

More  
Than a  
Game

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# More Than a Game

LIFE LESSONS  
FROM PHILADELPHIA'S  
SPORTS COMMUNITIES

NEW CITY COMMUNITY PRESS

Eliot Shorr-Parks • Steve Parks

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For Katie, Sadie, and Jude  
E.S.P.

For my father, Clint Parks  
S.P.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*More Than a Game* began as a conversation over Chinese food, where discussions of the goal of community publishing and sports culture blended into a book idea. At the time, there was little reason to expect that athletes, amateur or professional, would take time out of their hectic lives to sit and talk with us, often for hours on end. We had little sense of how our small project might bring us into contact with individuals and organizations whose commitment to our city's youth and neighborhoods would inspire us on a daily basis. We want to begin then by thanking those athletes and organizers who appear in this book. We hope this book does justice to the impact you have made on our city.

Moving an idea from a conversation, to taped interviews, to chapters, to the book you now hold in your hands took a team in its own right. For that reason, we also want to acknowledge the student interns who supported the logistics of this project: Austin Argenti, Benjamin Klein, Danielle Mancinelli and Beth Uzwiak. Without the unwavering support of the following, we might never have met many of the individuals featured in this book: Luke Butler, Bonnie Clark, Donna Cooper, Ben Herold, Margaret Hughes, Brian Johnson, Marisol Lezcano, Mark Lyons, Adele MacDonald, Larry Needle, Ryan Nissan, Tysha Monique, Louis Antonio Ortiz, Joe Saville, Deanna Sabec, Larry Shenk, Laura Shubilla, Jacquie Thomas and Pamela Browner White. Finding the proper home for this project has also led to an important alliance with Temple University Press. So we also need to thank Micah Kleit, for his vision on how our independent press, New City Community Press, and Temple UP might work together. His insights, along with those of the Temple University Press Advisory Board, have been invaluable.

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Finally, every book project is a deeply personal commitment – a faith that at the end of the day, what is produced will be of value not only to the authors, but to the readers as well. While we have worked together on this project, we want to take a moment to thank, as individuals, those who have sustained our effort:

*SP:* There is a cliché moment in any sports interview, where the athlete thanks his family for their unwavering support. In this case, cliché becomes reality. As always, I am deeply indebted to Lori, Sadie and Jude, for everything they add to my life. I am also grateful to close friends who have helped keep this project on track when it threatened to veer off into academic discourse or writing pedagogy (my day job) and leave behind the power of the stories being told: Brian Johnson, Jim Seitz, John Burdick and Jeff Bellamy. Finally, I want to particularly thank my youngest son's sports coaches, who without knowing it, were a guiding spirit in what I hoped to capture in this book: Matthew Grady, Patrick Fillimore and Chris Plant. My children were lucky to have them as coaches and teachers.

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special. For my brother Jude, simply put, you are the man. I can't wait to watch and see all the great things you accomplish in your life. To my sister Sadie, thanks for being the best sister a brother could ask for. To my parents, the older I get, the more I realize how lucky I am to have such wonderful, successful, supportive role models in my life every day.

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# MORE THAN A GAME:

## *Life Lessons from Philadelphia's Sports Communities*

*Rocky* might be considered the penultimate Philadelphia sports movie. Telling the story of a working-class boxer from South Philly who, through hard work and good fortune, manages to obtain the world title, *Rocky* has been adopted by the city for its ability to express the daily struggles of Philly's many residents. Indeed, for many, the essence of Philadelphia sports is captured in *Rocky*; it is the emotional framework through which much of our city's modern sports history is framed and articulated. Not only has "Win, Rocky, Win" become the battle cry for our professional and amateur sports teams alike, but every day hundreds of residents and tourists reenact Rocky's run up the Philadelphia Arts Museum steps, bouncing up and down upon their arrival at the top, their clenched fists reaching up into the air. Moments later they head over to the Rocky statue, nestled in a shaded area off to the side, completing a modern sports pilgrimage.

*More Than a Game* also tells a Philadelphia sports story. In the following pages, you will read about individuals who struggled against great odds to win titles, achieve success. Memorable lines also are spoken by these individuals; aphorisms that will inspire and compel you to strive harder in your daily life. This is not, however, a book framed around the *Rocky* narrative—the lone individual who, given a unique opportunity at success, steps into his moment and succeeds. For while this is a classic American myth, it is not, we believe, an accurate description of how sports operate in Philadelphia; it does not recognize and respect the ways in which Philadelphia residents have used high school teams, community sports leagues, or professional franchises to foster a greater sense of opportunity and community across the city. It does not place individual success within community support.

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For ultimately what *Rocky* gets wrong isn't that life-changing opportunities emerge from sports. It is wrong in presenting such opportunities as only possible through random luck. While such stories might *possibly* be useful in explaining one element or aspect of our city's sports culture, ultimately they necessarily fail to capture the complexity, diversity and richness of how sports operate in our city on a daily level, in the lives of residents who course about their neighborhoods every day committed to fostering and capturing the potential of a place they call home. If you look closely, you will see that while these efforts are embedded in sports, these efforts are really about mentoring, education and community building. This insight is only possible, however, if you step outside mass-produced visions of our sports culture.

We believe that to many young adults in our city, sports are a portal to a cohesive and supportive sense of community, a vital resource within urban neighborhoods that are often under tremendous stress. The work of high school and community league coaches and athletes offers a public space where communal values of hard work, team goals and achievable success are enacted daily—at every practice and in every game. At a moment when publicly-funded institutions, such as non-profit community organizations, are suffering under the “great recession,” sports leagues offer a low-cost consistent presence and resource to young adults, the very individuals who are often pulled towards behaviors that are not in their immediate or long-term best interests. In these situations, the coach, the team, the league offers a haven in which new identities and opportunities for leadership can be tested, tried on and assumed as a vital element of their own being. In this way, sports serves as a vehicle through which a set of values can be inculcated, internalized and enacted. If we take such a view, we can come to understand that the sporting community is a network of individuals, teams, and organizations which fosters a sense of purpose for our youth, a network that stitches together a diverse and multilingual community within our city and moves it towards a collective purpose.

Indeed to fully understand our city's sports culture, we also need to reconfigure our sense of the “fan community.” Too often, Philadelphia fans are characterized by singular moments that have turned into metonyms for an entire city's behavior—throwing snowballs at Santa

Claus, booing an injured Michael Irvin. If you listen to the fans and professional athletes, however, a more complex and rich relationship is demonstrated. Particularly when talking to members of Philadelphia's working class, it becomes clear that the push and pull between fan and player is an extended discussion over the importance of working-class values, an effort to ensure that our teams live up to the city's reputation for hard work and no excuses. It is also a conversation about different elements of the city expecting to be represented on the professional playing field, of franchises needing to see themselves not as businesses, but as neighbors. It is this image, this goal, which leads parents to take their children to games, that leads children to don the shirts of a Bobby Clarke or Carlos Ruiz. Rather than the simplistic vision of fan culture as "tailgating," then, we hope to explore how other elements of fandom help to create a concentric vision of community, moving from the immediacy of family outward to community leagues, and ultimately pointing toward the actions of professional franchises which circulate across the country.

To represent this community, we consciously decided not to frame our work as a traditional scholarly project—chapters written in academic discourse, footnotes indicating research trends and insights. Instead, we wanted to create a project that allowed residents, coaches and athletes to speak in their own terms about the ways in which participation in a sports team or program enriched their own lives and the life of their community. Indeed, what you will read in this book will be their words, as spoken by them, with little or no editorial changes. In choosing who to speak to for this project, our general intent—with some exceptions—was to interview individuals who had emerged from a working-class background and went on to become active in Philadelphia's sports community—either as athlete or coach. We were also interested in individuals who could speak to how their participation in sports translated into other areas of their life—whether personal or professional. Where individuals helped to create or were active in a sports league, we were interested in their thoughts on how the league impacted the community in which it existed. Throughout, we were committed to trying to represent the diversity of heritages and backgrounds that make up our city.

We believe important and compelling stories have emerged from these efforts, stories that can be used to teach and inform both the current



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and future participants in Philadelphia sports about the values and goals of its sports community. As you read through this book, you will hear:

Jordan Berman and Frank Greco talk about the rich history of street games, such as half ball and hose ball, which were the first games many working class children played “back in the day” on Philadelphia streets;

Angelo Cataldi, Vanessa Rodriguez and Nick Bradley demonstrate the importance of fathers in shaping the values they bring to their understanding of sports and community;

Bobby Clarke, Chris Pronger and Leonard Weaver talk about how working class values learned from their parents provided them an insight into the values of sports that carried into their playing careers;

Rob Enslin discusses the importance of the “Broad Street Bullies” as he navigated a simultaneously supportive and difficult childhood and Dave Leonardi speaks to how a commitment to the Flyers has enriched his life;

Danny Diaz share moments where his teenage years seemed to be heading off track, an experience that led him to create a youth football league in Kensington. Other sports leagues directors, such as Dan Winterstein of Mt. Airy Baseball, build off Diaz’s story to talk about the role of sports in building local community;

Leroy Johnson reminisce about growing up in Philadelphia in the 1920’s, watching Jack Johnson, the first African-American World Champion, spar in South Philadelphia, then face racial discrimination when he tried to swim in public pools. Alyson Goodner then “flips the script” by discussing how swimming on an integrated recreation team impacted her life;

Rami Ibrahim tell how a commitment to sports helped him overcome discrimination after his family moved to Philadelphia during the first Gulf War, providing him with a work ethic that enabled him to become the first Palestinian World Mui Thai Champion;

Bill Giles and Joe Banner talk about the role of their franchises in representing and supporting the diverse backgrounds and needs of Philadelphia's neighborhoods. Tina Sloan Green builds off their stories, showing how her commitment to African-American women athletes grows out of her own history and commitment to equity;

Carlos Ruiz and Rubén Amaro, Jr., remind us of the importance of the Latino community in developing a vibrant and engaged sense of sports in Philadelphia;

Sonny Hill share how his childhood helped to inform the creation and success of the Sonny Hill League, an effort to infuse a basketball league with the idea that "Education is Your Best Shot." A story echoed in the life history of former Eagle, Gary Cobb;

Michael Nutter, Herman Douglas and Ed Rendell speak to how their sports experiences led to their later successes and commitment to education, community and Philadelphia;

Finally, Larry Colangelo offers a final reminder to the reader of the sheer joy victory can bring to a fan, a fan-base, and a city.

We hope that taken collectively, these stories present an intimate portrait of the role of sports in Philadelphia, from the personal lives of our neighbors and friends to the role of professional franchises in our city. And while there will necessarily be overlap in themes between chapters, we have structured the book to move the reader from a sense of Philadelphia's sporting past, through the role of mentors in instilling important values about work and respect in children. The chapters then follow the path of young adults as they move onto and struggle to achieve on advanced sports teams, ultimately bringing a commitment to sports into their adult lives as coaches, commissioners and fans. The book culminates in a reminder of how victories in sports are often the result of all these moments combined by focusing on the 2008 World Series victory of the Philadelphia Phillies.

Of course, we can hardly claim to capture all the stories of Philadelphia sports. There are certainly athletes, teams and leagues that would have been welcomed additions. Absences are a necessary element



in any anthology of this type. At those moments, we take comfort in the advice given by a community publisher from the United Kingdom who once told us, “You can’t possibly capture everyone’s story, but you must capture stories that speak to the community as a whole.” We have tried to meet that challenge by finding experiences that speak to the broad and basic values of the sports community. If as you read this book, you find yourself asking why a certain person isn’t included, our hope is that his or her name occurs to you because the collection has given you a new way to consider this person or team. Hopefully, such moments can be used to initiate a discussion with a student, colleague or friend on the true meaning of sports in Philadelphia.

For ultimately, we hope *More Than a Game* can lead to sports in our city being seen as a vital site of literacy instruction. Typically, when sports and literacy are connected, what is meant is the ability of sports statistics to teach math; of sports history to teach about civil rights progress. We do not deny such benefits. We would argue, however, that sports offer a unique combination of intellectual and pragmatic literacy skills. For the young adult who plays a sport, he is learning how to study a skill, how practice perfects that skill and how such skills are useful only when placed in terms of a collective team goal. As he then moves on to manage a team, he is not just learning the game, but learning how to teach values, organize projects, set goals and achieve collective results. For those who then remain active by organizing leagues, they are not just organizing a sport, but learning how to find resources, schedule events, build community support and participation. All of these lessons are learned within the enriched paradigm of valuing the local community and the future of the next generation of city residents. In effect, sports teach individuals how to build *community*.

We did not always have this insight. After almost two years into this project, we had the opportunity to visit with Sonny Hill of the Sonny Hill League. At that point in our work, we had a series of powerful stories, but perhaps not yet an understanding of what we had found. Sitting on the bleachers at Audenried High School, Mr. Hill asked, “Do you see what is happening here?” I looked at the game. “No,” he said, and gestured to the stands, full of parents and children, cheering the good play of each team. He pointed to volunteer coaches, mentoring young adults in the skills that would aid them in their future goals. He pointed to referees, guiding players through the technicalities of the

game. He was, I realized, asking us to see the community that sports can create, to understand the value of such moments and to seek to articulate those values for the readers of this book. He was asking us to see that it was about more than a scoreboard; it was about more than a basketball game.

At its best, our book is an attempt to listen and learn from those who have spent their lives in gyms, on playing fields and at hockey rinks; individuals who through their coaching or life experiences have drawn forth the collective best from our city's youth. Ultimately, it is an attempt to share those lessons with others.

Rather than asking someone to emulate the individual achievements of a movie hero's run up a set of steps, we are hoping this collection of stories will inspire you to stand on the sidelines and take part in the difficult and inspiring work that marks sports in Philadelphia.

For ultimately, we believe anyone who has attended an Eagles game, cheered on the Flyers, or paraded down Broad Street with the Phillies, understands there is something more to sports in Philadelphia. It's more than just three periods or nine innings. It's more than a first down.

Sports have always stood for more. It's playing with your friends. It's watching your parents cheer you in the stands. It's giving your son the glove you played with. It's not letting down your teammates. It's digging deeper. It's trying harder. It's teamwork. It's winning. It's losing. It's learning from both.

Sport's is a lot of things. But it's not just a game.

It's *More Than A Game*.



The image features a background of green grass. A thick white arc curves from the right edge towards the center. A thin black horizontal line is positioned across the middle of the image, intersecting the white arc.

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# MICHAEL NUTTER

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*“The Philly fan wants you to put yourself out there. Understanding that, yeah, you might get smacked by a line backer, but that is your job. And whether you catch the ball or not, it’s about effort. Philadelphia fans want to see the effort.”*

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**P**hiladelphia is a city of great history, culture, art and education. It's a real place.

Philadelphia is truly one of the great cities of the world. It's an international city. It's a port city. It's a river city. It's the center of commerce and industry. It's a city where people are passionate about issues and ideas. They care. People in Philadelphia actually give a damn about things. And that's part of who we are and what we are about. It's part of what makes Philadelphia such a great town.

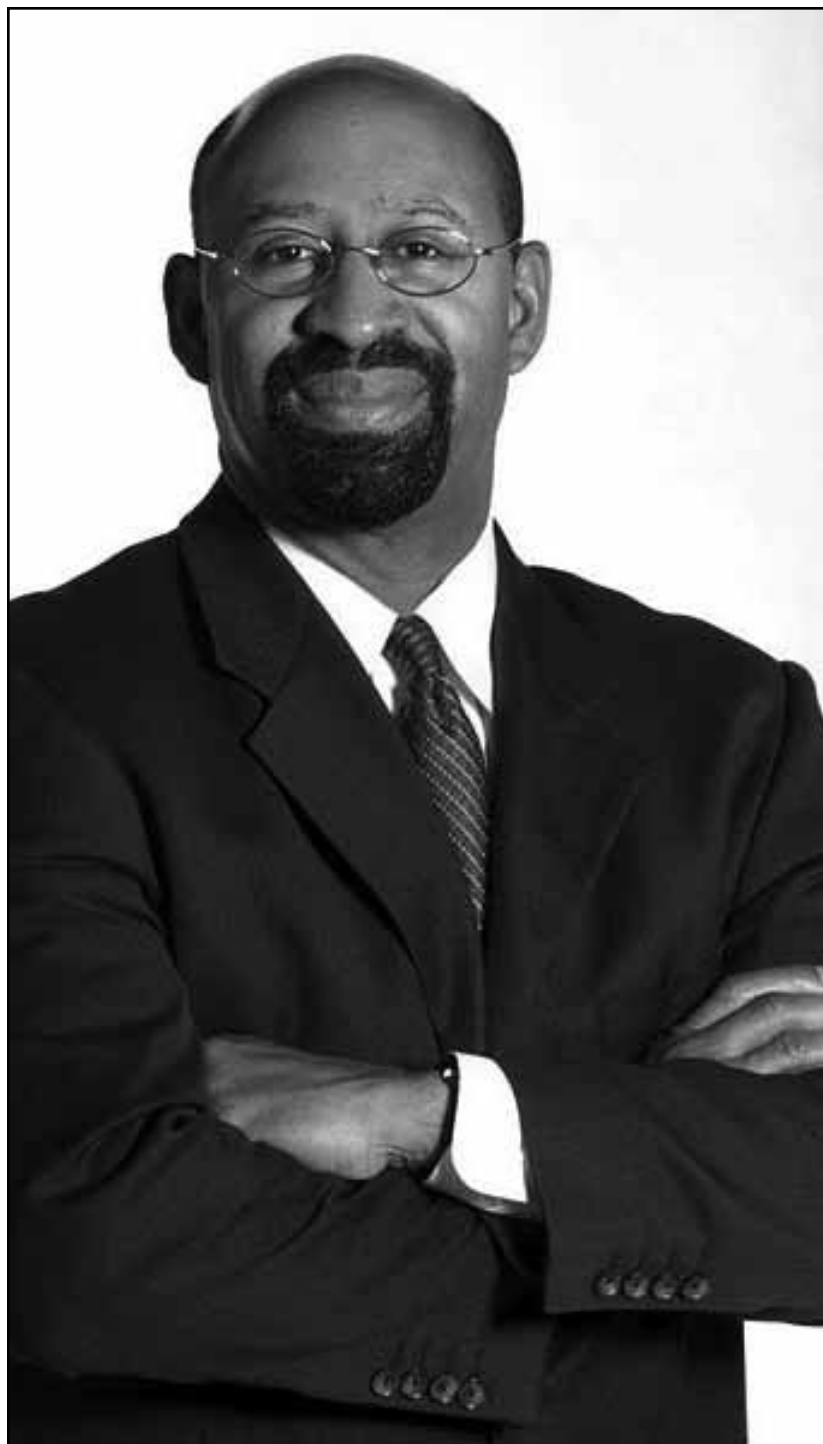
I'm proud to say I grew up here. I was raised in West Philadelphia, 55<sup>th</sup> and Larchwood. The neighborhood today is the same as it was back then. It's a middle class neighborhood. While all our parents worked, most had not gone to college. However, almost everybody on the block in my cohort of friends went to college or had opportunities to go to college. Often, we were the first in our families to go to college. So it was very much a working class community, full of serious people who cared about their kids. It had a great sense of community.

Growing up, like most kids in the city, I played sports all the time. I played football, baseball and basketball. I also played stickball, step ball, dodge ball, king block. I even played marbles from time to time. I also went to Franklin Field with my father when the Eagles played there or to the Spectrum when the Sixers played there. But the sport my father and I followed the most was boxing. I saw Kenny Briscoe, William Monroe, Bobby "Boogaloo" Watts. I saw some great fights as a kid. It was an incredible era of Philadelphia fighters.

Politics is a lot like sports, there is no question about it. Politics may not be as well-regulated as sports, but there is certainly a competitiveness to it, a certain amount of mental, physical, spiritual training to it. It

MICHAEL NUTTER

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has a certain ebb and flow, and at the end there is victory. I fell into politics to some extent. I met a lot of political people when I was working at the Impulse nightclub in North Philly, so I started coming to City Council meetings. I was in my twenties at this point. My life-long ambition growing up was to be a doctor—I wanted to help people. With my job now, though, I get to do that as well.

I've been lucky to be the mayor of a city that values sports as much as Philadelphia does.

Sports, whatever your sport, organized leagues or pick-up, are an important component of life. Leagues like the Sonny Hill League and Police Athletic League are important parts of the community. It's not about whether you are going to be a basketball star, football star, tennis star or hockey star. It really is more about the engagement, the interaction. Learning about self-discipline, teamwork, getting along with other people; even if you are star, you learn how to support your fellow teammates. You learn what sportsmanship is all about.

So I think there are many life lessons learned that have nothing to do with the mechanics of the sport. It's really about showing up every day, being prepared, being dedicated and understanding that you are part of something larger than just yourself. I learned a great deal from sport. I still have great friends from when I played in high school. I am sure the same continues for folks who go on to play in college.

There is also something about Philadelphians and sports. Mike Schmidt had just an incredible quote that I have used from time to time: "Philadelphia is a place where you can experience the thrill of victory, and the agony of reading about it the next day." This is a very passionate town. Everybody's got something to say, everybody's got an opinion. And the next person knows more than the last person—the player should have done this, could have done that, what about this.

The Philly fan wants you to put yourself out there. Understanding that, yeah, you might get smacked by a linebacker, but that is your job. And whether you catch the ball or not, it's about effort. Philadelphia fans want to see the effort. This is a hard working kind of town, people take their jobs seriously. They want their sports stars to do the same thing. No matter how big a star you are in the town, the Philly fan never wants our stars to get too far above the fans. So if you, as



a sports star, start thinking that the game is about you and not about the fans, you are going to have a problem right here in this town. We don't suffer the prima donnas easily.

Sports, I think, at least in this town, is also often a barometer of how people are feeling. At least during football season, on any Monday you can pretty much tell by the first 15 minutes of conversation with co-workers whether or not the Eagles won the day before. Baseball is everyday, so it's up, down, you know. And it definitely has an effect on the mood of the city.

That's what made the Phillies Championship in 2008 so special. As the Phillies were going through the playoffs that year, we are in the midst of one of the worst recessions this city had ever seen. But people were upbeat, they were nice, they were excited. There was electricity in the stadium that was somewhat indescribable. There was just this sense that we were going to win this game. Our last baseball championship was the 1980's World Series. And so it had been a long time and we had been watching this team of great promise and they had been building for some time, and it was a most incredible feeling when they won. I had never personally experienced something like that before. I saw the win in 1980 on TV, but I was not at the game. So to be in the new ballpark, seeing this great team, knowing the struggles that they had been through in '08, it was an amazing experience. And whether you follow the sport or not, you kind of get caught up in it. It's an incredible feeling for an individual and for the city.

So sports is about community. It's about something you don't do by yourself. There is at least a person that has to work with you. It's getting along with large groups of people, it's about dedication and commitment, it's about showing up every day, it's about the proper mental attitude, it's about how you interact with people who are focused on a particular goal to try and accomplish something. So sports teaches you about life, whether you use those lessons in a game or to run a city government. It's that sense of camaraderie that football coaches talk about: "It's about the team." And no matter the context, we still need to execute. We still need to take care of the fundamentals. Philadelphia is our team, and we are all trying to move in the same direction.

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