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March Madness

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Distinctly Catholic

Amidst all the crushing concerns of the world, from the earthquake-tsunami tragedy in Japan to the fresh outbreak of sex abuse cover-up in Philadelphia, to the normal ups-and-downs of quotidian existence, it is good every once in awhile to find something that lifts the human spirit. That something, this time of year, is known as March Madness.

College basketball is simply the best sport going in America today. The level of competition is unlike that found in any other sport. On any given night, any of the top twenty-five or even fifty teams can beat any other team. For something like eight weeks in a row, the team ranked #1 in the nation lost the following week and someone else claimed the top spot, only to be bested in turn, and bumped in the ratings the following week.

Nowhere has the competition been more fierce than in the Big East conference. As regular readers know, I am a UConn fan and have been for years, and their run last week at the Big East Championships was a thing of beauty to behold. Five wins in five days, finishing with a triumph over Louisville which had beaten UConn twice during the regular season. The thing about the Big East Conference is that there are teams like Seton Hall and Providence College which lost most of their in-conference games, but are nonetheless really good teams. If the Friars of PC were in any other conference, I suspect they would have a winning record.

Another interesting thing about the Big East is the number of Catholic schools it contains: Georgetown, DePaul, Marquette, Seton Hall, Villanova, Providence College and, of course, Notre Dame, which I think is probably the best team in the country and could easily win the NCAA tournament. I suspect the ability of these Catholic universities to consistently field great teams has something to do with the feeders provided by first-rate Catholic high schools.

There is more than athletic prowess entailed in collegiate sports today. Kemba Walker, UConn's star and the Big East Tournament MVP, is graduating in three years as did his predecessor Emeka Okafor, who led UConn to a national championship in 2004. Okafor actually stayed for his fourth year and got a Master's degree at UConn as well, but Husky fans fear Walker will bolt to the NBA, especially after his amazing performance in the Big East Tournament. I hope Walker will follow Okafor in a different way: Okafor, a very devout Catholic, is one of the most prolific philanthropists in the NBA.

This commitment to making sure student athletes complete their degrees and build their characters is not unique to basketball. A few years back, the son of a friend played football at the University of Maryland, which is just down the street from my house. After the games, he and some of his teammates would come over to the house for dinner. Much of the conversation, understandably, dealt with the game just completed, but much of it turned to classes and studies. These kids worked their tails off balancing their studies and their practice sessions. And, they were great kids.

We forget, sometimes, when we watch the phenoms of athletic ability that they are kids. UConn's basketball team, earlier in the year, had trouble breaking through a 3-2 zone. I would find myself getting frustrated and then I would remember ? half of the team consists of freshmen. They are eighteen years old. But, over the course of the season, they developed a degree of perseverance that was evident in their play, but which will also serve them well as they enter adulthood and face other challenges.

My friend and colleague Tom Roberts has been extolling the virtues of the Big 12 Conference, but I actually think the Big East is where the action is. But, wherever one locates their fan loyalty, the next three weeks are going to be a joy to watch. At least for a few hours, we can forget the troubles of the world and relish the exploits of our teams. It is March Madness and you won't be able to tear me from my sofa!

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