

Generosity, and the noble art of doing the little things well

SPORT

Fr Vlad Felzmann

Generosity – the word comes from the Latin *generosus*: of noble birth – is hugely attractive in sport as in life. Helping others feel better is Ubuntu – ‘enlightened self-interest’ or ‘humanity towards others.’ As you, dear reader, will have found out, while helping the beneficiary, generosity gives your own life a boost.

“Everything I know about morality and the obligations of men, I owe to football,” admitted Albert Camus, French philosopher (1913-60) author and journalist, winner in 1957 of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Sport is not just a metaphor, it’s also a school for life.

Muhammad Ali was very clear. “We can only be truly generous when we expect nothing in return,” he said. “With faith, discipline and selfless devotion to duty, there is nothing worthwhile that you cannot achieve.” Nicknamed “The Greatest”, Ali is widely regarded as the most amazing boxer of all time.

At the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, Germany’s Luz Long helped American Competitor and brilliant all-around athlete Jesse Owens win the gold medal in the long jump. The two men had met at the long jump, where Owens had inadvertently scratched his first jump, unaware it would be recorded as his first attempt, and not a trial. Unsettled, he scratched the second jump. As the story goes, Long suggested that Owens leap before the mark, ensuring that Owens would qualify to move on. In the spirit of competition, Long wanted the best from his opponent.

Owens did qualify, and the two went on to the finals. Long would beat the European record. But Owens would set a new world record that outdistanced Long. The two would best each other and the record five times before Owens finally won. What happened next is not the stuff of movie scripts but of real life.

Long took hold of Owens, and the two strode arm-in-arm for a victory lap. The crowd roared approval and shouted, “Owens! Owens!” Hitler promptly left the arena. The friendship between the two would continue for years until Long stopped writing to his friend in 1943. He had been conscripted into the German military and was mortally wounded in the Battle of St. Pietro. He passed away in a British military hospital, but not before penning a letter to his dear friend.



Luz Long and Jesse Owens

“Someday, find my son,” he said in his letter to Owens. “Tell him what times were like when we were not separated by war. Tell him how things can be between men on this Earth.”

Owens honoured the request and corresponded with the younger Luz for years. After the war, Owens returned to Berlin to walk arm-in-arm with Kai Long, the son of the great peacemaker and forever friend, remembering the moment in the stadium.

“It took a lot of courage for him to befriend me in front of Hitler,” Owens recalled. “I would melt down all the medals and cups I have, and they wouldn’t be a plating on the twenty-four-carat friendship that I felt for Luz Long.”

Life is not important...

Jackie Robinson, the first African-American to play major league baseball, stated that “a life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives.” His conviction is backed up by Roberto Clemente, former Pittsburgh Pirates great and baseball Hall of Famer, who spoke these words: “Any time you have an opportunity to make a difference in this world and you don’t, then you are wasting your time on Earth.”

As Dmitri Shostakovich, Russian composer and pianist (1906-75) put it: “Football is the ballet of the masses.” If you put your heart into it, your love may convert the prose of your daily life into poetry: something beautiful you feel.

Talking of faith, Imran Khan said: “Spirituality does two things for you. One, you are forced to

become more selfless, two, you trust in providence,” Khan, the Prime Minister of Pakistan between 2018-2022, previously captained the Pakistan national cricket team, which won the 1992 Cricket World Cup.

Be grateful to providence. Thank God for all you have. Never take your gifts for granted. Use them as well as you can. “I once cried because I had no shoes to play soccer, but one day, I met a man who had no feet,” admitted Zinedine ‘Zizou’ Zidane, French international star footballer named FIFA World Player of The Year 1998, 2000 and 2003. Zidane also won the Ballon d’Or in 1998 and managed Real Madrid from 2016-18 and 2019-21.

“When you buy me, you are buying a Ferrari,” boasted Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Swedish professional footballer who played 2016-20 18 for Manchester United, 2018-2019 for LA Galaxy and 2020-20 23 for AC Milan. Widely regarded as one of the best strikers of his generation, having won 31 trophies in his career, he is the most decorated active footballer in the world. However, before you jump to any conclusion – as you may have heard, it is unwise to judge a book by its cover – within that Ferrari there beats a heart of gold.

I know for a fact that, while at Manchester United from 2016-18, without any publicity, he used to send half his monthly salary to support youth clubs in the deprived areas of Malmö where he had been brought up.

To encourage their peers to be generous, some stars are happy to publicise their generosity. Cristiano

Ronaldo has been named the world’s most charitable sports star, having donated millions of pounds of his fortune to worthy causes. The Portuguese star was named by ‘Dosomething.org’ as the most charitable sportsperson, topping the Athletes Gone Good list of 20 stars.

Then there is Bethany Hamilton, a surfer who survived a shark attack when she was just 13 years old. Despite losing her left arm, she went on to realise her dream of going pro in 2007. Hamilton is active in charity work. She has her own foundation, Friends of Bethany, which provides support to amputees.

Empowering others

Lindsey Vonn, widely regarded as one of the world’s greatest female skiers after she won Olympic gold in Vancouver in 2010 and four World Cup championships, has her own foundation, the Lindsey Vonn Foundation, which focuses on community growth through the empowerment of girls. According to Kelley McMillan of the *New York Times*, Vonn has also done work with the Wounded Warrior Project and Wings for Life.

Tiger Woods – who passed through some very dark days in his life yet is arguably the world’s best golfer – has been involved in charity work and donations for some 20 years. His Tiger Woods Foundation provides money for deserving, impoverished students who want to go to college. It awards dozens of grants to improve under-privileged children’s health. Millions of young people have benefitted from his generosity.

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Jesse Owens

Serena Williams, with her 186 consecutive weeks stay on the summit of the WTA’s number one spot – she shared the spot with the German Steffi Graff – isn’t just a whiz on the court. She has been given many awards for her work with charities, such as the Young Heroes Award for her support of Big Brothers Big Sisters, the Family Circle and Prudential Financial Player Who Makes a Difference Award and the Celebrity Role Model Award from the Avon Foundation for her work fighting breast cancer.

“Life is like a game of soccer. You need goals. If there are no goals in your life then you can’t win.” (Author Unknown) Circumstances change, so will your goals. As they say, now is the start of the rest of your life. Your past has been a rehearsal for the present. Ask yourself: “What have I learnt from my life so far? How best to go forward?” Decide on a virtue to aim for. Maybe generosity? There are an increasing number of people in need.

Remember ‘Father Vlad’s five a day’? ‘Select, focus, commit, work and learn’ – perhaps to take another tack if that is what you need to do.

May you be inspired by these characters to do your bit. Maybe not with money but with your time and interest in the needy of your neighbourhood. Little things can mean a lot.

Towards the end of the last century – I keep the date vague to eliminate any possibilities of identification – a woman came to me to confess. She had thought of suicide. “But you look fine,” I said.

She responded: “That’s what I wanted to tell you about. Yesterday, standing in the checkout queue at my supermarket, a lady in front of me turned around and said: ‘Oh, luv, you look terrible. Come on, push your trolley in front of mine.’ I did. I burst out crying. Someone cared. I feel fine now.”

Generosity – as Jesus Christ broadcast through his Passion, Death and Resurrection – is a divine attribute. Worth acquiring while we have the time.