

Tonight's budget theme: **Not-for-profit**  
**Richard Hunt**

First Period

We are at the nadir of organized athletics. At one point in our lives, physical competition was as simple as “race you to the corner” or “next basket wins.” Now it’s a hot mess of money (some of it hush, some of it illicit, all of it out of control) ego, inexplicable haircuts, off-kilter celebrity, questionable branding, TV, and deals. Big deals. Big in every way, laden with lawyers (more on this later) plus lots of undue huffing-and-puffing, topped with a huge dollop of assumed importance, like the Emperor Who Had No Clothes. Mondays are dominated by ad infinitum replays from the gridiron (as well as ad infinitum replays of the ads)...with all sorts of strong emotion tied up in the outcomes. I’m sure I’m not alone in wishing that some of these fans felt as impassioned about our communities. Because does it really matter who your fantasy football defensive tackle is? Moreso, don’t we have better subjects for our fantasies? I know I do.

Whether it’s the NFL or the NBA or, and seemingly any sports organization, be it Lollipop Soccer, Little League baseball, CYO basketball, NCAA lacrosse...or any sporting affiliation with the term “professional” attached to the players and/or “parental supervision” attached to the coaches, there’s never been such a distinct and onerous disconnect between the love of sport and whoever’s pie hole might be smiling at you from a box of Wheaties.

Sport as a catalyst for developing character and culture traces back to 776 B.C.; sport as a livelihood is hardly a century old. The prose of Grantland Rice captured the exertions and exhortations of young men who trained to see how fast and far and high a human can go...without performance enhancing drugs (yep, that’s a different fantasy league too, the pro pharma league).

I would submit that the last time sport was pure was way back then, those three thousand years ago, when the ancient Olympics began. The Olympic ideal developed during that time, i.e., how strong and smart and disciplined an athlete can remain when the clock and the opponent conspire to overwhelm the will to persevere. The events were straightforward, lacked any equipment to speak of, and were almost always mano a mano. Track and field, wrestling, boxing, pankration (which is a Greek blend of wrestling and boxing), and equestrian events, as in chariot races. Except for the track and field events, the matches were brutal, as were the outsized outcomes. The victors were awarded an olive branch, brought honor to their hometowns, and sometimes were venerated as god-like. The vanquished sometimes perished, for in many of the competitions the finish line was “to the death.” With potential endings this impactful, the opponents would understandably (in the modern lexicon) leave it all on the field of play. Speaking of leaving it all on the field, as the athletes competed in the nude, married women were not allowed to watch the Games, but single women were, which reflects a certain amount of insecurity rippling through Athens, I’d say. You’re correct to infer that’s a whole different fantasy league therein. But let me be the first to express my gratitude that we don’t deliver our papers toga-less.

It is surprising, though by the tenure of these competitive events and the brutal history wrapped up in them that except for boxing, none of these sports have achieved major funding nor followings. By and large, these Olympic sports have stayed on the pedestal of amateur athletics. That is not to imply that the IOC, the International Olympic Committee toes the same amateur line. One only needs to read the applicable chapters of *A Killing Art; The Untold Story of Tae Kwon Do* by Alex Gillis which details how Korean representatives left large cash payments in hotel rooms for visiting IOC members in order to first buy the position as host country in 1988, and more payola thereafter to secure their national sport entered into the Olympic competition.

There is a silver lining to being outside mainstream professional sports; aside from lacking endorsement deals and rap stars and tailgating, these sports are, in the theme of the evening, not-for-profit ventures which then raises them above the control of the almighty dollar. These are sports that athletes devote themselves to absolutely, for that Wide World of Sports thrill-of-victory-and-agonies-of-da-feet, but not for financial gain. But for the most part, once college is done, so too is that athletic career. Trust me, as I have for years unsuccessfully searched for a pick-up wrestling match.

Roger Bannister might well be remembered for yet another decade or two...but he couldn't make a living running around a cinder oval even after he broke the four-minute mile. Nor could others whose names adorn stadiums, tracks, natatoriums and highway exits: Mark Spitz, Frank Shorter, Edwin Moses Jr., Dick Fosbury, and my hero, Dan Gable, who arguably is the greatest amateur athlete ever.

I'm admittedly biased, but of all these sports, wrestling is without question the paragon. While millions of fans, well, ok there's probably not millions of fans, let's just say many, believe wrestling to be an incredible physical test, I posit that the training serves two other, preliminary functions: spiritual conditioning to never, ever quit – thanks again, W.C. – and the physical foundation for the grapplers' ultimate competition, the mental match-up. All things being pretty equal, including weight, strength, and endurance, wrestling is a chess match, filled with bold moves, quick counters, countering the counters and setting up a move in the first period that will not come until the third period...and then it's lights out, my friend. After two decades of takedowns, reversals, arm bars, locking up, shooting, and illegal choke holds – yes, that does also sound like Season 4 of “The Sopranos” – any time I see wrestling appear on an applicant's resume, I know the candidate is conditioned for hardship, keeps his cool under pressure, tends to be quiet and calculating, is always looking for an opportunity to initiate action, might have a cauliflower ear, and will peel the skin off your face if you touch his food. Not really sexy, I know, but remember, it's a sport where a handshake begins and ends the contest and when a wrestler retires, he leaves his shoes in the center of the mat to signify that he's given his all, that there's nothing else left. It's all about honor.

Therefore what breaks my heart is the spectacle that exists at the far end of the spectrum: professional wrestling -- or at least that's what some people call that theater act. More depressing is that pathetic lycra-version of twenty pounds of manure poured into a ten-pound sack is all the wrestling that many, possibly millions, of people know. Bearing more resemblance to a hyperthyroid circus troupe infiltrated by a cross-dressing burlesque act, it desecrates the noblest sport with its ham-handed gymnastics...I will not say athletics.

I'm reminded of this adage dispensed by wrestling coaches everywhere: that which does not kill us makes us strong. I'm sorry I had to allude to it at all, but I knew I'd have to obliquely acknowledge its pitiful existence. In the immortal words of Monty Python, we shall not speak of this again.

### Second Period.

Any profession that serves as a whole category for jokes is obviously unfairly characterized, or one might say, caricature-ized. Case in point: I like lawyers. I find lawyers to be honorable when defending the innocent, often interesting and witty, and usually decent in the way all normal people ought to be. I think it's too easy for late-night talk shows hosts and radio pundits to lampoon the legal profession as one in which the membership can lift your wallet from the back pocket of your trousers without a rustle of fabric or conscience.

But truth be told, I don't think that I know a lot of JDs. That's because there aren't many good reasons for lawyers to hang around with book publishers. We don't make enough money to be sued. Moreso, we remind the legal eagles how perilously close they've come to career catastrophe. Lawyers are English majors who made it to the major leagues. Book publishers are English majors gone bad.

The species *barrister sincere-ious* has noble intentions: to interpret the law of the people and to protect said people when they have been subjected to injustice. Simple, sensible, decent, possibly even hard working. It is the sub-genus – and there's no "I" in that last word – of lawyers who instead of seeking precision and the sharp point of accountability in the verbiage of our society but instead serve to cloud, confuse, and unclarify documents, directions and the small-print details in order to hide the bad guys behind a wall of gibberish and mumbo-jumbo. Those are the no-goodniks who rile up publishers and authors alike. Those who serve first to obfuscate are no friends of the Strunk and White Society, those of us who proudly march into the fray with red, white and blue battle flags a'flyin'; the blue being the color of fountain pen, the white the bleached expanse of 80-lb stock that will carry our words, and the red, ah, the red ink that flows from editors' and teachers' pens alike.

Hence, I am quite attached and endeared to the English language. So my contention in this case with the lawyers who have waged war on the precision and humanity of straightforward prose is this: what's really the difference between non-profit or not-for-profit. I know one of them is a tax dodge, but it sounds like the splitting hairs, or worse, the difference between "maybe" and "not-yes/not-no." But I'll be sporting about it; let me represent the word geeks in a best two-out-of-three match. I'll even give away 3 or 4 weight classes. Just let it be known – the obfuscators will not prevail.

During my last year working at Bantam Doubleday Dell in New York, the company became infected with corporate double pneumonia, which means the usual insecurity about how well we were doing was anted up by C-level group-think that perhaps another MBA or two was needed to tell us what we were doing wrong...even though we had, at that point, a dozen straight years of profitability.

So an MBA from Kraft was hired. Remember, this is a company that "manufactures" what they call a processed food product. Mmmm, sounds tasty.

Well, one day at the office, long after all the Connecticut commuters had made their mad dash to Grand Central, the few of us left in the conference room broke open the piggy bank and ordered take-out Chinese from the MSG-factory down the block. When the food finally arrived, Phil – yes, that’s his real name, there’s no need for anonymity any longer – told us about the seven-figure campaign that led to his departure from the Velveta-colored mothership. The splashy TV and print campaign, he shared with us, was unfortunately a “non-success.” Remember, the rest of us there had an allegiance to our English degrees, so we asked, “What’s a non-success?”

“What it sounds like,” he said. “A non-success.”

“So it didn’t work?”

Phil nodded.

“So it failed?”

Phil’s cheek twitched and his eyes grew wide, but his voice was a whisper. “Big time. But we weren’t allowed to say failed. It was a non-success.” He nodded again. Nervously.

The next question should have been “How could all you smart guys from Wharton and Babson spend a million bucks in marketing and sell *less* processed food product than before all the whiz-bang marketing started?” But we had work to do.

### Third Period.

Not-for-profit shelters stretch back centuries, although providing the legal structure to operate openly as such is a more modern convention. For four hundred years plus, patrons of the arts have kept painters and playwrights and novelists and sculptors fed, bed and well-read in order to produce works that raised the cultural achievements of society. Shakespeare, Michaelangelo, Mozart, and da Vinci and Beethoven each respectively benefited from have a financial supporter who allowed them to focus on their creative expression instead of laboring to make a profit first, and only thereafter, to create a masterpiece for the ages.

A few months ago, readers of the *New York Times* were reminded of this practice when Michael Brown, a name not immediately recognizable, passed away. Mr. Brown was a cabaret performer and songwriter known for his sprightly contributions to the industrial musical. That phrase – industrial musical – sounds to me a bit like non-success or professional wrestling, or even another fantasy league. But what I learned was that back in the day, one way in which Fortune 500 companies would launch a new product or shore up a brand was to commission this American entertainment genre that literally sang the praises of vacuums and zippers and autos and steel. More notably, as an improbable result of his successful work with industrial musicals, Michael Brown bestowed upon his friend Harper Lee the financial resources to live upon while writing her only novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Seven years ago, a wonderful group of lawyers here in town helped us register our new LLC, which provided the legal path to knit two privately held publishing companies together. Four months after incorporation, an acquisition prospect came forward that was larger than even the newly merged company. Sadly, we didn't have the capital as our cash flow was usually titrated out to sign up new books instead of absorbing other publishers.

Into this breach stepped two local investors whose support allowed us to complete the sale and, equally important, operate for a few years afterwards when we were essentially a not-for-profit company, at least according to our year-end results. Those two fine gentlemen were our Michael Browns. They were, and are, our patrons of the arts. One of the investors made the acquisition go through, which looking back, we would have perished without. A shared wrestling background bonded myself and the other investor, perhaps not in a straight line, but if you connected the dots, they led directly to a wrestling room where the mats were seasoned by blood and sweat ran down the padded walls like rain. Without him, as well, we would have been DOA at a couple points during the year post-merger. I so wish those two men could have joined us this evening so I could, before this august group, shared with them this heartfelt appreciation for understanding our status as a temporary not-for-profit. They were our coaches when we stepped out into the center circle again and again, always ready for the next whistle. And every day, we make our way onto that metaphoric mat, to do our best, to wage this physical and mental war, committed to win. And we are.

Writers and publishers are genetically fond of metaphors. Very possibly, overly fond. Even though a path or action might be unwise, treacherous or flighty, we persevere, hoping we'll end up with a good story, or even better, an apt metaphor once the injury heals.

One of my favorite moments in foreign cinema was in the French film entitled "The Toy." In a scene where the new detective is being trained in the crafty ways of the seasoned cop, the interrogation technique involves hitting the suspect over the head with the phone book because the bruising would be hidden by the perp's hair. There are many metaphors in that scene, but the important one is that we publishers hit ourselves in the head with books in order to gain the truth. But as phone books and other reference works have gone the way of Martha, Cincinnati Zoo's resident, albeit taxidermied, reminder of and metaphor for extinction, one wonders what books will be next to render the truth serum. Or are books poised to be extinct as well?

To save any suspense around that last point, I'll simply say: hell no. It echoes the line that ought to be printed on the rubber suits we'd wear in order to shed the last few pounds before weigh-in: "It's a Wrestling Thing." But just in case I'm wrong here, feel free to use those words on my tombstone. There won't be a body buried there, but you will find a pair of wrestling shoes there, and a few books nearby. Plus the promise to never quit, realizing though that this vow could only be made and upheld because of the upstanding character and indomitable spirit of our two protectors.

At story's end, what few lines do I then commit to my soul: 1. Words, when well-wrought, will carry forward the highest ideals of man. So too, wrestling. 2. *Elements of Style*; Rule 22: Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end. Therefore, last and most

defiantly, for all the obfuscators, unbelievers, and professional wrestling fans: 3. not-for-profit this, bucko.