

Give UT student-athletes a sporting chance

In his commencement speech at the University of Texas at Austin last May, Steven Weinberg spoke controversially about higher education in Texas. His most controversial statement mentioned Longhorn football: "In the years to come, when you tell people that you graduated from the University of Texas at Austin, they are not going to care how well our football team is doing in the Big 12, at least not if they are adults."



Weinberg's last clause contains a hidden and hopeless wish: Adults are going to keep on caring, and caring too much, about Big 12 football. Try as I might, I myself cannot not care about Big 12 football and how the Longhorn student-athletes are doing. My feeling is that they would be doing fine if the adults around them would adhere to the principles underlying the ancient Greek "agonistic" spirit of sports.

On Aug. 24, I sent UT athletics director DeLoss Dodds and President Larry Faulkner an e-mail that contained a preseason appraisal of the Longhorns football team by one of my students, Lt. Col. Theodore S. Westhusing, a career Army airborne officer learning ancient Greek in order to teach philosophy at West Point in 2004. Westhusing, an Oklahoma graduate, knows how to motivate troops, and he understands group dynamics. He viewed a Longhorns workout and wrote to me: "While Brown has a stacked team, and Simms should win the Heisman, and that hotshot frosh [Cedric Benson] should start at running back by the fifth game... they appear undisciplined to me. I predict my Sooners will run roughshod over them."

Westhusing's observations and his implicit warning have proved uncannily accurate, especially if we grasp what he meant by "undisciplined." The Latin word disciplina implies learning the core realities of any science or art. What does this mean in the western "agonistic" tradition?

The Greek ideal was competition among fairly matched "athletes" or "competitors for prizes." The principle of fair competition underlies weight classes in boxing and the hierarchy of minor leagues in baseball. Until recently, it was reasonably well preserved by the scheme of divisions and conferences



Rodolfo Gonzalez/American-Statesman

A dejected Chris Simms walks off the field with teammates after the Longhorns' 39-37 loss Saturday to the Colorado Buffaloes.

in college football.

Fair competition and being "disciplined" in sportsmanship implies that teams and athletes test themselves against worthy opponents whose skills and resources can challenge their own. The ultimate goal is their true self-knowledge. Sadly, this principle has been perverted in big-time college football and nowhere more so than at UT-Austin. After the Big 12 championship loss, the wolves have bared their teeth against junior student-athlete quarterback Chris Simms. These former merchants of praise now point out that in his two major tests, Oklahoma and Colorado, he made eight turnovers leading to 33 of his opponents' 53 points.

Simms, however, never had the chance to develop against worthy competition.

The Longhorns, according to DeLoss Dodds, are the Joneses when it comes to

keeping up with exorbitant coaches' salaries, multimillion dollar stadia, luxury skyboxes, three consecutive top-five recruiting classes and Texas-size training rooms. Yet for most of the season, they were lowest in quality of competition among the top 10 teams in Bowl Championship Series ratings. The nine teams our Longhorns played besides Oklahoma and Colorado had aggregate conference records of 23-45, getting most of those victories playing teams such as Louisiana Monroe and East Carolina.

After trouncing four such hapless teams, the Longhorns defensive coordinator said, "We're playing at a pretty high level the four or five weeks since Oklahoma." My e-comment to the American-Statesman sports editors was, "How can he or anyone tell? How many of our brave veterans would remark that U.S. military defense was at a high

level because we were able to repel attacks by Monaco, Luxembourg, Nepal and Belgium?" The praise for the Longhorns offensive showing against such overmatched opponents was likewise deluded.

In F.X. Toole's remarkable new collection of short stories about boxing "Rope Burns," a wizened trainer comments, "Till you know how it was when it was, watch you mouf." Real sports is all about acquiring skills and self-knowledge through real competition. It is about learning to say "I won" gracefully and "I lost" proudly. It is not about scapegoating a single student-athlete whose program never gave him and his teammates a chance to learn about themselves through fair competition.

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