

FOOTBALL AND IDEALS

BY JOSIAH ROYCE

Professor of Philosophy

Not long ago I printed an address that I had read before a society of teachers of physical training. This address dealt with some of the relations between physical training and the present problems of moral education in America; and in one passage of the discussion I referred to those of our modern athletic sports which attract the greatest public attention, which in consequence fill the largest place in newspaper reports, and which, as a matter of course, draw together the most notable and enthusiastic assemblages of people when the culminating events of each season take place.

What I said in this passage, regarding these sports, was carefully confined to some observations upon their importance and their dangers as moral influences, as social forces, as phenomena of the life of great masses of our people, and especially as factors influencing the moral education of our youth. The editor of the HARVARD ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE has asked me to restate some of my theses for his readers. He has himself seen my previous article. He knows what my position is. In requesting me to present the matter in a way that can make any sort of appeal to his readers, he is aware that, in some respects, I am an opponent of views that are now the ruling views amongst these readers. He cannot expect that, being what I am, I shall be able to affect these opposing opinions in any notable way. In brief, he asks me to lead, or at least to take part in, a "forlorn hope." I can only say, at the outset, that, since the matter concerns a contest for a moral ideal, the task is as attractive as it is forlorn.

I

Football is, in many respects, the king among those athletic sports which arouse the keenest general interest, which are reported at the greatest length by the newspapers, and which draw together the notable and enthusiastic assemblages. Consequently, football is at present a great social force in our country. It has long been so. Apparently it is destined long to remain so. In consequence, any plain man, however little he knows about the game itself, is bound to form his impressions about its place among the great social forces of his time and his nation. The plain man has a right to these impressions — yes, even a duty to form them. He may be able to give many reasons for them without being even disposed to form or to express any opinion whatever regarding the more intimate and technical problems of the game itself. Any great social force properly attracts the attention and awakens the scrutiny of the man who is not directly involved in the activities which represent this force. It does so, not because of what those who are under the direct sway of this force regard as its most interesting features, but because of its interference or coöperation with the other social forces which mould our common life.

Thus, for instance, the great labor strikes, nowadays so common, are phenomena that represent great social forces. Each great strike grows out of controversies whose merits are, in general, quite problematic to all who stand at a distance from the disputants, and who know nothing of the practical workings of the business in which the strike has arisen. To judge who is right

in the particular controversy that has led to the strike is therefore usually impossible to anybody but the expert. And nevertheless, if the strike is a serious one, our ignorance of the merits of the controversy, and of the technique of the industry in whose conduct the quarrel has arisen, does not absolve us from forming an opinion as to the way in which the interests of our common social order are affected by the strike. Some of these common interests we *do* understand; and it is our social duty to understand them. If they are endangered by the strike, we form an opinion regarding the mischief done. We *must* form such an opinion. If hereupon a powerful employer of labor suggests that he has a "God-given" right to run his business in his own way, and that we, being quite ignorant (as in fact most of us are ignorant) of how his business must be run in order to make a fair profit, must not presume to comment upon his decisions in the matter under dispute,—we find just this particular appeal to the rights of experts simply grotesque. For the strike may be endangering our whole social order. And equally, if a labor leader assures us that, unless we have toiled in the dust and darkness side by side with the striking laborers, we can form no fair judgment regarding what their grievances justify them in doing for the sake of redress, we repudiate this way of viewing the merits of the case. For the rest of us have our own work to do, and with this whole work the strike may be interfering. Each man's business, calling, sport, pleasure, grievance, love, or hate is his own; but the social order is for all of us. Whoever affects by his action its general forces can take no refuge behind his skill as an expert, or behind his rights as a free judge of what is good for himself, when we form and express our opinion about the effect that

his institutions and practices have upon the common weal.

Well, it is with the great sports, and, in particular, with football, as it is with strikes. If such things affect the social order at large, they have to be judged by every loyal lover of the social order, whether he knows anything about the details of the industry in which the strikers are engaged or not, and whether he is acquainted with the technique of the game of football or not. Football must be estimated as to its general relations to the welfare of society, just as Standard Oil, or just as the railway management which results in killing a larger proportion of railway passengers in our country than in other countries, must be estimated; it must be judged by non-experts, precisely in so far as it influences their great common social concerns.

II

The great social concerns with which, in this little paper, I have to do are the concerns called Moral Ideals. Does this great modern social interest in football, does this gathering of crowds, does this fascination, does this long-continued prominence in the newspapers, help on our moral education? Do such social influences make our national ideals higher, sounder, more lasting, more effective? That is a fair question. For the reasonable answer to that question the opinions of a football coach, however expert he may be, and however honorable a man he may be, are not finally decisive. The question is one for moralists. Now a football coach may indeed be, and no doubt often is, a moralist. But as a moralist he has no special authority conferred upon him by his expertness in the game. Or again, the value of football may have been publicly estimated by a lover of sports and of ideals who is

himself not only a most distinguished moralist, but a President of the United States. In this case, the distinction of the moralist, and his own lofty ideals and lengthy public services, will indeed give great weight to his judgment. But his expertness in sport will no more make his opinion upon the moral question final than his high political office will make it decisively authoritative. Problems about ideals must be thought out by each moralist for himself. And any man, according to his powers and his insight, can become a moralist who will take the trouble to think out his ideals for himself, with the hearty intent to put them into practice, and to make them indeed moral ideals.

I have stated the question. Does football, as played under these absorbing and engrossing social conditions, under the sway of all this newspaper publicity, in the presence of these notable, these fascinated, — yes, if you will, these fascinating — multitudes, — does football (viewed not as a game, but as an American institution, as a great social force in our nation) help on the moral education of our people? Now there are some — I fancy that there are even many — who will turn rather lightly away from this question. "Football is a sport," they will say. "It is not for moral education, but for the joy of power in those who play; and in those who look on, football exists to satisfy love of watching the mighty display their might."

So far as any chance reader of mine tends to respond in this way, he tends to answer my question at once; and, so far as he himself is concerned, he tends to answer it in a decisive way. A bard who sang in a recent number of the HARVARD ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE gave voice to precisely the confused emotion which a great and excited crowd usually awakens in an unguarded mind, when, after a brief expression of the spectator's

joy in the game where "a man is a man and a team is a team," he reminded us that the true football enthusiasm naturally culminates in a "glorious night in town." Now, whoever states the case thus, points out that, to him at least, football stands for no moral ideals, but simply for "letting off steam," or for what may be called, in a phrase that I borrow from Professor James, "a moral holiday." I have here absolutely no comment to make upon the place of "moral holidays" in a man's existence. I am discussing ideals. Whoever states the case for football as the author of the verses in question stated it, answers my question by saying frankly that football is, in his own mind, the teacher of no moral ideals whatever. And that, as far as it goes, is an instructive answer to my question. I regret the answer, but thank the bard in question for his frankness. I have no doubt that there are thousands of spectators who feel in the same way —

"Where the world looks on from crowded stands;
Where we hear the rip of quick commands,
And the crash of cheers, and the boom of bands."

A great social force that had only this message for those under its influence would possibly act as an anesthetic for over-sensitive consciences and might in consequence be recommended as an occasional relief to certain saintly invalids. But if this were the whole story, such a force would help no man to an ideal, but might serve to scatter and muddle whatever ideals he might happen already to possess, especially if he were young enough to believe that whatever the world on the "crowded stands" happens to feel or to think is important.

I hasten to point out, however, that the true lovers of football, and especially

that those true lovers who as players have been trained by it, or who, as experts in observing the moral influence of sports, defend it as an indispensable means for the training of a large portion of our youth to manhood, — that these, I say, find in the game another, and a very genuinely ideal value. These, the only true and enlightened lovers of the great sport, emphasize the thesis that it trains men to a very high and practical form of Loyalty. Now Loyalty is, to my mind, indeed the central moral ideal, an ideal of which our nation at present stands in very great need. If football, in its general social influence, is training our youth, as a socially organized group, to genuinely high forms of loyalty, then my question is answered effectively, and is answered in a sense favorable to the sport.

I fully agree that if such high training in loyalty is as a fact the normal, the prevailing result of this intense social interest in the "game of games," — then very much can be endured in the way of incidental mishaps and extravagances, and still the sport can be viewed as a vastly important and perhaps indispensable factor in the moral education of our youth. I can and should regard with indifference a good many serious physical accidents; I ought to make light of much "roughness"; I should cheerfully leave to the coaches and to the other experts the entire supervision of all the controversies about this or that rule or method of play, — if only the lovers of the game can make good their thesis that the game teaches to the majority of those concerned, both players and spectators, the art of honoring, of prizing, and of practising a hearty devotion to serious social ideals. Loyalty means a willing and practical sacrifice of a man for some significant cause. In its higher form loyalty means a hearty coöperation with the growth of the loyal spirit in all

other men. Now "team work" and "fair play" are surely examples of the loyal spirit. The high physical and mental training involved in the preparation of the players, the coolness and self-control that they must learn to exercise under trying conditions, the obedience to discipline that is essential to their work, the self-sacrifice, the indifference to pain, the courage, which belong to their task, the fair play to which the rules, and the constant public criticism to which the players are subject, are supposed to hold the players — well, all these are means of training, — not merely "manhood," — but loyal manhood. And whoever defends football upon such grounds has indeed insisted upon ideals that are of genuine, in fact, of eternal worth. And such a lover of football, if only he can make out the thesis that this sort of training is the net result of football, has indeed hereupon every right to insist also upon the cheerily emotional aspect of the case, and to say that a sport which teaches ideals at all, teaches them far better than sermons, or even than set tasks of study or of enforced discipline, can teach them, and that it does so just because a sport is fascinating, and because it thrills a man through and through, even while it makes him work his hardest. Such lovers of the sport have a right then to dwell upon the joy of it, and to emphasize all its fascinations.

And now, as a fact, I know some great public servants, men now devoted to the noblest and hardest social tasks, who assert that they personally first learned unselfish devotion, and the spirit of "team work" (that is, of social service) on the football field; and who say that the "roughness" and perhaps their own broken bones, first gave them the needed moral lessons in what have since proved to be the most delicately tender and the most earnestly devoted forms of loyalty.

If such could be shown to be the prevailing social influences, due to modern football, the objections arising from "roughness," from accidental injuries, from the occasional neglect of classroom studies, and from all the other mere incidents of the sport, would be swept away as a stroke. I should myself unhesitatingly say, — better broken bones and extravagant enthusiasms and much "roughness" with true loyalty as the net result, than physical safety and sedate demeanor without a youth trained to the spirit of loyalty.

III

But, as a fact, can the thesis be maintained that the prevailing result of this great social force which we are discussing, is, in view of the present condition of the sport, the training — not of this or of that individual, — but of the youth of our nation at large towards effective loyalty?

I insist that this question is one, not for football experts, but for any fair-minded observer of general social conditions, and for any lover of loyal ideals. I also insist that, in answering this question, one must consider most of all not the effect of the game upon the players, but its effect upon the spectators.

The game, as it is now played, is played for "the world that looks on from crowded stands." Were that world not there, or were it not expected to be there, the game, as we are often told, would "dwindle." That is why any restriction of intercollegiate football is vigorously resisted by all who love the game. In other words, were not the crowds what they are, as to size and enthusiasm, nobody concerned would see any such reason, as he now sees, for the degree and the form of enthusiasm for the sport which is at present in him. The spectators come largely because each expects the crowd. The players regard

their cause as deriving its importance from its publicity. For the sake of the crowds they have learned to be loyal to that cause.

If this be so, since the players, and the candidates for the teams, are relatively few, and the crowds are vast, the prevalent, the widely and socially important moral influence, whatever it is, is the influence upon the spectators, and upon especially the watching academic youth. The moral effect upon the players is an effect of vanishing quantity when compared with the moral effect upon the masses who do not play. Now, does it train me in loyalty to see *another* man's bones broken? Or, better (since the broken bone, or other notable physical mishap, is indeed only the occasional chance of the sport), — does it train me in loyalty to see *another* man showing his physical prowess in a loyally devoted way. He, the player, indeed, is loyal. Does that make me, the spectator, a loyal man?

Certainly there are conditions under which the example of loyalty proves contagious, and deeply effective. But if you will look through your life, you will see that the example of another man's loyalty has been of the most ideal value to you, either (1) when you were yourself already working side by side with him, in the same sport, task, or other cause; or else (2) when you were aroused by his example earnestly to plan some way in which you could practically imitate him, or could at least somehow translate his spirit into your own deeds. Cheering a loyal man is good; but for you personally it is the cheapest and tamest form in which you can possibly honor loyalty. "*Go thou and do likewise*" is the only word that can convey the true spirit in which any loyal act of another man, whoever he is, should influence you. Cheer, if you will. But if a man has only taught you to cheer him, he has so far

merely amused you, and perhaps has roughened your throat.

Yet there are those who grow enthusiastic over the "vast influence" which the indeed genuine devotion of the players has upon the general spirit of college loyalty, and who seem to suppose that staring at the loyal players is itself loyalty, that cheering is loyalty, that a cloud of enthusiastic emotion is loyalty, that waving flags constitutes loyalty, that singing songs is loyalty, that talking over the chances of the game for weeks means loyalty, that neglecting other things in order thus to stare and to talk and to be stirred is loyalty, that, in brief, *anything* is loyalty which is *not* a hearty and sustained and clear-headed devotion of a man to his own hard individual work for his own chosen ideal and cause. The loyal players, — well, everybody knows that *their* business is not to stare, nor to cheer, nor to be overcome with emotion. Yet one persists in saying: "How loyal their devotion makes me, by reason of the contagion of their noble example! See the results. I cheer, I wave my flag. In the tumult and passion of my loyalty I lose my wits. How noble all this makes me! See how I rage and exult."

The fair retort to any such view of the matter is plain. What does this enthusiasm make you *do*? These players are setting you the example of loyalty. They risk their bodies, they devote their toil, they suffer and endure, — for their cause. And you, — you should regard it as a deep disgrace to have sat there staring and glowing, to have enjoyed the spectacle of their devotion, to have made your holiday out of their pain, to have gloried in their care and in their service, — *unless* in your life there is some service, some effective loyalty, which is at least as hard, as long, as painful, as cheerful in danger, as resolute in the face of apparent defeat, as patient when de-

feat has come, — as their loyalty has taught them to be.

If this is the lesson that football teaches you, and if you go away from every game a man more practically devoted to your own tasks, whatever they are, just because these players are so devoted to theirs, — well, then football has helped you and is helping you to an ideal. If not, football, may have helped you to "let off steam." But on the whole its prevailing influence will have been to enervate you, the spectator, — to make you less, not more loyal, — for all your cheering. For you have gloated over the sacrifice of others, and yourself have sacrificed, and intend to sacrifice — nothing.

IV

One may reply, and probably will reply, that to introduce such considerations as these to the ordinary member of the crowd of spectators is to attempt to remind him of something wholly incongruous with the occasion. "Of course," one will say, "the enthusiasm of the crowd at the game is not itself any form of practically loyal devotion. But it is a sort of preliminary to a possible loyalty. It at any rate is a tribute to loyalty, and therefore need not be other than a perfectly innocent joy, with a tendency resulting to prize good work for its own sake."

I answer: As true as is the word: "*On ne badine pas avec l'amour*," so true is the thought that one does not well to trifle with the spirit of loyalty, by cultivating a slavery to the enthusiasms of vast crowds and of an excited newspaper public in the place of a serious devotion of the great body of our youth to those possible activities which, whether under the name of sport or under the name of work, should actually absorb them in personal and practical

and ideal tasks of their own. "Team-work" is the great ideal of civilization; it is another name for loyalty. But is the crowd on the benches a team? And what is the prevailing social influence of the vast modern sports? Is it not far more this: To make and keep the crowd a crowd, rather than to train and keep the team a team?

Now to my mind, all the special evils which are justly chargeable to any modern athletic sport as it exists in our schools, colleges, universities, are merely incidents, often mere transient accidents of the one great evil which results from the extravagant publicity of our sports, from the prominence which the newspapers give to them, from the size and the miscellaneous constitution of the crowds which attend them, and from the inevitable distracting, confusing, and unreasonable social influences which belong to sportive activities thus carried on. These evils I believe to be both great and manifold.

The loyalty that is trained in the players is indeed precious. There is no praise too high for some of its best manifestations, even in case these are not always as wise as one could wish. For when a man devotes himself and all his powers, according to his lights, to his cause, — what more can you ask of him, so far as he has yet come in the pursuit of wise loyalty?

But sometimes, — in some place, in some seasons, — this or that evil spirit of unfair play may for a time be suggested to this or to that group of players. At such times the crowds concerned in watching these players are not themselves in any condition to give discriminating counsel, or to help the players into a better insight. On the other hand, the crowd may, for a time, condone, or even ignorantly applaud the new evil, until it grows somewhat obviously intolerable. Then comes one of those worse

seasons of football, when evils that nobody has ever deliberately intended wax prominent. We have known of such seasons. They lead to efforts, which are often very serious, to introduce reforms. These efforts prove temporarily effective. Good seasons follow for a time, — seasons when the friends of the game are content, and when its critics, — all except a stray moralist or two whom nobody will heed, — are silent. But the social forces involved in this extravagant publicity, in these fascinations of the crowd, are irresistible. After a time the moral clouds gather again, — now in some Western community, now nearer to our own homes. The clouds themselves vary endlessly in their form and their shading. Now one hears of "professionalism," now of violence, now of some other form of unfairness; or perhaps one hears merely of triviality, of neglect of work, of an excess of accidental injuries, or of some other symptom of over-excitement. These are but examples of the evils which attend the social influences to which I have referred.

For my part I care little what special form these passing evils take during the bad seasons. And I am never disposed to blame individuals, nor yet particular bodies of students, for any of these ills. What I note is that the modern game is played under social conditions which render such incidental and recurrent mishaps inevitable. These conditions involve namely a play of social forces which renders an enlightened and prevailing public opinion, such as shall steadily favor, in the mass of spectators a loyal life and a practical love of loyalty, impossible, so far as the conduct and the spirit and the results of these public displays are concerned. And so various evils result. The prevalent result is not favorable to the best moral education of the great body of our youth.

V

One will ask, Could these social conditions be changed without destroying the "great game"? I answer that, if the colleges could more completely organize their own academic social order, and could shut out extraneous public sporting influences, and could meanwhile so develop their other sports, and their college activities generally, that the spectators at the great games were limited to those who had the opportunity and, in the vast majority of cases the wish, when they applauded the display of the loyal spirit, to "go and do likewise," themselves, by doing their own work or play with equal loyalty, — well, then the great games might be simply culminating events in a generally loyal common social life. In that case I should have little fear that anybody would have occasion to complain of any excessive love of sport. I should be sure that football would retain all of its vigor and its true charm, without being helplessly obliged, every few years, to go wrong; and every year to mislead a good many people as to the estimate of true moral values.

But I see no very near prospect that such a social change is imminent. And under present social conditions, I do not believe that the forces at work before and about the great public games tend to the general moral education of our

academic youth. The players win training, and may learn the highest ideals through their devotion. But the crowds do not thus learn ideals. Hence the frequent incidental evils.

Whoever believes that I am wrong, is meanwhile invited to refute me by using his opportunities as a spectator at the game as means of making himself a more loyal and devoted man, in whatever sport or calling he thinks wise, than ever he was before. If those who thus refuted me should prove to be the majority of those present at any game, I should ardently rejoice in being thus refuted. If the game, if the players, — if their devotion, if their patience in training, if their courage in facing difficulty or peril, if their self-control in adversity, if their moderation and dignity in triumph, if their sacrifices, if their coolness and clearness of head, awaken these virtues in the spectators, and make the latter a body of men as earnest and devoted as they are joyous and enthusiastic, — a body of men as much lovers of sound reason, — and of such sound reason put into loyal action, — as they are now lovers of football, — then let this body of spectators show the result in their whole social life. Hereupon I shall be indeed both refuted, and blessed in the consciousness that I am refuted by a wisdom which will be much better than all the cheers of many multitudes.

