

An attitude of gratitude – and giving thanks – does you the world of good

SPORT

Fr Vlad Felzmann

“Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others,” stated Marcus Tullius Cicero, (106-43 BC) a Roman statesman, lawyer, scholar, philosopher and writer.

When we are given a wrapped present, we instinctively say: “thank you” or even “many thanks” before opening it. As I have aged, I developed the habit on 31st December to thank God not just for the past year but for the new – as yet by time un-wrapped – year. Is that courtesy? Trust in God? Hope?

When we express gratitude or are thanked, our brain releases dopamine and serotonin, the two crucial neurotransmitters responsible for our emotions that make us feel ‘good’. They enhance our mood immediately, making us feel happy from the inside.

“The joy I get from winning a major championship doesn’t even compare to the feeling I get when a kid writes a letter saying: “Thank you so much. You have changed my life,” wrote Tiger Woods, widely regarded as one of the all-time greatest golfers.

The dictionary defines gratitude as “the quality of being thankful; readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness.” The word originates from the Latin *gratus*, meaning pleasing and thankful.

Kathy A. Feinstein, a sport performance consultant who is based in Florida, writes: “Did you know that practising gratitude can improve athletic performance? Research confirms what the world’s elite sports stars already know – that being kinder to yourself, and to others, and being grateful – is good for your mental health.

“Athletes have talked about how having compassion, gratitude and a sense of perspective enable them to balance the demands of being a full-time athlete with having a family.”

Ben Francia, an internet marketing consultant based in the Philippines, says: “When you start each day with a grateful heart, you are inviting positivity to your day. Gratitude is a simple trait we mustn’t forget to practice. We need to practice it every single day, regardless of the circumstance. We can always find something to be grateful about.

“It can be big moments or small accomplishments. It’s just important to be grateful.”

Gratitude encourages humility.



Tiger Woods: Photo: Mike Segar, Reuters

Appreciating all those who have helped – on and off the pitch, court or pool – encourages the use of “we” rather than just “me”.

Thanking – *eucharistia* [In Greek] – expresses appreciation; itself evidenced in taking care of that gift. I express my gratitude to God for all I still have across my PIES – the Physical, Intellectual, Emotional and Spiritual dimensions of my life – by taking care of them. Hence my 86 pushups on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays; and the same number of full-squats on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. (Regular readers will remember the equation: 86 = 84 [my age] + ½ years of breathing + nine months in my mother’s womb, rounded off to the nearest higher integer.)

Grateful athletes recognise people who go unnoticed. They shake the hand of the maintenance worker who helps cut the grassy field that they are about to tear up with their studs, or the caretaker who mops the floor so that their feet won’t slide on the dust.

They offer their athletic trainer a thank you note for taping them up, helping them rehab, or stretching

them out before practice. They give a hug to the die-hard fan that is at every game and cheers for his/her team, regardless of the outcome.

Like the great New Zealand All Blacks who tidy up their dressing room after every game and training session – and believe humility is aligned with greatness – grateful athletes appreciate everyone around them. They appreciate everything they receive – there is no attitude of entitlement.

Grateful athletes appreciate what they have: the opportunity to play a sport they love and all of the benefits that go with that sport – fitness, relationships, life lessons, the joy of winning and learning from losing, as well as the opportunity to challenge and test your abilities.

Being grateful for competitors

Grateful athletes are grateful for competitors – from Latin *com* ‘with, together’ + *petere* ‘to strive’ – mutually helping each other improve. Competitors can bring out the best in you and, without them, you do not have the opportunity to play and test your limits.

In his autobiography, former

Olympic track star Carl Lewis, who won 10 Olympic medals, nine of them gold, admits that he chose to embrace his competitors as essential in his quest for performance excellence, rather than as enemies meant to be beaten down.

Grateful athletes enjoy the pressures that enable them to demonstrate their skills and test their limits. They want to win, but appreciate their process, the competition and the challenge.

“Remember to be grateful for what you have including your opportunity to play your sport. Sport is not something you have to do, but something you get to do!” wrote John Haime, President of New Edge Performance: former professional athlete and current bestselling author of *You are a Contender! Build Emotional Muscle to Perform Better and Achieve More ... in business, sports and life*.

Practising gratitude – saying or writing ‘thank-yous’ – has been shown to increase happiness as well as physical and mental health; shifting away from resentment, jealousy, and other negative

emotions.

Along with a more positive outlook, individuals who regularly practise gratitude often sleep better, express more compassion, report feeling more alive, and have stronger immune systems.

It’s also related to higher levels of optimism, life satisfaction, and well-being, and a greater likelihood of engaging in prosocial behaviour. Gratitude is like a supplement for your brain – reducing the noise and focusing in on what matters.

One study performed at the University of California, Berkeley, asked individuals in states of mental distress to write gratitude-focused letters, which they were not required to send. Results showed that individuals who wrote letters experienced positive mental health beginning four weeks after the study – and those feelings lasted up to 12 weeks after the act of writing.

By monitoring brain activity, researchers were able to note which areas of the brain were active while participants were making their decisions. Those who wrote letters were more likely to be motivated by gratitude than by guilt or obligation.

The differences in brain activity demonstrated that a continued focus on gratitude over time will create physical changes to the prefrontal cortex. You can physically change your brain and train it to be more gratitude-ready.

Giving thanks to God

Beyond the benefits to your outlook, immune system, and sleep schedule, a few studies (and plenty of anecdotes) have documented the positive impact that gratitude can have on an athlete’s performance. If you remember that sport is a metaphor for life you might ask yourself during your night prayers: “How many times did I say ‘thanks’ today – to whom?”

Have a think on what you can do to become a more grateful human being. Perhaps thanking God the Father for the great gift of your life, Jesus Christ for giving that life meaning and the Holy Spirit for God’s love? If, currently you do not, to show gratitude, why not say, even silently, grace before all meals – including breakfast.

I know people who systematically cultivate gratitude, typically by keeping a “gratitude journal” in which they regularly record the things for which they’re grateful. At night, as part of your night prayers, why not think about two things you are grateful for from the day?

Get into the habit of being ever more grateful. It will improve your life.

Your gratitude will give your life wings.