A cliché about the intensity of the desire to succeed or win identifies the sense of ultimacy that many persons in American culture often accord to triumph, especially in contests: “I’d die to win.” Football Hall of Famer George Allen, one of the winningest coaches of all time, was a man consumed by such a desire to win, so much so that NFL Films adapted some of his motivational quips to provide the title to his biographical tribute: “Winning Is Living and Losing Is Dying” (cf. Allen). Although the desire to win is associated with passion for life, at what cost might winning be pursued? What is the relation between life and victory, between victory and death, between life and losing, between death and defeat?

Millennia ago in a spiritual context, St. Paul shifted expectations about the relation between death and victory in his epistolary aphorism that “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). Success surely comes in victory. But under what circumstances, we might press, is death, which is the defeat of life itself, the willing price of victory? And how is this equation or computation of cost-benefit complicated by the aspect or context of sports—when the victory sought is not only the rush of a kind of spiritual success but the triumph in a sports contest? For some ancient sports, like the Mayan game of ball, the victor was rewarded with death, honored by beings sacrificed to the gods. The sacrifice of the winning captain, as suggested by the bas reliefs on the walls of the ball courts at Chichenitza, was not merely the reward of athletic superiority. The sacrifice was connected with a series of sacred stories about Hun Hunapu and Hun Hunacu, as identified in the Popol Vuh. Because the playing of the ballgame ritually re-enacted the myths of the primeval creation struggle, the sacrifice of the winning captain was understood as assuring fertility. Yet the people also recognized the death of the captain as the honor of victory in the ballgame, rather than as a risked consequence of its pursuit (cf. Wilkerson 45ff).

The conflation of death, sports, and spirituality is occasionally played out in contemporary American sports, with the pursuit of victory being thwarted by the death of an athlete, who is then mourned by teammates, friends, and fans. In recent American fiction, Don Keith explores the possible convergence of sports, spirituality, and death in his first novel, The Forever Season. In the opening paragraph of the novel, Corinthians Philippians McKay, the narrator who is an aspiring Rhodes Scholar nominee at Sparta University in the South, reflects on these three themes: life, death, and football. C. P., as he prefers to be called, confesses:

I died exactly the way I lived. Death’s sneaky that way, matching its style to your life. If you are weak, it lets you linger until almost everything is gone, then it claims you with an almost welcome touch and a whisper. Or it taps you quietly on the shoulder in the middle of a nondescript existence and leads you away in the middle of the night. But sometimes, death lets you thrive, gets so teasingly near to all you want, then swoops down hawklike and snatches you away. That’s the way it was with me. I was stretching for the goal line, for the things that mattered most to me, but there were too many others who wanted me down. That’s to knock were too many others who wanted to knock me down. That’s when sly death winged in from my blind side. (Keith 1)

In the long run, C. P.’s story is one of overcoming adversity in familial and social situations until he dies trying to score. Nonetheless, like many athletes throughout American sports, he manifests such an intense desire to win that his quest for victory becomes satisfied, perhaps even consummated, when the contest itself demands the sacrifice of life.

Not merely in fiction but throughout history, athletes have died in the heat of competition, in the aftermath of contests, and in the preparation for games and events. But in recent years Americans and their media have turned increasing attention to the deaths of athletes, whether the accidental death of a peewee player in competition or the death of a celebrity athlete long retired from the field or court. Among the latter group of celebrity athletes, few were
more heralded than Mickey Mantle, who died in the mid-1990s. In his eulogy for the Yankees’ switch-hitter, Bob Costas demonstrated America’s anguish over the loss of a heroic sports super star with a country smile and a bon vivant engagement with the world. Although never a superstar like Mantle, former outfielder Al Cowens, who enjoyed an All-Star season for the Angels during seventies, also drew public attention at the time of his death in the winter of 2002. Not only do Americans mourn the deaths of retired athletes, they also mourn the loss of athletes whose careers are cut short by death off the field. At the height of his career golfer Payne Stewart encountered accidental death off the field, or, to adapt the metaphor to his own sport, beyond the rough. Similarly, the deaths of Yankees catcher Thurman Munson and Cubs second baseman Kenny Hubbs in single engine aircraft crashes shocked their teammates, opponents, and fans, whether in season (as with Munson) or during the off-season (as with Hubbs).

Often, however, the accidental deaths of athletes occur because of some negligence or abuse, such as driving with excessive speed or using illegal drugs (like collegiate basketball star Len Bias) or abusing legal drugs like alcohol. The Spring Training death in 2002 of promising Padres outfielder Mike Darr, who crashed his car while driving under the influence of alcohol, falls into this category of alcohol related deaths. But the most intense mourning is usually exercised for athletes who die on the field, or whose deaths result directly and almost immediately from their athletic pursuit. Most prominent in this regard is the death of NASCAR legend Dale Earnhardt, whose crash at Daytona in the opening race of the 2001 NASCAR season was publicly mourned in ways exceeding those of most politicians, entertainers, or religious leaders. Yet for all of the mourning that takes place for a NASCAR driver, there is some degree of its expectation since the risk of the sport is well known: It can kill. Routinely, it will kill. In months preceding Earnhardt’s fatal crash, Adam Petty and Kenny Irwin, Jr., also suffered fatal accidents in competition. As tragic and similar as the deaths of these young drivers were, they did not elicit the sustained, pervasive public mourning of Earnhardt, whose feats and attitude had become the hallmark of NASCAR.

Another of the physically violent sports that expects significant injuries and regularly risks the athlete’s life is boxing. Mike Tyson punched out the purpose and effects of boxing quite simply and directly, as if he could comment in any other way: “It’s a fighter’s sport,” he said. “This is a hurt business. In this business, things happen,” like death (NandoTimes Website). In recent decades, deaths have occurred in the ring—or shortly thereafter from injuries suffered in bouts—about once every ten months. Amazingly, however, although brain damage might result from the cranial pummeling that takes place among heavyweight contenders, few deaths claim the biggest, hardest hitting boxers, perhaps because the cause of death for boxers in the lower weight classes might be tied to the rapid loss of weight that they experience in order to make weight and the subsequent inability of their brains to replenish essential fluids following their taking of diuretics.

Although the high-risk sports of NASCAR, boxing, and football (whose intent is to hit the opponent so violently that it knocks him off his feet) recognize the risk of life that is part of the sport itself, athletes in other non-contact sports also suffer loss of life. Even baseball registered its single loss of life in competition in 1920 when Cleveland’s star shortstop Ray Chapman was beaned—pre-helmet days—by the Yankees’ Carl Mays. In the winter of 2002, the death of Penn State champion pole vaulter Kevin Dare in the middle of an attempted vault, whose height he had cleared on numerous occasions, indicates the vulnerability even of track athletes to death while trying to win. Somewhat similarly, the death of Hank Gathers following his dunk against the University of Portland more than a decade ago still shocks basketball fans and others who observed his apparent health, talent, and compassion—his chiseled physique, his scoring prowess, and his caring for his son. With 13:34 remaining in the first half, Gathers turned up court following his dunk to give the LMU Lions a twelve-point lead. He never made it to half court, collapsing and suffering cardiac complications that caused his death within two hours; he never regained consciousness. The game was suspended, and the West Coast Athletic Conference cancelled the remaining games in the WCC tournament, whose winner would secure an automatic bid to the NCAA tournament.

But it has been in football that most athletic deaths in America occurred in the early twenty-first century. Shortly after the death of Dale Earnhardt on the wall at Daytona, another athlete died in Florida, DeVaughn Darling. Following a late February workout during which he had been deprived of water, he complained of chest pains and died a short time thereafter. Although the autopsy report was inconclusive about the exact cause of death, it did note that there were measurable amounts of ephedrine in his blood. Ephedra, which is considered by the FDA to
be a nutritional supplement rather than a drug, is a stimulant, whose use, like caffeine, is restricted by the NCAA. Although doctors were not able to determine the precise relation between the use of ephedra and the deaths of Darling, Northwestern star Rashidi Wheeler, and indoor league player Curtis Jones, the use of the supplement by the deceased players drew further attention to the health risks that players might undertake in their desire to excel, to win—at all costs (cf. Carey; Abrahamson; Abrahamson and Pugmire; Fernas; Fernas and Heckert).

Elsewhere during spring practices in 2001, Drew Privette, a sixteen-year-old student football player at North Jackson High School in Stevenson, Alabama, complained of a severe headache. Although a causal connection of his death (from spinal meningitis) has not been established with the practice sessions that he had attended, it is quite possible that he contracted the disease during his training and drills. A month later, his teammate, Nick Allen, age 14, collapsed and died following a practice. His cause of death was determined to be cardiac arrhythmia, a pre-existing condition of irregular heartbeat. Both of the Alabama high school football deaths made brief national news. But it wasn’t until the death of Minnesota Viking Pro Bowl offensive tackle Korey Stringer in late July 2001 that the national consciousness and the popular press turned more intense attention to the connections between football and players’ deaths. In Stringer’s case, he suffered from heatstroke on the muggy, hot July day, during which he did not ingest fluids. His body temperature had soared to 108.8 degrees. Within a week following Stringer’s death, Rashidi Wheeler, a pro prospect defensive back at Northwestern University, collapsed during a conditioning drill and died shortly thereafter from exercise-induced bronchial asthma.

Their deaths were followed in the next couple of months by an eighth grader in Georgia, who died on the practice field from complications due to a rare cardiac disorder, three high school students in Texas, who succumbed to heart defects in practice and in scrimmage, and two other high school football players in Alabama, for whom autopsies provided inconclusive evidence with respect to the cause(s) of death. In light of the deaths of these prep players in practice and the two Southern California football players who died on the field in the 2001 season, one can see that the issues about being willing to die to win are not restricted to professional players and near pro prospects. All told, there were seventeen reported football deaths during 2001. Although one often associates the possibility of death in football with the violent physical contact in the game—both in terms of the hits that players put on one another and on the falls to the turf—most of the football deaths that occurred during 2001 resulted from heart problems whose severity became known during conditioning drills.

For each of these athletes, the news media reported the loss of life, the circumstances of their deaths, the shock and sadness of family, friends, and fans, and the memorial tributes often established in their honor. But the clustering of the death of Earnhardt with the unusually large number of deaths and high profiles of football players during 2001 provides an occasion to examine how Americans grieve the deaths of athletes. Increasingly, mourning for athletes and former athletes assumes significance for persons who have not been familiar with the deceased players or even fans of their particular sports. That is one of the manifestations of the prominence and power of sports in contemporary American culture.

According to Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and Gran-ger Westberg, two of the most devoted and influential grief therapists and analysts in America during the past half-century, acute grief and separation that result from sudden sorrow customarily start with an initial phase of shock, panic, and numbness. In this stage of grieving, it is common for the bereaved to experience and express such feelings as denial, anger, outrage, resentment, and protest. This initial phase and its emotional responses are not confined neatly to an identifiable period. They may emerge or erupt again, usually with decreasing intensity, frequency, and duration, throughout subsequent stages of grieving. The initial phase of shock and denial is followed by a transition to reality, an acceptance of the loss—with feelings of resignation starting to supplant those of resentment. During this general stage, the bereaved person begins to adapt to the reality of the absence of the deceased. In this period of adjustment, it becomes possible to deal with “the facts” surrounding the death and, among other activities, to pack up the deceased’s belongings. And like the temporal parameters of the initial phase of shock and denial, the onset and duration of this stage of reality adjustment overlap those of the preceding and subsequent stages. The grief process is completed by a third set of initiatives—by a period of changing, of paying tribute or remembering in ways that move beyond those of merely placing headstones, erecting statues, or creating a gallery of photographs. Instead, this creative phase transforms the reality of one’s death into a new initiative, one that seeks to improve
the quality of life for persons with similar interests, challenges, or activities of the deceased. In other words, the tribute becomes an expression of hope and transformation—a way of making sense out of death by using the particular character or interests of the deceased to improve the safety, regulation, or support, for example, for practices or causes dear to the deceased.

In one of his works for counselors, grief therapist and prolific author Wayne E. Oates writes that “the grief process is not really complete until the bereaved persons work through to the discovery of a new purpose for life and a fresh reason for being independent of the deceased” (46). Almost immediately in response to the spate of football-related deaths in 2001, efforts began to improve practice drills by adjusting their time and duration to fit with the practice site’s heat and humidity index and by encouraging athletes to drink water throughout the length of the training exercises. Efforts to improve the monitoring of players’ condition were also started, particularly efforts to educate coaches and trainers about symptoms related to heat exhaustion and to improve the administration of drug testing. And other efforts were introduced to provide more extensive physical exams. In this regard, Columbia University became the first school to conduct non-invasive echocardiograms on its players in addition to the normal physical exam. One reason why the exam is not standard procedure at schools is that it costs up to $2000 per player to administer (College Football Notes D6). Yet the preventative diagnosis, which might cost a team as much as $2000 K in its initial year, might be worth the high cost because it could mitigate the number and size of lawsuits, like the multi-million dollar suit filed by the family of Rashidi Wheeler against coaches, staff, and Northwestern University for failing to heed his signals of special health needs.

The influence of the media to effect several of these changes should not be underestimated. Within days following the deaths of Stringer, Wheeler, and Travis Stowers, a high school hopeful in rural Indiana, Chris Dufresne, a sports columnist for the Los Angeles Times, reviewed the practices of respected, demanding coaches Bear Bryant and Frank Kush, both of whom were famous for their brutal summer camps. Among other things, Dufresne noted the limits that these disciplinarians established even for their rigorous programs. In early September, Mike Penner, also a sportswriter for the Los Angeles Times, looked at the dozen football deaths that had occurred by that point in the season, and he examined American culture’s fascination with football, especially its willingness to tolerate (even embrace) death as a possible consequence of the pursuit of football excellence. Not letting the memories or the efforts of the football players fade from public attention, Diane Pucin, a sports feature writer for the Los Angeles Times, briefly retold the seventeen stories in late December and reported on the processing of grief, especially for young Travis Stowers, whose home town in rural Indiana she visited. While describing the grieving of families, teammates, and communities, these reporters also manifest the developmental grieving process in the changing foci of their stories, moving from shock to realistic acceptance to a constructive project respecting the lives and efforts of the dead athletes.

The public interest in the autopsy report for Dale Earnhardt has also prompted NASCAR to make some changes. In that regard, Rusty Wallace, whose relationship with Earnhardt was as professionally charged and competitive on the track as it was personal and compassionate off the track, saw a positive result that had come from Dale’s death: “I don’t think anybody would ever have paid this much attention to safety if it had been any other driver [than Dale who died],” he said. Certainly, that seems to be the case since both Adam Petty and Kenny Irwin, Jr., had been killed in similar crashes by similar forward head whipping injuries at the time of impact. By the end of the NASCAR season in 2001, NASCAR had established new requirements for head and neck restraints by drivers in its top three divisions (cf. Henderson; Glick; Henson; and Long).

Throughout the various stages of grieving identified by Kubler-Ross and Westberg, there are several recurrent themes that characterize the process. Especially in grief processes following acute, sudden loss, one of the themes that runs through the various phases or stages is the perception/feeling—or rationalized feeling—of injustice. It is quite common, for instance, for a bereaved person to say that “if medical care of the deceased had been wiser, better, different, or quicker, then the loved one would not have died” (Oates 47). In part, that is the claim of the families of Stringer and Wheeler in their lawsuits. Indeed, this is the recurring response throughout the phases of three of the highest profile deaths that I have mentioned: Earnhardt, Stringer, and Wheeler. In response to Earnhardt’s accident, some passionate fans issued threats against Kenny Schrader, whose bumping of Earnhardt’s car in the final turn of the final lap had caused him to lose control and crash. In other words, in a perverted way, the threatening fans sought to bring justice on behalf of Dale. Of course, the irony
here is that few drivers were ever so persistent and successful in employing such intimidating, bumping tactics as Earnhardt. In fact, his nickname “The Intimidator” was celebrated by Jimmy Buffett, who altered the lyrics of one of his songs to incorporate that designation for Dale. (It is noteworthy that, in the days following Earnhardt’s death and prior to his public memorial service, radio stations in Charlotte played Buffet’s altered version more frequently than any other song.)

In different ways, both the families of Kory Stringer and Rashidi Wheeler manifest the feelings of injustice in days (and weeks) following their deaths. One indication was the general accusation that insufficient supervision and medical attention had been provided to both players during the oppressive conditions of their work-outs. A second indication of the feeling of injustice emerged in part out of the first: the filing of law suits—to bring justice to their lives, their deaths, and their legacies. Stringer’s family filed a $100 million lawsuit against the Vikings, and Wheeler’s family filed suit for less money but an equally sure sense of legal and moral justice, as evidenced with the hiring of Johnny Cochrane as counsel and Jesse Jackson as spokesperson.

In the media stories following the deaths of the athletes, we can discern this theme in the grieving process perhaps as much as the style or quality of journalism. Questions about the adequacy of the deceased athlete’s treatment (in terms of establishing the demands and supervision of training exercises, and in the administration of medical aid following initial manifestation of its need) are not exclusively (or perhaps primarily) the probative questions of investigative journalism. They are also expressions of feelings of injustice in the grief process itself.

A second theme that suffuses the various stages and responses throughout the grieving process deals with ideas of immortality. In fact, Freud suggested that persons unconsciously believe that they are immortal (cf. Freud 166). Consequently, the grieving process includes two facets related to immortality. On the one hand, memorials repeated for athletes seek a way of keeping them alive, of affirming that immortality that is humanly intuited. On the other hand, the realization of the death of a friend shocks us into the recognition that we are not physically immortal. Certainly, we know that at an intellectual level; but the point becomes real, becomes a burden, when we see that those whom we love do die. And so will we. In grieving for deceased athletes, this element in the grieving process is quite poignant. For the shock about the reality that all will die becomes even more intense when observing that athletes die. When faced with the death of a physically fit or physically impressive athlete, we often experience a keener anxiety about our own mortality. For if an athlete can die in the midst of preparing to engage in sport, then how much more are we, who are less physically fit and often merely desirous of play, vulnerable not only to the certainty of death but also to its timing, its possible imminence?

A third recurrent theme throughout the grieving process is the tendency to idolize the deceased. “Pathological grief sets in when the bereaved over-idealizes the deceased to such an extent that the lost loved one for all practical purposes takes on the attributes of a God. Sometimes bereaved persons will even center their lives around their loss of the beloved” (Oates 48). As Marcel Proust put it so succinctly, “In our mourning for the dead we pay idolatrous worship to the things they liked” (238). Although the elevation to demi-divine status has not taken place for the recently deceased football players, the apotheosis of Dale Earnhardt has certainly been achieved. Despite the articulation of regulations by the Dale Earnhardt enterprises, the copyright of his name and signature, and the targeted marketing of his interests, several websites have sprung up that pay tribute to him in ways extending beyond mere memorials. His hometown of Kannapolis, North Carolina, held a public memorial service in its largest venue, the Fieldcrest Cannon Stadium, on the Sunday after Earnhardt’s death. The following day, the Kannapolis City Council adopted a resolution and proclamation, which certainly sought to canonize Earnhardt: The final stanza of the resolution read, “through the death of Dale Earnhardt, Sr., the citizens of his community and even the greater community throughout many parts of the world, suffer the loss of a man generously possessed of those rare, intangible qualities of leadership, courage and compassion which generated admiration and esteem from all who knew him” (Kannapolis website). Within ten days following Earnhardt’s death, the official Dale Earnhardt Tribute Steering Committee was formed in Kannapolis to make sure that a previously planned tribute to Dale (or so it was claimed at the time) be elevated in stature and prominence to assure that a more central site and elaborate memorial be erected: a brick plaza on Main Street. And the committee voted to pursue a private, not-for-profit status to assure that its efforts would promote the public good by retaining focus on Earnhardt, his character, and his accomplishments.
Earnhardt was eulogized not only at home, where he was called “the poor man’s dream,” but throughout the country tributes were paid. For the first three NASCAR races following Earnhardt’s death, the third lap was run under a caution flag, and winning drivers routinely held three fingers aloft outside their windows as they drove their victory laps. Other expressions of grief also sought to recognize the apotheotic stature of Earnhardt: In Cocoa Beach, Florida, one farmer plowed a 353-foot numeral 3 in his pasture to provide a tribute large enough to be seen from above—basically so that Dale could look down from heaven, the farmer said, and see his number. Others drove from throughout the country to Daytona, to other NASCAR sites, to the Dale Earnhardt Incorporated headquarters, and to his hometown to pay their tributes. They didn’t fly. They drove. And one perceptive tourist who had been near Daytona Beach a week after the accident took pictures of the launch of a Titan rocket from Cape Canaveral. On the Internet he posted his photograph of the contrails, which, spirited by coastal winds, shaped a giant 3 in the sky (Montville 1). And to complete the tributes at the end of the year, the Daytona Speedway, the Mecca for NASCAR devotees, erected a bronze statue that might call to mind presidential memorials in Washington, D.C., or a golden calf in the shadow of Sinai.

In the course of working through the tragic loss of athletes whose physiques, talents, and exploits have provided intimations of immortality, Americans have often exalted them as heroes, functionally elevating them to divine status. The plaque dedicated to Mickey Mantle on the center field wall at Yankee Stadium, the oak tree planted in honor of Korey Stringer in front of the residence hall at Minnesota State where the Vikings had practiced, and the statue erected for Dale Earnhardt, Sr., at the Daytona Speedway exemplify the ongoing efforts to canonize deceased athletes. The grievers feel that something permanent must take their place, must stand for them, must keep their achievements alive. Thus for many Americans oriented toward the intense desire to win, even at great cost, the process of grieving for athletes often takes on characteristics of apotheosis.

Some years ago Vince Lombardi, the Hall of Fame NFL coach for whom the Super Bowl Trophy is named, identified the significance of winning in comparison to effort: “Winning is not everything,” he said, “but making the effort to win is.” For a coach preparing players for a tough game, that rhetoric certainly inspires. Grieving their fallen athletes, many Americans hold the idea that “Winning is the Only Thing” (cf. Roberts and Olson)—that one might even die while striving to win, as in fictional C. P. McKay’s stretch toward the goal line or in gritty Dale Earnhardt’s last lap press toward the checkered flag. And in the process of commemorating the athletes’ efforts in “dying to win,” Americans often sanctify their dedication and their accomplishments as a way of crowning victory, even in death.

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