

Phil Hooper
“Finding Your Best Self Via Competition”
Tree Talk 7/30/07
Camp Pasquaney

Here at Pasquaney, we spend much of our time trying to better ourselves. Tangibly, we can hit the courts for some tennis instruction, or schedule some time in a 420 to improve our helmsmanship. Intangibly, we take the time to listen to sermons, tree talks, or even just friends about how to better live with one another as well as ourselves. When my father first heard about this aspect of Pasquaney, he coined a phrase that concisely sums it up and has stuck with me ever since: at camp, he said, you are constantly striving to be your best self. There is one facet of camp that I believe helps us be our best selves more than any other. I am talking about competition.

Competition. Literally, this word means ‘striving with others’. Competition allows each of us to struggle alongside, not against, others in order to reach a previously inaccessible level of excellence. It is found in many aspects of camp life, with each aspect serving to emphasize a different important value. Baseball games and watersports contests push us physically and also help us to develop good sportsmanship, while dorm inspections help foster teamwork and improve our organizational skills. While these tangible activities are clear examples of competition, some of the other competitions at camp are often overlooked. Duties are a good example of an overlooked competition, as they force us to strive as a community to keep camp running smooth and looking sharp. While duties do not divide the camp into teams and declare one the winner when duties are thoroughly finished, the fact that the entire camp, both council and campers alike, is striving together toward a common goal adds a competitive element to the whole business.

Hikes are another good example of an unnoticed competition, though that hardly makes the competition any less vibrant or palpable. On hikes, you are once again striving with a group of your peers, only now the goal is to summit a peak or complete a hike. Every member of the group pushes the others, whether it be physically by hiking at a fast pace, or mentally by enforcing good cheer and enthusiasm. These examples are just some of the many areas of camp where competition can be found. In fact, you would be hard-pressed to find a part of camp where competition is absent. For me personally, my favorite example of competition on the hillside can be found within rowing.

Rowing; for some of you, I hope that this word evokes feelings of hard, enjoyable races and, overall, sense of accomplishment and fun. However, I know that, at least for a few of you, this word evokes memories of superfluous scheduling and long, hard, and generally unwanted practices. I’ll be the first to admit that participating in such a sport seems to go against every grain of common sense I possess. During the regular school year, I train around 1000 hours for a little less than 42 minutes of racing. That’s almost 24 hours of practice for every minute of actual time on a racecourse. I can say with no ego that the work is exhausting even for highly trained athletes, and that the payoff seems extremely short for something so difficult. Despite all those facts, I still choose to play this sport because of its competitive nature. This competitive aspect has helped me be my best self more effectively than any other activity I have come across, both at Pasquaney and beyond. It pushes me to my physical limits, improves my mental toughness, and

fosters my sense of teamwork by forcing me to put complete trust in my fellow oarsmen. It helps me to test personal boundaries while at the same time allowing me to help others test their own limits. No other activity pushes me as hard on so many different levels to be a better person.

While I have certainly stressed the positives about competition so far, one of its biggest benefits is the absence of the negativity inextricably linked to a poor sense of competition. During early June, I rowed in the 2 seat of a straight 4 at the IRA regattas, the national championships for men's collegiate rowing. A straight 4 is a shell designed for 4 rowers and no coxswain. Such a shell is difficult to row because it is steered by the rowers themselves, who must keep looking behind them to make sure their shell is headed in the right direction. During the 1st heat, my boat accidentally moved to the outside of our lane at the same time that we began to row through Temple's crew, who had also begun to drift to the far inside of their lane. The result was that our two crews clashed blades and eventually came to a dead stop, not an ideal situation considering we had already passed outside of the area where the officials would restart the race. The fact that we both shared the responsibility for the situation, however, didn't stop the Temple crew from screaming out a few profanities at my boat as we had begun to grit our teeth and start to finish the race.

While I do not remember how Temple finished during that race or any of the subsequent ones, what I will remember for the rest of my days is their incredibly unsportsmanlike conduct. They had let themselves get so carried away with the competition that they had lost sight of its main goal, striving with others, and had gone to the far opposite end of that spectrum, becoming so completely concerned with winning that they strived against other crews vocally, my boat in particular. Conversely, during another one of my races at the IRAs, we beat a crew from MIT in a close race, largely because MIT had a little trouble getting off the line at the start. However, instead of complaining about their start, every person in the MIT boat thanked my crew for giving them a great race down the whole course. While I may never be able to remember the exact margin of that race, and while I may also probably even forget the outcome in a few years time, what will stick with me is the good sense of competition MIT exhibited through tough racing and good sportsmanship.

Long after a game is won or lost, what people remember is not the final score, but rather how each team played the game. Thankfully at Pasquaney, we never see any examples of sportsmanship as poor as Temple's, but we can lose sight of the main goal in competition. When sportsmanship slips or when tempers flare on the lake or the diamond, you know that people have lost sight of their best selves and are instead focused only on the outcome of the game. When a person becomes despondent or unenthused while hiking, it is because they have forgotten that they are striving with the rest of the group and are instead focused only on their own hardships. Try not to lose sight of that big picture, that you are part of a community with whom you are striving. Pasquaney is such a special place in large part because of the community that surrounds and dwells within it, a community founded and strengthened by competition. By striving to bring out the best in one another, we are forging one of the strongest communities possible. You have all chosen to be a part of that community by simply coming to camp this summer; now

choose to help foster that community by bringing out the best in others as well as yourself through competition.

In these last 2 weeks of camp, let's all try to be our best selves. Use competition to bring out the best in one another, not the worst. There is precious little time left in the season: let's all commit to utilizing that time to bring out the best in both ourselves and this community at large.