

Merton on Sports and Spirituality

By **Ron B. Rembert**

Thoughts about Thomas Merton's writing and teaching do not lead seamlessly to thoughts about athletes and athletic competition, but Merton's attention to these topics, and to sports in general, can enlighten us about key personal and pedagogical moments. Some of Merton's sports references emerge in *The Seven Storey Mountain* where he describes his own experiences as a college athlete on a crew and a cross-country team. Other sports episodes involving football and boxing arise as illustrations in Merton's taped teaching conferences for novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Merton does not explain his motivation for utilizing these sports sources in his writing or teaching. However, we can turn to a passage in *The Seven Storey Mountain* for a plausible clue, a fundamental comparison drawn by Merton between sports and spirituality. That comparison arises as part of Merton's reflection on his father's struggle with cancer: "Souls are like athletes, that need opportunity worthy of them, if they are to be tried and extended and pushed to the full use of their powers, and rewarded according to their capacity. And my father was in a fight with this tumor, and none of us understood the battle. We thought he was done for, but it was making him great."¹

If we assume with Merton that "souls are like athletes," what implications follow? One implication is that the spiritual and physical dimensions of life are so integrated that each affects the other. Separation, not a split, between the spiritual and physical makes integration possible. Another implication is that comparisons between spirituality and physicality make sense. Tangible events in the physical realm of athletic competition can help clarify less tangible ones in the spiritual arena of monastic practice. An additional implication is that a legitimate comparison between the two dimensions focuses on challenges or struggles, soulful and athletic, which can make one "great." The challenges encountered by the athlete serve as analogues for the testing of the soul.

In another section of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton adds a related image, that of a "spiritual athlete." As he returns from a workday in the fields, he reflects upon life in the monastery by claiming, "Anybody who runs away from a place like this is crazy," partly because "you feel satisfied that you are a spiritual athlete and a not inconsiderable servant of God" (*SSM* 392). That being a "servant of God" correlates with performance as a "spiritual athlete" also invites comparisons between athletes and athletic competition and the monastic life at Gethsemani. How might a "spiritual athlete" look? Merton's descriptions of his own athletic experiences as a rower and runner and those of athletes in two major sports, football and boxing, help us consider that question.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton provides a glimpse of his own athletic experience on the rowing team at Clare College, Cambridge. His first attempt at "trying to row" proved strenuous for Merton, pushing him to a point that "nearly killed" him (*SSM* 122). That unremarkable result does not capture his



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entire experience. Merton suggests that some benefit arose from his training regimen, an early-to-rise and early-to-bed routine that provided some structure to an otherwise often undisciplined and chaotic college experience (see *SSM* 122). Later, at Columbia University, Merton again volunteers for a position on the rowing team. In this second rowing effort, Merton realizes another false start initiated by his willingness to rejoin crew during “a moment of madness” (*SSM* 149). Facing climatic dangers of hurricane proportions while rowing on the Hudson River, he cuts short his rowing career with the realization, “I did not wish to die so young” (*SSM* 150).

After leaving crew, Merton turns to cross-country running as another sports option at Columbia. Merton claims some accomplishment in this second athletic endeavor, at least to the extent that he was never the last of the Columbia racers to cross the finish line. Neither his own self-image as a runner nor the roar of the crowd seemed to motivate him to finish higher than the last group. Nor was he apparently seeking acclaim from his coach or teammates by striving for a higher finish. To the contrary, this time his training routine implodes because of unhealthy personal habits curtailing his ability to be a highly successful competitor on the cross-country course (see *SSM* 156-57). Merton describes another experience on a cross-country course during a race against Army and Princeton in 1936. Again, Merton seems to accept without question his finish in the last group of collegiate runners. His physical discomfort at the end of the race appears intense enough for him to lose all interest in his performance or how it might be perceived. He walks away from that cross-country event without turning back, neither offering an explanation nor expecting comment from others about his departure. This final race exposes Merton as an athlete unprepared for the heat of competition that day and conclusively ended his career as a cross-country runner (see *SSM* 161).

What might Merton learn about his “soul” from these athletic experiences? His strength and stamina seem at low ebb during these challenges, his impulsivity and anxiety extreme at times. Merton’s attitude toward competition seems indifferent, his commitment to training sometimes serious and sometimes lackadaisical. His ranking in races appears irrelevant, his image as a runner insignificant. As a college rower and runner, Merton ultimately shrinks in the face of competitive challenges rather than flourishing as a result of them. He does not seek to be “great,” nor is he in anyone’s estimation. Merton’s performance as an athlete reflects a tepid soul, not rising triumphantly to the challenges that test him but collapsing quietly in the face of them. Interestingly, his less-than-stellar personal experiences as an athlete does not appear to dampen his interest in sports in general.

Years later, during his conferences at Gethsemani, Thomas Merton refers on a number of occasions to athletes and athletic competition, not from his personal perspective but that of others he observed. Specifically, he turns to two sports, football and boxing, as reference points in his teaching about the monastic life. In these athletic arenas he finds physical challenges faced by athletes as analogues to spiritual ones faced by monks. Football and boxing provide potential lessons for strengthening the soul, his own and those of the members of his community.

Merton’s interest in football may have arisen initially in his imagination, at least according to this passage in *The Seven Storey Mountain* about his novel-writing effort during his Columbia days: “The months passed by, and most of the time I sat in Douglaston, drawing cartoons for the paper-cup business, and trying to do all the other things I was supposed to do. In the summer, Lax went to Europe, and I continued to sit in Douglaston, writing a long, stupid novel about a college football player who got mixed up in a lot of strikes in a textile mill” (*SSM* 181-82) – an intriguing storyline that, unfortunately, does not survive in finished form. If starting in his novel-writing

imagination, Merton's interest in football apparently intensifies in real life during his teaching days at St. Bonaventure College, where he reports that his best students were "the football players and the seminarians": "The football players were mostly on scholarships, and they did not have much money, and they stayed in at night most of the time. As a group, they were the best-natured and best-tempered and worked as hard as the seminarians. They were also the most vocal. They like to talk about these books when I stirred them up to argue" (*SSM* 306). Merton's appreciation for football players as students extended beyond the classroom to their work ethic on the athletic field where they faced high expectations and demanding physical challenges: "But the ones at St. Bona's taught me much more about people than I taught them about books, and I learned to have a lot of respect and affection for these rough, earnest, good-natured and patient men who had to work so hard and take so many bruises and curses to entertain the Friars and the Alumni on the football field, and to advertise the school" (*SSM* 306). Merton compliments his student-athletes at St. Bonaventure by noting that they instructed him as much as he instructed them, not about literature but about "people" facing competitive challenges. What are some lessons Merton learned from observing competitiveness in football?

In Merton's conference entitled "Re-evaluation of Contemplative Aims,"²² actually a tape made for and sent to the Franciscan sisters at Allegany, NY, adjacent to the St. Bonaventure campus, in August 1967, he appeals to the game of football for exploring a new way of looking at the ascetic life in terms of "toughness" and "rewarding hardness":

It should be a toughness that tones us up to meet new possibilities, to meet the new, to meet the unexpected, to meet that for which we have not previously been capable, for which we have not previously been ready. . . . The toughness of the contemplative life has to lift us above ourselves, above our capacities. Therefore it must be hard. Hard and rewarding, not hard and frustrating. This should give us an insight into the new way of asceticism. A rewarding hardness, not just a frustrating and a beating down hardness, just the kind of hardness that deprives you and shoves you off into a corner and leaves you to rot. I mean, a hardness that proves you out, the hardness you get in football.

"A hardness that proves you out" – that's the ultimate challenge sought by the football player in the heat of a game and, Merton envisions, by the monk in the practice of asceticism. That hardness does not have a diminishing impact, a frustrating result. On the contrary, toughness developed through meeting physical and mental challenges strengthens one "to meet new possibilities, to meet the new, to meet the unexpected." There is nothing easy about the game of football or ascetic practice; it's hard. There's nothing soft about the competition or ascetic struggle; it's tough. The outcomes on the field or in the monastery are not always successful. Toughness does not guarantee victory; it stimulates reparation and rejuvenation throughout the contest. There is a reward, not in overcoming an opponent, but in one's own conversion.

Merton's reevaluated asceticism (the Greek word itself originally referred to athletic training) replaces extreme views of the ascetic life which he finds tempting and worrisome enough to question – for example, on one extreme a view demanding a "restricting toughness" based on severe and arbitrary exclusion of experiences left behind and rejected when entering the monastery. This view promotes a "frustrating and beating down hardness." On another extreme, he questions a view promoting "a

softening of the contemplative life,” making ascetic practice much too comfortable and flexible. Merton’s revised view of the ascetic life aims for hardness, not deprivation, and toughness, not complacency.

In another conference, entitled “Heroic Humility,”²³ presented to the novices in September 1962 as part of a series of conferences on the Benedictine *Rule*, Merton offers football as a case study connecting humility with acts of fortitude or courage. In his *Rule*, St. Benedict’s fourth step of humility as applied to obedience anticipates members of a Benedictine community “readily accepting in patient and silent endurance, without giving thought of giving up or avoiding the issue, any hard or demanding things that may come our way in the course of that obedience, even if they include hard impositions which are unjust.”²⁴ For monks, the vow of obedience may be the most difficult of monastic vows to uphold because of its demands, expected and unexpected, on a daily basis. When obedience grows challenging, not easy to uphold without question or concern, does humility arise as reinforcement for finding courage to obey?

Merton’s first football example involves a type of courage without humility, an aggressive type expected of a running back, “one that attacks” during a football scrimmage. The runner’s goal is to take the handoff, drive through the defensive line, gain ten yards or more and be happy. This is a natural expectation of a running play. On the other hand, Merton muses, “But suppose all you do, you get the ball and you bang up against the line, and there is no gain? You’re pushed back, and then maybe you make six inches gain, and then you don’t get anywhere. That’s not satisfying. Instead of being satisfying, it’s frustrating.” Merton judges this dynamic as a test, making “patience more difficult, because it means putting up with natural frustration.” Not only does patience grow more difficult in this circumstance, but humility grows more necessary. If the runner remains committed to play or, by comparison, the monk remains committed to obey, the obstacle must be accepted with humility and anticipated with courage.

A second consideration reorients the play from the runner’s view to that of the defensive linemen. Again Merton invites his listeners to imagine an act of courage, but a defensive, aggressive type this time: “he’s got the ball, he’s coming through and you have to stop him.” Unsatisfying and frustrating outcomes may result from this play if defensive players are blocked and tackles are missed. But Merton adds an interesting twist to this example with two queries: “Suppose he’s been tackled by someone else and you have slipped. You’re underneath and everyone lands on top of you. Which is the greater fortitude? Which demands the greater strength?” Merton concludes, “It’s courage to deal with this business of being stepped on or held down or suppressed or something like that” and get up again for another defensive stand. Such courage is required by the lineman on the bottom of the pile or by a monk under the pressure of obedience who endures the test, not allowing a sense of humiliation to override a response of true humility.

In these two examples from football, Merton highlights players struggling in ways that monks might encounter under their vow of obedience. Both offensive and defensive players seek satisfaction throughout the game, but they face prospects of frustration as much as success with every play. The monk also aims for satisfaction in fulfilling the vow of obedience as an integral part of monastic life, but may face psychological or spiritual difficulties from time to time. The courage needed to sustain one’s performance in the game of football or to comply in obedience to those in the monastery relies on humility in face of discouragement and disappointment. Courage without humility can eventually trap one in frustration; obedience without humility can lock one in resentment and resistance.

In another conference, entitled “The Commitment to Conversion,”⁷⁵ Merton does not refer to athletes playing football or the game itself to illustrate a teaching point, but he alludes to a scandal involving football players at the United States Air Force Academy in the 1960s in discussing the place and importance of St. Benedict’s *Rule*, especially the vow of conversion of manners, for monastic life. In 1965 and again in 1967, cheating scandals tarnished the Air Force Academy’s well-known honor code tradition. In the 1965 incident, a cheating effort centered on the selling of examination question – “About 44 percent of those involved in the cheating scandal were recruited athletes, with most of them on the football team.”⁷⁶ In deciding to forego the honor code for the sake of academic gain by playing by a different set of rules, the guilty cadets showed great lack of maturity and a misunderstanding of the connection between freedom and obedience. By comparison, monks who suddenly rebel against their vow of obedience, deciding unilaterally to disavow it for personal reasons, display immaturity and delusion in wanting to change the rules of the monastic life. For Merton, it is like changing from one sport to another in the middle of a game: “You start out playing tennis, and all of a sudden the fellow jumps over the net and grabs you and tackles you. ‘I’ve decided we’re going to play football.’ . . . Of course the whole thing is so silly, so obvious that there shouldn’t be any reason to talk about it, except that this happens all the time.” Such behavior reflects what Merton calls “a certain type of mentality outside in the world,” that is, “every man for himself.” He reflects: “Take the scandals you get – the cheating, and with some of the scandals you get with athletes. People taking a little money to blow a game. And the big scandal they had at the Air Force Academy with someone selling answers to exams. Some character got the questions, figured out the answer and sold them to everybody.” For Merton, questioning the vow of obedience may reflect the “basic philosophy outside” that engenders scandalous behavior. That troublesome philosophy finds unfortunate expression at times in athletic competition inside the classroom and outside on the field of play as well as within the halls of the monastery when monks might lose sight of their vow of obedience.

In that same conference, “The Commitment to Conversion,” Merton offers another example, one from boxing, to explore the mutual understanding among all parties involved in a boxing match and in practicing the vow of obedience:

For example, you’re going to box with a guy, you get in the ring, and there are certain places where you’re not supposed to hit him, and there are certain things you’re not supposed to do. You’re not supposed to suddenly kick him or poison him or put poison in his water bottle so that he gets a drink of arsenic or something. Or you’re not supposed to pull out a lead pipe and hit him on the head with it. In other words, when you go into a ring with another person, it’s understood what’s going to happen. There are certain limitations as to what each one agrees he’s going to do.

This rather graphic account of potential, underhanded boxing ploys, ranging from misdemeanor to felonious options, is intended by Merton to emphasize the necessity of maturity over immaturity in athletic performance and, by implication, in the monastic life:

One of the basic things that goes with being a mature person is that you are able to abide by these understandings. This is a mark of maturity. Mature people accept certain things, and then they stay with them. And when things get to be too difficult or unpleasant or something like that, or impossible or disgusting or repugnant, well there are various things they can do about it.

Among these various things, Merton focuses on the importance of discussion: “In other words, if there is suddenly a certain change in your view of the thing, if all of a sudden you decide you’re going to enter the ring with a piece of lead pipe, it’s only fair that you tell the other fellow, at least that much. Of course, if you intend to cheat, then you don’t tell.” Informing an opponent in the ring about one’s intention to change the rule applies also to monks who may start to question an essential rule in the monastic life, their commitment to the vow of obedience. Discussion is the mature course in both settings, whereas not telling indicates immaturity, at least, and cheating, at most. Subversive action is underhanded and unacceptable in both in the ring and in the monastery.

Unlike Merton’s interest in football and football players, his interest in boxing does not have a clear point of origin. It is pure speculation to wonder whether his student days at Columbia University in New York City may have provided Merton with opportunities to develop an appreciation for this sport. After all, between 1935 and 1940, some of the most famous bouts in the history of Heavyweight Championship Boxing occurred. For example, in 1935, considered a major underdog, James “Cinderella Man” Braddock defeated Max Baer for the title.⁷ In 1936, in a bout with racial and political implications, Max Schmeling (or “Der Max” as known by his Nazi supporters) knocked out Joe Louis, a rising young boxer who had never been defeated (Bromberg 237). In 1937, Louis regained stature by knocking out James Braddock, but a rematch with Schmeling was needed for recognition as “the real champion.”⁸ In 1938, Louis won that rematch against the German heavyweight, not the outcome expected by Nazi propagandist Josef Goebbels in his promotion of Schmeling as a “symbol of ‘German mastery’” (Bromberg 241). In 1939, Joe Louis repeated as champion again by knocking out opponent John Henry Lewis in the first round (Hudson 36). Perhaps Merton read about some of these boxing matches in the newspaper, especially the ones with intense racial and political overtones, or listened to them on the radio, developing an interest and appreciation of boxing during his college days in New York.

As mentioned above, Merton found in the sport of boxing some important points of comparison with the spiritual life. Another boxing example appears in his May 1968 retreat conference for contemplative prioresses entitled “Lessons from Zen Buddhism,”⁹ where Merton warns about “vacancy in prayer” experienced sometimes by himself in evening chapter and by others during choir. On one such occasion, Merton notices a novice appearing “like a prizefighter hanging on the ropes” in a dreamlike stupor. How does one avoid this condition? “That’s a thing everybody has to know for himself. He has to know when he’s asleep and when he isn’t. . . . You just know by experience when you’re vacant, you’re really vacant.” Besides illustrating the daze of one hanging on the ropes, a prizefighter can also exemplify one rebounding from that state, reviving himself at that crucial moment just before facing defeat. Merton introduces this more inspiring image while discussing St. Benedict’s degrees of humility as climbing the rungs on a ladder. According to Merton, a ladder serves as an “archetypal,” “ancient” and “symbolic” image in spiritual literature which helps us picture a life evolving in humility by degrees:

You find yourself face-to-face with this ladder; you have to climb the ladder. This is based on a fact, one of the elementary truths of the spiritual life based on an image of a ladder. What’s the fact? We’ve got to go from one place to another. We’re at the bottom, and we’ve got to get to the top. . . . We’re down, and we’ve got to get up. This is the way the spiritual life is constituted. You start out from a recumbent position with the referee reaching the count nine, and then you’ve got to get back up on your feet, and start going.

During a fight, a boxer may face low points when he appears down and almost out in a “recumbent position,” as well as high points when he pulls himself together to “start going” again. Similarly, the monk faces moments of “vacancy” during liturgical practices when he must strive to awake from his slumber and “has got to get up.”

Using another image involving boxing in his conference “The Paradox of Joy and Sorrow,”¹⁰ Merton explores the connection emphasized by St. Bernard about saints having gifts and being generous:

If I have been given the grace, the gift of nature to be a heavyweight boxing champ, that means to say there are certain gifts that go along with this, a certain physique and certain things I can do and so forth. . . . Generosity consists in going into the ring and knocking out everybody in sight out of it, and not let anyone stay in there with me for more than fifteen seconds or something like that. Well, that’s generosity in that field. But, if I haven’t got that particular gift, that kind of generosity is just going to get me in a lot of trouble. I can rush in the ring with someone endowed with a great generosity and allow myself to be immediately knocked out. It can’t get you anywhere. So I have to be generous in terms of the gifts I don’t have or do have. It’s no use to be generous in terms of the gifts I don’t have.

Generosity cannot flow from a lack of gifts; it can only stem from a source of gifts, natural or grace-filled. The spiritual goal of generosity begins with recognizing one’s gifts, either as a boxer or as a monk, because one cannot generously offer what is not already realized as one’s own. To offer generosity prematurely without first recognizing the gifts on which it is based proves unfulfilling in the athletic arena or the monastery.

Merton’s limited experience as an athlete illustrates a soul less aware and prepared for competition, while this survey of passages from Merton’s conferences presents a different picture, one of athletes facing challenges head on. Merton’s examples from football and boxing provide numerous insights about the challenges of monastic practice and spiritual life – the hardness and toughness of the religious life (football), the connection between courage and humility in spiritual formation (football), the commitment to vows without disavowing the rules of monastic tradition (football and boxing), the prospects of lethargy and resilience in monastic practice (boxing), and the dynamic of gifts leading to generosity in the spiritual life (boxing).

What makes his references to football and boxing in these conferences worth noticing? One reason is their focus on challenges. It is not difficult to envision the challenges facing athletes on the football field or in the boxing ring. In these arenas, football players and boxers face struggles initiated by others, but also ones arising within themselves. One might wonder why Merton turned to such violent sports as examples for comparison with the monastic life. Why not reference more peaceful endeavors? These athletic events do not gloss over the challenges of intense competition, but often pinpoint the struggle in graphic terms as opportunities for growth and development. As sources for comparison, sports serve as analogues for the challenges and struggles of the monastic life, especially for those novices in the early stages of practicing it.

A second reason for emphasizing the value of these sports images is their focus on concrete, physical events. These football and boxing episodes offer in tangible terms a perspective on spiritual challenges which, as teaching tools and practical aids, enhance the novices’ efforts to understand

and face them. Exploring spiritual insights strictly in spiritual terms has disadvantages in fostering thought on a very abstract level. Concrete examples of a spiritual trial can embody its essence and truth in ways that make a challenge more realizable in everyday practice.

A third reason for appreciating sports images is their appeal to a shared, cultural perspective connecting Merton with his listeners. Accounts of football and boxing events draw attention to aspects of popular culture Merton treats as familiar and relevant for himself and novices (and also, apparently, for cloistered nuns!). Popular culture does not always serve as a dependable source for positive lessons regarding the monastic life, but Merton's discriminating selection of episodes from boxing and football seems to prove helpful in his pedagogical efforts. The world within and beyond the monastery walls appears less distant.

A final reason for underscoring these sports references is their confirmation in scripture. For example, in comparing sports with the spiritual life, Merton stands firmly in the Pauline tradition as indicated in this passage from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:24-27 [NRSV]). Merton's use of sports images point toward the goal of that "imperishable wreath" that inspires day-to-day life in a monastic setting.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 83; subsequent references will be cited as "SSM" parenthetically in the text.
2. "Reevaluation of Contemplative Aims," lecture 5 of Thomas Merton, *"Man to Man": A Message of Contemplatives to the World (1967)* (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013) (transcriptions of recorded comments include minor editing to remove repeated phrases or verbal tics such as "see").
3. "Heroic Humility," lecture 9 of *Thomas Merton on the 12 Degrees of Humility* (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2012).
4. *Benedict's Dharma: Buddhists Reflect on the Rule of St. Benedict*, ed. Patrick Henry (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002) 16.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Commitment to Conversion* (Kansas City, MO: Credence Cassettes, 1988).
6. William Anderson, "Stamps 'Sound' on Air Force Academy," *Chicago Tribune* (7 May 1965) IA4.
7. Lester Bromberg, *Boxing's Unforgettable Fights* (New York: Ronald Press, 1962) 217; subsequent references will be cited as "Bromberg" parenthetically in the text.
8. David L. Hudson, Jr., *Boxing in America: An Autopsy* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012) 35; subsequent references will be cited as "Hudson" parenthetically in the text.
9. "Lessons from Zen Buddhism: Emptying the Self," lecture 6 of *Thomas Merton, The Prophet's Freedom* (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2012).
10. Thomas Merton, *The Paradox of Joy and Sorrow* (Kansas City, MO: Credence Cassettes, 1988).