
Who's Number One?

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
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Who is number one this week? The question has become relentless.

Political candidates, of course, and their most committed supporters, are obsessed with the question. And there seems to be no escape. Every day, someone is conducting, or releasing, another type of poll. Who is number one with this group, or that demographic, or that region?

Our media distributors sell magazines and television shows and internet sites because of our temptation for rankings and lists. So we have show after show devoted to some sort of competition ""from challenging mental games to goofy survival gimmicks. (We even have television shows about the best television shows.) Sometimes I think that our political debates this year have resembled television game shows.

My former colleague at the Cathedral of St. Philip, Elizabeth Rechter, once delivered a memorable sermon in which she lamented our culture's obsession with lists. She did not want another article labeled "Best of ... ," she said, as if everybody, and everything, in the world were being ranked.

Our current lust for competition can be exhausting. It might be because our culture uses politics and sports as the wrong sort of model, a model that is too limited. In most political campaigns, and in most sports events, we dramatize and exalt only one human winner. In a league, for instance, of thirty-two teams, all with excellent players, only one team will win the final game. Thus, at the conclusion of the Super Bowl this Sunday, one team will feel like a loser, even though thirty other teams wish they had been there. Competition can depress us if we believe there is only one human winner.

Competition is truly dangerous when our desire to win includes destroying our competitor. We have all seen that reality. Competition can also be dangerous when it motivates theft, lying, or cheating. We have all seen those realities, too, perhaps in certain financial circumstances. The drive to win, at any cost, can also drive some people to lose their humanity.

But there are healthy elements of "competition!" In the best sense of the word, a competitor is someone we "strive with." To compete with someone is to strive toward a goal, with another person, not against another person. With, not against. A true competitor brings out the best in our own gifts and talents. Sometimes the runner will not run so fast alone as she does when with someone, when another competitor is matching her stride for stride.

I, for one, do not mind some of the displays of religious faith on the athletic field year after year. Of course, I believe some of those displays can be rude and arrogant and condescending""just like some religion can! But sometimes, the displays can be reminders that no one, not one of us, is actually "number one." If an athlete points to the sky after a touchdown, perhaps that gesture can mean, "The real Number One is up there, not down here!" Maybe the losing team should start pointing to the sky, too, after the score, as if to say, "The real Number One is up there, not down here!"

I pray for all those who strive, whether they be candidates or athletes, bankers or business executives, even lovers or

siblings. I hope we all strive for things, and I hope we all strive for truly good things. At their best, competitors help us to do that; they help us to see a larger reality, a larger goal, even a common goal, a common good. Competitors often become our best friends when we realize how much we have in common. Competitors can also be our best friends when they help us to see that "the real Number One" is larger than we are.

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