Beyond sport: what the sport and exercise medicine community can learn from the life of Archbishop Desmond Tutu

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If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. (Desmond Mpilo Tutu)

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Mpilo Tutu (1931—2021) loved sport. He recognised the power of sport as a vehicle for social cohesion and equally believed it should be used as a platform from which to advocate for justice and social change. Despite having suffered from polio and tuberculosis, he played rugby at school and was an ardent supporter of South Africa’s national football, cricket and rugby teams. When the Springboks (the South African rugby team) won the World Cup that the country historically hosted in 1995, he said of the victory’s unifying effect, ‘It achieved more than any of my sermons.’ In 2019, he also joined Springbok captain Siya Kolisi in a public celebration of the team’s most recent World Cup win. He was a global ambassador for ‘Beyond Sport’—an organisation committed to advancing through sport the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals of peace, prosperity and a healthier planet. Archbishop Tutu’s death has been mourned by world leaders, countries and sports organisations globally and provides an important opportunity to pause, reflect and acknowledge what we can learn from his life and legacy.

INTOLERANCE OF INJUSICE

As a cleric, Archbishop Tutu used the pulpit as a powerful platform to campaign against injustice. For decades he was a leading voice in the anti-apartheid movement, one of the world’s most powerful resistance organisations of all time. With the imprisonment of many of the movement’s stalwarts, Nelson Mandela among them, and others killed by the regime, Tutu’s profile was elevated. He used his global stature to implore international leaders to openly and meaningfully pressure the white minority government to end apartheid. He spoke defiantly, led mass marches and was himself arrested and imprisoned. In the face of threats on his life, he tempered dogged determination with satirical humour, “If I’m doing God’s work he should jolly well look after me!” His unrelenting solidarity with the oppressed won him the Nobel Peace prize in 1984. It was Archbishop Tutu who coined the term ‘Rainbow Nation’ to reflect the potential of the country historically divided on the basis of colour, language or tribe. Tutu himself acknowledged that he was flawed and spoke about the importance of understanding and guarding against your own ‘Achilles’ heel’. He spoke frequently and passionately about forgiveness, seeing good in others and embracing human imperfection.

A HUMAN SIDE

Despite his stature, the Archbishop was never afraid of showing his human side. As chair of South Africa’s postapartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he openly wept at atrocities described by victims. Despite the gravity of many of the issues he tackled, he exuded a lust for life, had a loud and recognisable laugh and a mischievous side to his character. The Archbishop, however, as some detractors have highlighted, was not without imperfection. Some accused him of seeking the limelight and being melodramatic, while others criticised his approach to oppressors as sometimes too merciful and forgiving. But perhaps herein lies another lesson: to give honour does not suggest perfection, rather it is the acknowledgement and celebration of an individual’s journey. Tutu himself acknowledged that he was flawed and spoke about the importance of understanding and guarding against your own ‘Achilles’ heel’. He spoke frequently and passionately about forgiveness, seeing good in others and embracing human interdependence. He led with courage, integrity and authenticity. Importantly, he used his leadership position, genuine character, aura and influence to show compassion to the oppressed and to uplift the downtrodden.

A BROADER MISSION

Archbishop Tutu saw his role as far more than just liturgical and ceremonial and, led by the courage of his convictions, conducted a determined and effective crusade against all forms of injustice. Postapartheid, Archbishop Tutu turned his critical eye on the new South African government, openly condemning corruption, the self-serving policy of cadre deployment and their own tolerance of oppression. ‘You are behaving in a manner that is totally at variance for what we stood.’ Globally he criticised discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities (at the time going against the teaching of his church), raised the profile of HIV sufferers and empathised with the victims of war. In more recent years, he brought global attention to address the imperative impacts of climate change on the most marginalised and impoverished.

He also introduced the world to the African humanistic concept of Ubuntu: ‘I am because you are. My successes and my failures are bound up in yours. We are made for each other, for interdependence.’ Through Ubuntu, he provided us with a call to action grounded in inclusive and equitable responsibility. While many clerics stuck to preaching scripture, Archbishop Tutu’s doctrine remained pragmatic, meaningful and impactful. To our benefit, his vision and calling extended far beyond the pulpit.

REFLECTIONS BEYOND SPORT

When icons die there is a risk that their legacy perishes with them. As sports and exercise medicine clinicians and researchers, how can
we learn from the Archbishop’s inspiring life and positively impact others as he did? How often do we use our ‘pulpit’ to highlight and act against injustice, inequality and bias? Perhaps we too should look beyond the field of play and consider the real-life issues affecting those in our environment. In sport and medicine inequities and injustices exist, some overtly and others veiled. Racism, sexism, ableism, child abuse, interpersonal violence and homophobia have all reared their repulsive heads in sporting contexts. Sport and exercise medicine is a field of leaders poised to positively impact their communities, and we have a responsibility to use our platform as advocates for greater opportunity, justice and change where needed. Drawing on ‘the Arch’s’ example would serve us well in situations where it is often easier to be uncritical, deferential and sycophantic, but where a mix of Tutu-like empathy, compassion and courage are more appropriate. We cannot be neutral in situations of injustice or intolerance, and we would do well to remember Archbishop Tutu’s example as one of the best in humanity. We too should act both in and beyond sport.

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