognize morally worthy goals and the appropriate means to achieve them. This requires the ability of knowing what's important and what's not. As the philosopher Phillipa Foot writes, "What a wise person knows that a foolish one does not is that such things as social position, and wealth, and the good opinion of the world, are too dearly bought at the cost of health or friendship or family ties. So we may say that a person who lacks wisdom has 'false values.'" This point can be illustrated by a climbing incident that happened on Mt. Everest last year. According to news reports, as many as forty climbers passed a dying 34 year-old British climber, David Sharp, on their way to the summit of Mt. Everest. Many

of the climbers no doubt paused over the delirious climber to deliberate about whether or not to abandon their goal of reaching the summit of the world's highest mountain and attempt the all but lost cause of rescuing David Sharp. Any attempt to save him would have been dangerous, and for most of the climbers it would have meant sacrificing this once-in-a-lifetime chance to achieve their goal. But these people were focused on achievement, and they placed their personal goal above trying to save a fellow climber's life. Sir Edmond Hillary, the revered New Zealand climber who made the first successful ascent of Everest, was horrified. He remarked, "People have completely lost sight of what is important." Climbing Mount Everest is hard, and these people were no doubt clever to make it to the top. But they seem to lack wisdom by pursuing false values.

One does not have to be smart or clever to make right value judgments of what's important and what's not. The wise person, then, can be distinguished from the merely clever person by their ability to discern morally worthy goals and the appropriate means to achieve them. Cheaters, murders, and villains can be highly intelligent, clever people, but are not wise.

Whether it is in baseball, mountain climbing, business or education, the problem with a culture that overly focuses on achievement is that it risks developing people who are merely clever. As we all know, the ends *do not* justify the means. This is why most people consider the use performance enhancing drugs to achieve athletic greatness immoral. If the means used to achieve an admirable goal are not also admirable, the achievement has little value. End and means together create the value of an accomplishment. The growing achievement culture puts an undue emphasis on the goal, and this can lead to rewarding clever people over wise ones. As a result, we risk encouraging clever achievement addicts over wise people who know, as they say, "what's what."