



Drew Hyland, Charles A. Dana Professor of Philosophy, asks students to examine their lives through the clarifying lens of athletics

Phil. 213: Philosophy of Sport

by Jim H. Smith

“For many of us, that sense of self-identity in the light of a given activity comes only with the arrival at adulthood and the choice of a career. One ‘becomes’ an artist, teacher, doctor, and begins to think of oneself in those terms. But for many athletes and certainly for me, the event of self-identity with athletics takes place much, much earlier.” —Drew Hyland, “Basketball”

It’s a beautiful, sunny day on the brink of both Spring Break and March Madness; the kind of morning when students might be inclined to cut class. But at 9:45 the largest lecture hall at Trinity, McCook Auditorium, is quickly filling up. And it is near capacity at 10:00, when the professor steps to the lectern.

He’s a trim man with closely cropped hair and a neat goatee. His lightness of step belies his age. He moves with the kind of poise that comes from years of introspection about the most economical ways to shoulder life’s myriad burdens.

Teaching still inspires him. That much is clear as he starts to speak and holds his audience rapt.

His subject this morning is finitude, about which few undergraduates have much personal experience. The vehicle with which he has chosen to explore this big concept is a 20-year-old film his students have watched, called *Everybody’s All-American*. It’s nominally a sports film, but to hear the professor talk about it you soon realize that it’s rich in the kinds of messages about the meanings of life and death that distinguish all enduring cinema from throw-away celluloid.

Still, it seems like unconventional material for a philosophy class. This is no conventional philosophy class, however. It’s “Philosophy of Sport,” and the professor is Drew Hyland. He has been teaching it annually since the year he arrived at Trinity, 40 basketball seasons ago.

In the metaphor of sport—learning from basketball

He was 29 that year and launching “Philosophy of Sport” was a declaration of individuality, an act of intellectual defiance against graduate school academics that had looked down their noses at athletics.

Sport was nothing less than a witness tree for Hyland. An athlete from childhood, he had captained championship basketball teams at Princeton and “was struck by how much time and energy I had invested in basketball, from which I had learned an enormous amount about life, the world, and myself.”

In the metaphor of sport, Hyland saw not only an opportunity to explore the meaning of life, but an opportunity to connect with students, especially student athletes, who might otherwise see philosophy as a subject with little value for them.

Indeed, the big ideas about the human condition that inform the many other subjects he teaches—Greek philosophy, Plato, 19th- and 20th-century Continental philosophy, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Hegel—are all apparent in “Philosophy of Sport.” Hyland expects his students to grasp the meaning of philosophy and to begin defining a philosophy for themselves by examining their lives, as he has examined his own, through the clarifying lens of athletics. His eight books (two more are about to be published) include *The Question of*

Play (University Press of America) and *The Philosophy of Sport* (Paragon House Publishers).

“In our everyday lives,” he once wrote about that lens, “where speech is the primary vehicle of our ethical encounters, it is notoriously easy to dissimulate. (It is) much harder in sport, where the almost exclusive locus of ethical decision is physical action which is usually quite literally visible. In sport, we actually *see* what kind of ethical person you are: a cheat or a fair player, a coward or a malicious bully, a ‘whiner’ or one who doesn’t complain, a player who ‘gets away with anything he can’ or a person of a higher ethical standard.”

Perhaps more important is what “Philosophy of Sport” demonstrates about Hyland’s teaching style, however. “One of the great joys of a liberal arts education is learning how to live a questioning life,” says Robert Pippin ’70, who was one of Hyland’s students in the late 1960s and now teaches philosophy at the University of Chicago (see sidebar). “Drew exemplified that. People speak of philosophy as a way of life, but often

The living of an excellent life

When Drew Hyland returned to his alma mater, Princeton, in 2005 it was to deliver a lecture called “The Sweatiest of Liberal Arts,” about the two loves that have remained inextricably intertwined throughout his career—sport and philosophy. In it, he called the ancient Greeks to the defense of sport, noting that “the basic feature of [their] educational world, [was] the conviction that the two core disciplines, without...which a young person could not develop to full humanity, were the arts and athletics...”

At the site of his own greatest athletic achievements, he told his audience, “This strenuous and passionate desire to improve is the hallmark and pride of every true athlete. But, I ask my student athletes, why limit that quality to their athletic lives?”



Karen Go '98

“I really value what I learned as a philosophy major.”

accessible. He would stay and talk with us, answer our questions.”

Karen Go '98 could certainly relate to that. As a Trinity undergraduate, majoring in philosophy, she took a class on Nietzsche from Hyland. “There was a group in the class who really got engaged in the material,” she remembers.

“We weren’t done when the class was over. Professor Hyland was always

In addition to teaching his students about the great German philosopher, Hyland conveyed, she says, “a way of thinking, of examining life and human nature, understanding human motivations.”

And that point of view has stuck with her. After graduating in 1998, she worked for a time for a private hedge fund where Hyland’s teaching about the meaning of an “excellent life” helped her to succeed. Lately, she has found an outlet for her longstanding interest in movement—dance. She is currently exploring a career shift into dance movement therapy.

“I really value what I learned as a philosophy major,” she says Go, who in 2006 took a course on the aesthetic system, concentrating on the works of Aristotle, from another former Hyland student, Professor **Andrew Haase '84**, at Stony Brook Manhattan. “I feel that it has been a definite part of everything I’ve done since Trinity.”

“Suppose [student-athletes] were to take that passionate commitment to work at improving every day which they exhibit so well in their athletic lives, and transfer it to their larger lives as well, to their studies, to their involvements with their friends, later on with their business and family lives?” Hyland told his audience at Princeton. “Shouldn’t the drive for excellence that we learn so well from athletics be transferable to our larger lives as well, and in the end, to the only goal that really matters, the living of an excellent life?”

they are unreflective. He encouraged students to live philosophically. He was especially good at communicating the message that you only live once and he used accessible examples in his classes to engage students.”

“Skiing and Being” —philosophy in the Vermont hills

It was an approach to teaching that would serve him well. Arriving at Trinity in 1967, he found a campus that mirrored the highly radicalized milieu of the decade. “It was a very challenging time,” he recalls. “There was a prevalent politics of confrontation. Many students distrusted all authority. I had bright students, but it was challenging to get them to think about the philosophical issues.”

So, in 1968, he countered radicalism with a radical idea, inventing an interdisciplinary curriculum that he could teach and which was wholly portable. Then he rented a house in Vermont large enough to accommodate him and his family, including two toddlers, and a group of 15 talented students. There, through the winter, he immersed them in a daily existence that involved intensive reading and study along with daily skiing and outdoor recreation.

“It was a brilliant program,” asserts **David Roochnik '73**, who is now a professor of philosophy at Boston University. “Drew had a great deal of sympathy for students who were challenging authority and asking questions. He had no sympathy for people who had become self-indulgent. In Vermont he was able to teach us that our good impulses needed to be channeled. He really helped us to understand that rationality is good,

was there, in Vermont, that many of us came to see ourselves as part of a great tradition of questioning.”

“He was an astounding teacher,” concurs **Jay Bernstein '69**, now a professor of philosophy at the New School University, who says Hyland’s Vermont retreat sprang from the noblest of liberal arts traditions. “He was fresh from graduate school when he came to Trinity and I think he felt the stakes were very high.

Students nicknamed Hyland’s Vermont retreat “Skiing and Being,” and it was so successful that he returned to the north, with a new group of acolytes, three years in a row. It was, he says without hesitation, “the most powerful teaching experience I’ve ever had.” And his students, many of whom have carried the philosophical torch forth from Trinity to other colleges and universities, agree.

As his children got older, they objected to having their young lives disrupted every winter, so Hyland discontinued the retreat in the early 1970s. By then the radicalism that had gripped college campuses coast to coast during the late 1960s had begun to wane.

However, the need to continually challenge fertile young minds and rescue them from dogma and self-indulgence had not. It was and is a mission that has captivated Drew Hyland for four decades and he approaches it, as he approaches life in general, with the spirit of an athlete.

“He is thoughtful and passionate and he firmly believes in what he’s doing,” says Bernstein. “Forty years of teaching and there is not a drop of cynicism in the man. He radiates such joy in his work.”

Philosophy Professor Drew Hyland took a group of students to the hills of Vermont in the late 1960s for intensive immersion in reading, discussion, and daily recreation, as covered in this contemporary edition of the *Tripod*.

not a point of view limited to the military-industrial establishment. He defined dogmatism as the pinnacle of irrationality and he showed us how one could live a life of questioning. It

He really believed that modernity was threatened by nihilism and there was certainly strong evidence. He not only knew his material thoroughly, but he taught us by example.”



Trinity philosophy alumnus elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences has announced the election of 203 new fellows and 24 new foreign honorary members. Among them is **Robert B. Pippin '70**, Raymond W. and Martha Hilpert Gruner Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago, and a former student of philosophy at Trinity. The 227 men and women, who are prominent figures in scholarship, business, the arts, and public affairs, will be inducted into the 227-year-old academy at a ceremony on October 6 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A complete list of the academy’s new members is available on its Web site at www.amacad.org/. Pippin was featured in the spring 2002 issue of the *Reporter*.