

Celebrating the beauty of sport

There is no set universal explanation of exactly why football is referred to as the beautiful game, but it is widely accepted that the sport is so beloved for its sheer unpredictability, ability to bring communities together through supporter clubs and how visually pleasing an excellent game of football can be.

The Beautiful Game – it translates poetically in Portuguese into *o jogo bonito* – is a worldwide nickname for association football. It was popularised by the Brazilian footballer Pelé, although the exact origin of the phrase is disputed. English football commentators used it as far back as 1958.

Football at its best – think David Beckham and his long-distance passes and goals, Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi on the move – has elegance and beauty. “That’s the beauty of sport. Sometimes you laugh, sometimes you cry,” stated Pep Guardiola, current manager of Manchester City.

“To me, teamwork is the beauty of our sport, where you have five acting as one. You become selfless,” admitted Michael – Mike – William Krzyzewski, American basketball coach. He has served as the head men’s basketball coach at Duke University since 1980, where he has led the Blue Devils to five NCAA Division I titles, 12 Final Fours, 15 ACC Men’s Basketball Tournament championships, and 12 ACC regular season titles.

In 2016, Nicholas Hogg, an English novelist, short story writer and poet from Leicester, wrote: ‘It was beauty that brought me back to cricket. After 12 years away from the game, burned out from obsessively watching and playing the sport I’d loved from the age of 11 to 22, I signed up for an indoor league in Tokyo. It had been so long since I’d played that I wondered if I still knew how to hold a bat, let alone score runs.

“Running in to bowl, worried that I’d not get to the crease, and whether it was even worth getting to the crease, I was just a few steps from an epiphany – that it would be the aesthetic of the game that still held joy for my 34-year-old body.”

“There was nothing beautiful about the venue, an indoor-tennis school in Chiba, a radioactive town downwind of the fractured Fukushima nuclear reactor,” Hogg continued. “Twenty-two yards away, the opening bat for the Japan women’s team took guard. Balanced, poised. Then I bowled, my first ball in competitive cricket in over a decade. The average, and perhaps even ugly, delivery was met with an exquisite cover drive into the netting. In that instance of timing and technical perfection, a culmination of dedication, ability and talent, was a moment of cricketing beauty. I’d fallen back in love with the game.”

The beauty of sports is not in becoming a great player; it is the learning of valuable life skills that



will serve players throughout their lives. If we look beyond the focus of winning and achieving success, the arena of competition is one of the finest classrooms a young player could ever have.

St John Paul II made it clear that the human body is something of a ‘masterpiece.’ “The Church cannot

but encourage everything that serves in harmoniously developing the human body,” he said. “It is rightly considered the masterpiece of the whole of creation, not only because of its proportion, strength, and beauty, but also and especially because God has made it His dwelling place and the instrument

of an immortal soul, breathing into it that ‘breath of life’ by which man is made in His image and likeness.”

Philosophers have long debated the nature of beauty. When Aristotle was asked why people desired physical beauty, he answered: “No one that is not blind could ask that question.” There’s no doubt about the existence of beauty, yet to call something beautiful is, of course, a subjective judgement. The argument is that a universal beauty isn’t possible, as true beauty only exists in the eye of the beholder.

“There is no definition of beauty, but when you can see someone’s spirit coming through, something unexplainable, that’s beautiful to me,” said Liv Tyler, an American whose sport is acting, producing and singing. She is best known for her portrayal of Arwen Undómiel in the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy.

Arsenal’s legendary manager Arsene Wenger made it clear that “(his) job is to give people who work hard all week something (beautiful, my addition) to enjoy on Saturdays and Wednesdays.”

Rugby is beautiful. It offers teenagers increased confidence and self-respect, as the ultimate character-building sport. It fosters courage, fitness, team effort and togetherness, bringing together boys and girls from all backgrounds.

“Beauty is power; a smile is its sword,” declared John Ray FRS (1627-1705), widely regarded as one of the earliest of the English parson-naturalists.

“Let us live for the beauty of our own reality,” encouraged Charles Lamb (1775-1834), English essayist, poet, and antiquarian, best known for his *Essays of Elia* and for the children’s book *Tales from Shakespeare*, co-authored with his sister, Mary Lamb.

Here’s one from France: “Things are beautiful if you love them,” stated Jean Anouilh (1910-1987) a dramatist whose career spanned five decades. Though his work ranged from high drama to absurdist farce, Anouilh is best known for his 1944 play *Antigone*, an adaptation of Sophocles’ classical drama.

As we celebrated the life of Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1931-2021), I was reminded of this quote from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a Swiss-American psychiatrist, who is a pioneer in near-death studies, and author of the internationally best-selling book, *On Death and Dying*: “People are like stained glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within.”

Today you have 100 per cent of your life left. That is the beauty of now: the present of the present in which God is present so you can shine beautifully – and cock a snook at Friedrich Nietzsche (German philosopher, 1844-1900) with his famous quote: “I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed.”

Eyes on the ball: ‘An ugly, delivery was met with an exquisite cover drive into the netting. In that instance of timing and technical perfection, a culmination of dedication, ability and talent, was a moment of cricketing beauty. I’d fallen back in love with the game.’

