FEATURE ARTICLES

Reflections on the Intersection of Sports, Leadership, and the Warrior Ethos

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Having dedicated much of my youth and college years to sports, I am convinced that there are relevant connections between athletics and the development of the elite professionals I work with every day–the men and women who have chosen to serve in the military. While there are certainly many factors contributing to successful leadership attributes, athletics is one tradition with a rich history. Yet, it can be vague the connections between sports and leadership in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) culture that we operate in today. To describe how athletics can shape leadership experiences across a spectrum of real-world challenges, I will provide a brief history of the sports-military relationship. Then, I will relay three personal stories that connect the warrior ethos, athletics, and the Leader of Character Framework (LCF) used at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) (CCLD, 2011). After this, four professionals with a wealth of experience, share their perspectives on the relevance of sports to leadership. These include a current USAFA coach, a sports psychologist and former NFL player, a USAFA grad world-class athlete, and a former commander and Army combat soldier.

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Background: U.S. Military/Sports Interaction and Where We Are Today

In her book, *Playing to Win: Sports and the American Military from 1898-1945*, author Wanda Wakefield makes a case for the origins of the U.S. military-sport relationship originating in the late 19th Century (Wakefield, 1997). Because of improvements in media, transportation, and industrialization, by 1898, sports were a major part of America's civilian culture. In the late 19th Century, they had not yet become a part of the U.S. Military culture. The Spanish-American war in 1898 changed this. President Theodore Roosevelt and General Leonard Wood valued fitness and were both fierce competitors in their personal lives. President Roosevelt chose his famed "Rough Riders" from the ranks of athletes, and General Wood was Roosevelt's second in command (in addition to being a physician). These leaders advocated the troops' athletic development and linked sports directly to their ability to fight well. Additionally, with a growing U.S. international focus to combat Spain in Cuba and quell an internal rebellion in the Philippines, a rapid fivefold buildup of U.S. troops occurred in the late 1800s, an increase from roughly 25K to 125K soldiers (Wakefield, 1997).

As with most large troop movements, the soldiers had free time, and the U.S. Military was unprepared to support the soldiers' health and wellness while away from home. Out of necessity, the leadership instituted a sports program that focused on keeping the troops fit while simultaneously diverting their attention from vices such as gambling, prostitution, and alcohol. The military leadership deemed the athletic diversion a success in Cuba and the Philippines. Within the years leading up to WWI, leadership further formalized sports' role within the military (Wakefield, 1997).

In the early 20th Century, Wakefield enumerated sports' varying purposes within the military. Sports provided a common lexicon amongst diverse troops while attempting to break down racial barriers. Sports gave a sense of American identity while overseas, favoring baseball over "foreign sports" such as soccer and fencing. Finally, according to leadership at the time, it promoted the fighting spirit while reducing anxiety. Combat was frequently correlated with a "game" to pacify the nerves and provide a familiar context. Following WWI, General Douglas MacArthur became the Superintendent of West Point and immediately increased participation in collegiate intramurals. He did so because it "brings out the qualities of leadership, quickness of decision, promptness of action, mental and muscular coordination, aggression, and courage" (Wakefield, 1997, p. 53). Today, if you take a tour of any Service Academy, it is apparent that the sports-military relationship has grown significantly since MacArthur's West Point command.

Personal Examples

Within these next three examples, I would like to make a case that sports are vital in real-world leadership situations. In each scenario, there are instances that can be appreciated both within and outside of the military. Ultimately, the challenge is to rise above one's discomfort and rise to the challenge. The first story was when I was a 2nd Lieutenant in Pilot Training. The second is as a new copilot on my first deployment to Afghanistan. The third is as a senior Captain and aircraft commander on my third deployment to Kuwait.

Story 1: "Stop the Sim"

February 2006 - I am a new 2LT at Moody Air Force base in Undergraduate Pilot Training. I have completed the academic phase, and I am sitting in a T-6 Texan II procedural trainer (simulator). I have yet to fly the T-6. The instructor is an older, retired KC-135 Pilot that I'll call "Mr. Smith." He is running me through Emergency Procedures, and I feel out of my element. As I struggle through each step of the checklist, I say, "I *think* I will roll wings level....and then I *may* look at my gauges...then I'll analyze the situation." Mr. Smith is silent while I am fishing for guidance and approval. Mr. Smith pauses the simulator–never a good sign.

Mr. Smith: "Listen, Danny...No crew wants to know what you *think you may do or may not do*. This is an emergency. Your *indecision* is contagious and will breed a lack of confidence in those you lead. Just make an informed decision and move out."

Then Mr. Smith starts the sim again.

I can imagine I was the 1,000th student to which he bestowed this pearl of wisdom. Yet, to me, his advice made perfect sense. Largely because it drove home everything I learned from a career in sports. On the athletic field, there are times when you are uncomfortable and out of your element. Maybe it is getting pinned in unarmed-combat by someone smaller. Maybe it is playing on a new team in a new position. Or maybe it is being the go-to player, and everyone is counting on you. Regardless of your role, the team or your crew needs you to show up with confidence and make informed decisions–usually under pressure and quickly. "Give me the ball because I know what to do with it" has to be the attitude of a successful athlete and also an aircrew member. If you do not have this mindset, then what are you doing on the field? Or at the controls of a multi-million-dollar aircraft? Or the leader of a high-visibility project for your organization?

The Leader of Character Framework (LCF) was developed in 2011 by the Center for Character and Leadership Development (CCLD) and gave structure and guidance to the ambitious goal of developing officers who must lead in defense of our nation. The LCF defines a leader of character as one who "lives honorably, lifts others, and elevates the team's performance" (CCLD, 2011). To prepare these young men and women, the LCF asks cadets to own the pursuit of their destiny, engage in deliberate experiences, and practice habits of thought and mind. Finally, the LCF speaks of a decision-action gap where a leader recognizes a problem and must have the inner strength to correct the situation. In addition to the LCF, USAFA has nine institutional outcomes that the educational-military cadet's four years are built around. One of these outcomes is to embrace the warrior ethos; "exhibit grit: a hardiness of spirit and resistance to accept failure despite physical and mental hardships."[1]

As 2nd Lieutenants, both the decision-action gap and one's grit level are tested very early on. Whether the officer is leading a Maintenance Flight or soloing for the first time in a high-performance aircraft, or leading a formation into combat, the ability to perform is based upon a history of owning the pursuit of one's identity (CCLD, 2011, p. 13). The experiences on "the friendly fields of strife" in athletics prepare an individual for these stressful situations. By demanding that cadets experience various sports, they will likely excel in certain areas while struggling in others. One cadet may be good at racquetball, but there's a good chance that the same cadet has never been punched in

1 https://www.usafa.edu/app/uploads/Warrior-Ethos-White-Paper-approved.pdf

the face before while boxing (me). To grow leaders from officer candidates, it is critical to experience the range and variety of sports requirements, including those that require developing grit when things are going terribly wrong. Otherwise, we would all gravitate to that which we are already good at and never stretch our limits.

There are unquestionably a variety of ways to develop grit and perseverance, and yet, I believe sports is unique, namely because of the combination of team dynamics and physical requirements. Unlike the aero club or debate team, the physical nature of sports demand individual sacrifice both in the short term and the long term. When you're on your last day of a deployment or putting in an eighty-hour workweek, I believe one can gain confidence and strength from their previous athletic success and failure. And know that they can overcome the present hardships.

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Story 2: "Go Around"

In 2010, I was a new HH-60G copilot in a Combat Rescue Squadron in Afghanistan. I was on my first deployment, and thankfully, the crew was accepting of a new copilot. Oddly enough, the pilot that I flew with was a classmate and friend from USAFA and, within a week, it was obvious that the crew worked well together. The separation of duties became second nature. It was not unusual to be called upon at 0100 to rescue a soldier who had stepped on an improvised explosive device (IED) and had sustained horrific injuries. We also picked up injured Afghan Soldiers, Taliban Soldiers, and Afghan civilians as part of our mission. We always flew in a two-ship formation for mutual support. Each crewmember was trusted with a unique role. The Flight Engineer and Gunner would lay down fire when necessary and call the approaches. The Pararescue (P.J.'s) would gather information on threats and patient status.

Additionally, if needed, the P.J.'s would fight their way to a survivor's location and stabilize the patient while providing overhead cover. The Flight Lead was the Rescue Mission Commander and would decide risk levels, navigation, and tactics, among other duties. When the alarm sounded, the crew ran to the helicopter and would be "wheels up," gathering information within five minutes. At the end of our deployment, our formation had picked up over 200 severely injured soldiers. Like every crew at that time, we had been shot at routinely and had shot back. Each mission presented its challenges: routing, high altitude operations, ground threats, fuel limitations, and weather.

One particular night we were called to rescue the crew of a downed U.S. Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter and eight severely injured soldiers. It was unusually dark at 0130 when the call came. The Chinook had crashed while attempting a brown-out landing. This is where a helicopter lands in fine dust and loses visual references as high as 120 feet before touching the ground. There are varying techniques to accomplish a successful brown-out, but the key to a safe landing in a confined area is to set up a controlled approach early and to trust both your instruments and your flight engineer/gunner calls until the wheels touch down. On this night, we were the lead HH-60

of a two-ship formation and tasked with the landing and survivor pickup. The other aircraft would provide overhead cover. Additionally, a C-130 was overhead, lazing the landing spot within a tight canyon.

Over the radio, the ground element passed that the survivors were in bad shape, so our crew was in a hurry. We had practiced hundreds of brown-out approaches previously, yet, in our haste, we set up a rushed, turning approach and began to flare for landing. At 100 feet, the pilots lost all references while in a turning descent. At 80 feet, there was silence within the cockpit after the Flight Engineer said he lost ground reference. At 75 feet, I began to notice the instantaneous velocity vector shifting to the right – this meant we were drifting laterally fast. I said, "Stop Right." Within the next second, we were at 40 feet and descending rapidly. At the same moment, I noticed the velocity vector pointing directly to our screen's right again – it maxed out at 25 knots. I called "go-around" and took the flight controls. With the other pilot (not procedure), we wrestled the aircraft back into controlled flight and exited the cloud going slightly backward but up. We had narrowly missed crashing while "rescuing" another helicopter crew that had crashed in a brown-out. We all re-focused, and the pilot took his time to set up a second, controlled brown-out approach. He executed it to perfection. I should mention that this type of experience is familiar to any crew that has flown helicopters in the desert. When the dust cleared, our crew noticed an eight-foot-deep ditch just ten feet to the right of our helicopter's wheels. The C-130 couldn't see the ditch from their altitude, and it was obvious that this is where the Chinook had crashed. The margin of error was small, but we were able to pick up the injured members and return to base as a crew.

The LCF advocates that to "help someone develop as a leader of character, people of influence in the organization must begin by assessing the person's growth, and then challenge them to become and do more" (CCLD, Read Ahead, 2011). The greatest motivation for me as a new copilot was to not let my crew members down. To pull from the LCF's verbiage - the "people of influence" on my first deployment, the more experienced crew included the pilot, flight engineer, and gunner that had accepted me as their new copilot. During the deployment, hundreds of split-second decisions were made, and I made plenty of wrong ones. Yet, the more experienced crewmembers let me make recoverable mistakes while I continued to improve. I knew they trusted me to take action if and when a dangerous situation developed.

This was similar to my experience in sports at USAFA. When I first joined the USAFA Men's soccer team, I had previously spent a year playing for Wake Forest University. As a new "4-degree" (freshman), I was not considered a leader within the greater USAFA sphere. The upperclassmen rightfully kidded me and treated me like every other 4-degree yet, when we laced up our cleats, the dynamics changed. They then trusted me to be the team's defensive center midfield and stop counterattacks while distributing the ball to those who could score. Within USAFA athletics, the upperclassmen teammates and coaches were the "people of influence" who challenged me to be and do more. Like the helicopter crew, the older players' trust and confidence gave me an intense desire to not let them down when the whistle blew. I've heard that fear of letting your fellow soldiers down is what allows individuals to conquer the debilitating terror of combat. In many ways, this is similar to sports.

In addition to knowing who the people of influence are, knowing one's role matters. During my first season at USAFA, we had an unusually good team and were ranked 19th in the nation at one point. It was a team

that still stands out in my mind because all of the players knew and embraced their role. A firstie (senior) defender was tenacious at stopping counterattacks but knew he could not distribute the ball well. After he stole the ball, he would always give it to the central midfielders, advancing the ball up the field. In succeeding years, where players did not embrace their role, a defender would often steal the ball only to do something "great" with it themselves–maybe beat the next defender or crush the ball down the field. In my role, I knew I was not a natural goal scorer. Because of this, if I ever had the opportunity, I would give the ball to those I knew could score.

Ultimately, this comes back to the warrior ethos outcome and "the ability to put the mission and others before one's self" while "applying techniques to maintain effectiveness."[2] Within USAFA and the operational environment, this translates to challenging others to become better leaders, pilots, athletes, or technicians, independent of the environment or personal discomfort. To knowing one's role and how you fit into the greater mission. I can't think of a better place to practice the warrior ethos outcome than on the athletic fields.

Story 3: "I have a bad feeling about this."

In the summer of 2012, I was deployed to Kuwait as an aircraft commander. Although we weren't shot at in Kuwait and never picked up a survivor, the conditions were still precarious for helicopter operations. It was not uncommon at night to lose the horizon and rely on instruments while still maintaining formation position. On one particularly dark night, our crew was briefing to accomplish "live" night water training in the Arabian Gulf. This is where we simulate a survivor in the open ocean and drop in P.J.'s to rescue them. They normally jump out while we troll at 10 feet/10 knots over the ocean. Once the simulated survivor is "packaged" by the P.J.'s, we often use a hoist for the extraction. On this night, illumination barely met minimums to accomplish training, and we had a cover helicopter for safety mitigation. In night water training, like brown-outs, the pilots have to trust their instruments, and the crew has to work together to not lose sight of the P.J.'s in the water while maintaining a stable platform. After departing base, we flew past the bright lights of cities and into the utter blackness of the Arabian Gulf. As we went "feet wet," we ran through our overwater checklist and began to descend. The entire crew had a sinking feeling about how unusually dark the night was. As we continued at 125 feet over water to our training area, there was silence in the cockpit. I focused completely on keeping the "spinny-side up" while reviewing the training requirements in my head and keeping the formation position. The other crew members scanned for boats and monitored for undeclared descents.

Within about three minutes of silence, the Flight Engineer said, "It's really F'ing dark out here." More silence...then the gunner says, "Guys, I have a bad feeling about this." At that point, I realized that my silence as the aircraft commander was creating an overly tense situation. We had practiced this both at home and in Kuwait many times before; it was up to me to instill confidence in the crew. I knew we would perform better if the crew was calm, so I tried to think of something. The previous night, we had watched "21 Jump Street" as a squadron. It is an incredibly stupid and funny comedy where a couple of undercover cops go back to high school. I ended up bringing up a scene from it. Immediately, the P.J.'s chimed in. Then the copilot and the rest of the crew started laughing while

2 https://www.usafa.edu/app/uploads/Warrior-Ethos-White-Paper-approved.pdf

continuing to scan. We were still concentrating, but the crew was not in a bad spot–they were at ease and could focus on their specific role. We safely accomplished the training mission and returned with confidence in our ability when the real call came.

This was a clear example of the LCF's decision-action gap mentioned previously. The first step was to recognize there was a problem and the source of the problem. In this case, the problem was my lack of confident, decisive leadership. After understanding that I was the problem, the next step was to decide how to correct the situation and act on it. It was essentially the CCLD's *ARDA Model* at work. The LCF defines the ARDA model as a "technique and an approach to ethical and effective leadership" (CCLD, 2011, p. 24). Within the ARDA Model, the *A* stands for being *Aware* that a leadership issue is at stake. The *R* is *Reasoning* through the next step to correct the leadership problem. The *D* is *Deciding* that something has to be done, and the *A* is *Acting* on that decision. "I have a bad feeling" and "It's really dark" were clues that something was wrong, and yet, this was not a good enough reason to cancel the training. The weather and illumination were above minimums. To be ready for the survivor who is having a terrible day, we must practice in harsh conditions.

As in the other stories, my operational experience was similar to my background in sports. Within a team, the athlete constantly trains for game day. At USAFA as a cadet, this meant training when there was four inches of snow, and you could barely see either the ball or the opponent from five feet away. It meant running down from Chemistry class in 40-knot wind immediately after taking a test that didn't go well. It meant putting personal interests aside and showing up ready to play at every practice despite the inevitable, competing interests. Everyone on my helicopter crew thought that training conditions were difficult that night over the Arabian Gulf. I also remember thinking that we had no business training in the snow at USAFA when my toes were freezing, and I could not see the ball. And yet, I was thankful for my training when the survivor needed us on a black night in Afghanistan. Or when we played against San Diego State in a blizzard. Our teams and our crews depend on us showing up every time, whether in training or at game time. That practice reduces the decision gap that leads to decisive leadership. The LCF advocates for deliberate practice that supports the pillars to live honorably, lift others, and elevate performance. The warrior ethos includes "continuously honing physical, mental and professional skills in supporting the ability to employ military capabilities."[3]

I believe in the connection between sports and one's ability to lead in challenging circumstances. This said, it is only one perspective within a sea of individuals who have dedicated their lives to either coaching, leadership, or the development of others. The following are some of those who have graciously agreed to give their thoughts on the intersection between sports, the warrior ethos, and leadership.

Dana Lyon – USAFA Graduate; Former Member Air Force World Class Athlete Program; Current USAFA Assistant Coach, Track and Field

The way you do anything is the way you'll do everything.

I had only been in the uniform—my Track & Field singlet, that is—for 15 months when a senior competitor, from Texas A&M, said to me, "Dana, the fact that "AIR FORCE" is printed across your chest tells me you're more than a just good javelin thrower…" She

3 https://www.usafa.edu/app/uploads/Warrior-Ethos-White-Paper-approved.pdf

went on, but that conversation was the first realization for me in my athletic career, that the core of our mission at USAFA infiltrates every aspect of our lives, especially athletics. It ingrained in me not only the high calling for excellence, but the empowerment to achieve more than I could have ever imagined. The physical act of any military or athletic training is critical for growth because we won't get it right the first time; we don't just drill to get it right; we drill until we can't get it wrong. Basic Military Training, Combat Survival Training (CST), Airmanship 490, and other military training at the Academy are in lockstep with athletics at USAFA. Likewise, drill after drill, rep after rep—on the court, in the field or gym—develops in us the will to achieve and overcome. I call it creating patterns of behavior—we beat our bodies into submission, we set our minds to conquer, and we come out victorious. Not because we know the drill, it's because we know how to master the drill. The mindset of a champion is a powerful vessel. The hunger for victory is never satiated.

If my javelin coach only told me how to throw the javelin, but I never practiced, I would have never won championships. If we only sit in a classroom or watch a briefing on the critical programs we expect our cadets to be successful in, they will undoubtedly fail—and we would have failed them. It's the physical courage to work, battle, fail and respond with an attitude to overcome that gives us the ability to conquer any challenge the military, or life, may throw at you. I would take it one step further: it's not enough to simply complete a course or drill, you must be excellent. There is no victory in survival.

For me, track & field at the Academy was my life's training environment. Now, as a coach here, it is critical to the development of my athletes. I want my practices and training sessions to be more difficult than anything their competitions will ever throw at them. Who I was determined to be as an athlete, the grit and determination to surmount any challenge, has spilled over into every facet of my life. It is my calling to inspire my athletes to achieve the same in sport and life.

Lt Col Kaipo McGuire, Ph.D.– Former NFL Player; Current Deputy Department Head/Director of Support, Physical Education at USAFA

Lt Col McGuire's view is that athletes and warriors are similarly developed to perform at increasingly higher levels, starting from a low-stress environment and then advancing to a high-stress environment. Later on, as highly trained warriors or athletes, these leaders draw on their experiences in increasingly challenging and difficult circumstances, whether making the clutch field goal or fighting in combat.

Lt Col McGuire also describes how practicing repetitively the often mundane and boring drills help these athletes and warriors learn to perform at their very best regardless of the conditions. The drills can be immeasurable, such as watching films, strategizing with the team or coach, or staying after practice for the extra reps. The consequences of not performing well in the highest levels of amateur sport, (e.g., in hockey, if you're not checking, you're going to get checked,) align with the consequences of not performing well in combat. Where do they learn these skills? Both athletes and warriors learn these skills more on the practice field than they do in the arena. When they put in the work on the practice field, both learn to perform at their very best in the moment required. They reach their peak performance when it counts.

Another equally important point is that athletes and warriors learn to immediately "dump" negative thoughts. These negative thoughts have a direct relationship to poor performance, so learning to clear

your mind and focus on the mission at hand takes mental training. Within the sports, combat, or business world, failure will be a part of taking calculated risks. Athletes learn that dwelling on the past missed shot will only negatively affect their future shots. In combat and business, there will be mistakes and, yet, one must keep going forward. Focusing on the mission and well-being of the team over your individual disappointments is critical.

Rich Ramsey – Lt Col (ret) U.S. Army, Former Army Commander/Air Officer Commanding (AOC); Executive Coach

There are parallels between an athlete and a military warrior in conditioning. Both the athlete and the warrior begin their training with physical and mental conditioning, as well as basic drills. Overextended conditioning, this preparation leads to a "live under the lights" experience. For both the warrior in combat or the athlete in the game, everything is predicated on training. Both fall back on repetitive and increasingly intense training, and the individual becomes capable of doing things without conscious thought. It becomes automatic that the warrior naturally flips the safety switch on their weapon when in a firefight, or the athlete effortlessly makes the free throw in a game – despite the pressure to not fail. Practice doesn't make perfect; practice makes permanent. Just as warriors wire their brains in training so that combat comes naturally, so athletes wire their brains in practice so their skills will be automatic in competition. Finally, these same skills translate to leading others, whether at the tactical level in the military, an athletic team, or a civilian organization. The same dedication and grit that led to success on the friendly fields of strife will pave the way to success in other life tests.

Coach Sam Barber – USAFA Wrestling Coach

The first rule for coaches is to be a leader who teaches and models character and integrity. Coaches set the program goals for the warrior ethos, holding their team accountable and providing stability during times of uncertainty and adversity. Coaches provide experiences that directly impact future leadership during times of high stress. A model sports program for the warrior ethos will create an environment where cadet-athletes will have to balance multiple life demands while pursuing challenging but realistic athletic goals over a set period. Additionally, the model program will flex, support and demand that cadet-athletes pursue excellence in all areas of their lives. There is a right way to win versus winning at all costs. The coach will provide a challenging and supportive environment that builds resilience despite or in the face of failure.

In combat and business, there will be mistakes and, yet, one must keep going forward. Focusing on the mission and well-being of the team over your individual disappointments is critical.

Great coaches are strategic thinkers and use all the tools required to achieve and track progress toward mission success. Accountability is critical in both the individual and team's development. This, in turn, can influence a shared growth mindset where failure isn't accepted but can be teaching points for the future.

Finally, the coach can teach athletes how to be strategic thinkers, not just on the athletic field, but in service to their nation. With the right mindset

and approach, the coach can create transformational experiences in the athletic world that develop maturity and confidence that translate to their future capabilities as leaders of character.

Conclusion

At USAFA, athletics is one of the pillars of a cadet's development. Like the other Academies, USAFA is tasked to prepare leaders of character who are ready to lead with integrity in defense of our nation. To prepare to serve in the Air Force as a leader, tactician and strategist, the Academy uses athletics as a building block for personal development. All of the Service Academies value competitive sports as a means of developing leadership and the warrior ethos. The intersection of Athletics, the Warrior Ethos, and the tenets of the LCF to "Own, Engage, and Practice" will continue to be dynamic and integral to the development of Air Force officers.

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