

76 Address by Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh,
Executive Director, President of Notre Dame
at

ANNUAL FOOTBALL BANQUET
of Notre Dame
December 12, 1949

To many throughout the country tonight, it may seem inappropriate and disproportionate that a priest and an educator should be associated with the festivities of an annual football banquet. To these people football has no connection whatever with education, and to them, it would be an abomination to link it in any way with religion. I would accuse them of near-sightedness because they cannot see beyond the externals of a game which to them appears to be a kind of organized mayhem. They lack the perspective to see football as a means to something far greater than the mere struggle between the goalposts.

There is another opposite approach to football which makes it an end in itself, something restricted to a hundred yards of playing field, to chains measuring ten yards, and to proper numerals on the score board. This second view also suffers from near-sightedness and a lack of perspective which is typified by the reaction of a coach of long ago who is reported to have seen one of his players smiling on the field, whereupon he yelled: "Wipe that smile off your face. What do you think this is, a game?"

We at Notre Dame have ever tried to steer a middle course between these two extremes which either condemn football out of hand or make football an end in itself. We do not play football for the sake of football alone, and yet we try to play it as well as possible, because we recognize in it some values that are well worth promoting in the world today.

Football has been called by many a typically American game because it dramatizes certain values that have made this country great among the nations. One of these values is a spirit of competition, another is cooperation and

team-work, still others are responsibility and initiative and imagination and courage and loyalty to an ideal. We feel that good competition on the gridiron makes our boys and our teams strive to be superior instead of mediocre. We believe conversely that those who would ostracize or penalize superiority even in football, are by that very token putting a premium on mediocrity in football, as well as in other fields of endeavor.

Look at the values of cooperation and team-work. A man may be the greatest runner in the world, but he does not run very far when his teammates fail to open up the holes and provide downfield blocking. Leon Hart made a very true statement last week upon the triumphant return of the 1949 squad to South Bend when he declared: "We played as a team, we won as a team, and we are national champions as a team." Hart"

The other values inculcated by football are rather self evident to anyone who follows the game. The only perfect plays of the game, as in life, are when everyone is fully responsible for his assignment. Sometimes things do not go as planned. It took a lot of initiative to meet the new offensive pattern of Southern Methodist. To have had the imagination to adapt themselves to meet an unforeseen situation, to have had the courage of those goal line stands, these are the characteristics of a champion in football as well as in life.

→ We often hear it said that American youth are going soft. If they ever do go soft, they will not learn how to do it on the football field. We are all for a game that can promote the virtues that made America great, because it is the same virtues that will keep America great. And we hope that our Notre Dame men will always cherish superiority in team-work and cooperation, in responsibility and initiative, in imagination courage and loyalty.

We might stop here if this were all that had to be said about football

as it is played in college today. Unfortunately, the collegiate football utopia does not exist, any more than an economic, or political or spiritual utopia exists any where in this world. Collegiate football is under fire from many directions today, and every college must re-examine its policy in the face of existing conditions. You have often heard repeated the basic policy enunciated by Father Cavanaugh at a past annual football banquet: "We shall always want Notre Dame men to play to win, so long as there is a Notre Dame." But this was not all he said. He added, "And to win cleanly according to the rules....because Notre Dame men are reared here on the campus in this spirit; and because they exemplify this spirit all over the world, they are the envy of the nation."

Reflect for a moment upon this statement. When we say we want to win, we do not mean that winning is an end that justifies any means. Competition without any regulation becomes vicious and unfair. That is why this University is sincere in its will to join with other institutions of learning, to do whatever they will do for the betterment of the game. That is why we impose upon our athletic program academic standards that are stricter than those imposed by common regulation, like the 77% average for varsity competition. That is why we insist that our players be good men as well as good athletes. We feel that winning a victory would be hollow and hypocritical if it did not represent the same kind of winning that we expect Notre Dame men to attain in marriage, in business, and in life; winning according to the book. Here is the possible blind spot in collegiate athletics today: to win at any cost, by hook or by crook, as the saying goes. And here is the test of the real champion in athletics as well as in life; to achieve his greatest desires within the limits of accepted regulations, not to cut corners.

Read all of these meanings into Father Cavanaugh's statement of policy and I think you will find that Notre Dame's stand is still good for many years

to come.

If what we have said thus far means anything, I think it means that football, seen in its proper setting, can make a very definite contribution to the field of education. It might seem more difficult to relate it to religion, but I think it can be done. Our age has been characterized by a severance between the things of man and the things of God. In a highly secularized society, a few moments on Sunday are traditionally reserved for God with the underlying idea that if God gets that much, He should be satisfied. But the simple fact of theology is this, that all things have come from God, and somehow, all things are meant to contribute to His glory, as well as to man's happiness. How is this accomplished? One man has called it "the art of consecration." If we can glorify God by picking up the stones of the field and making them into a cathedral, if we can transform the simple bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, then certainly human efforts and the achievement of superiority can be offered to God, for His glory and His praise. This is why we are not ashamed at Notre Dame to pray at Mass and on the field for victory and the strength to play in a way deserving of victory. This is why we pray that victory may be achieved without injury to our men or the other team. This is why we honor so highly Our Blessed Mother on and off the field since God has already honored her more than our feeble efforts can ever do. All of these things are close to the Spirit of Notre Dame and part of the will to win. They are consecrated efforts as long as we win in a way that can be offered to God. And we trust that this same spirit of consecration will pervade our other efforts to attain the worthwhile things of life. Life could be very boring and hum-drum, and fruitless without this spirit.

It would not be right to close these remarks without a word of deep gratitude to the members of the Athletic Department who have labored long and hard in accomplishing the dull and the demanding details that make for a successful operation; to Mr. Cahill and his cohorts of the aspirin league; to Ed Krause, Herb Jones, and Charlie Callahan, the three musketeers of sleepless weekends; to the coaching staff and the greatest of them all, Frank Leahy, we feel that your reward has been the magnificent performance of the 1949 team that is among the greatest of the greats: as football players without equal, as Christian Gentlemen worthy of the monograms you wear, to all of you, the blessings of God and the smile of Notre Dame is our best wish.