What Does Sport Have to Do With AIDS?

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It has been approximately a year since the International AIDS Conference in Thailand. The Bangkok meeting was both positive and troubling for me. On a positive note, the conference was well done and informative, and visitors could not have been shown greater hospitality. I had an unexpected opportunity to spend time with one of JANAC’s international editorial board members, Dr. Venna Jirapaet, who is a nursing professor at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. Dr. Jirapaet gave me a tour of her city and the largest University Hospital in Bangkok. This visit reaffirmed my fond feeling for Thailand and its people.

Yet despite the wonderful experience of visiting Thailand, the conference left me with an overwhelming loss of optimism concerning the fight against HIV/AIDS. I have been going to International AIDS Conferences for more than a decade, and each conference has been a positive experience in that new treatments have been announced, prevention programs have been shared, and strength has been gained from engaging the world community in the fight. However, a sobering reality hit me in Bangkok. Despite all the wonderful work of individuals and groups, we arrive at each new AIDS conference with reports of an ever-increasing pandemic and a growing number of individuals who have been infected with HIV. Despite all the treatment advances, despite all the global awareness, despite all the political jockeying, we are not winning this fight.

With everything we have done, the fact remains that the HIV/AIDS pandemic continues to grow daily. For me, the Bangkok Conference underscored this reality. Further, it underscored that we are not merely fighting an infectious disease, but rather a vast array of issues that promote the spread of HIV/AIDS. It will not be enough to make antiretroviral therapy available in resource-poor countries. It will not be enough to pontificate on the responsibility of individuals to be more moral. It will not be enough to focus on other world priorities and hope all of this will just go away. I suddenly gained a new awareness that it is not just an AIDS pandemic—we are in a much larger fight to respond to complex forces that converge to support the spread of HIV/AIDS around the world. These forces are as familiar as the nightly news. They will continue to promote a world that is ripe to spawn new diseases and decrease our humanity.

To more fully understand the complexity of the situation, consider that, in sub-Saharan Africa, 75% of new HIV infections are among young girls and women 15 to 24 years of age who are not free to abstain from sex or to get treatment when infected. In many countries, there is a generation of AIDS orphans who are growing up without parents or support. A number of resource-challenged countries are losing a generation to HIV/AIDS—the generation that was most prepared to help advance economic improvement in these countries. The result is a worsening economic outlook. There are more than 70 regional conflicts under way in the world today. Rape has become a tool of war. Stigma and discrimination, long identified as an enemy of successful responses to HIV/AIDS, continues to be commonplace, not only in HIV/AIDS but also against the poor, women, gays and lesbians, ethnic and religious minorities, and anyone who is viewed as “other.” These are universal forces that are not new but provide a fertile ground in which epidemics like HIV/AIDS grow. These forces need to be recognized, not as isolated occurrences but as intertwining forces that act to
undercut the overall human condition and prevent any successful response to HIV/AIDS.

The point is that those working in HIV/AIDS care and prevention, those working to support economic development in resource-limited and wealthy countries, those addressing peace and reconciliation in the world, those working toward justice and gender equity, need to understand that all of these efforts are different aspects of the same, larger fight. The countries of the world seemed to have acknowledged this fact in their adoption of the Millennium Development Goals established by the United Nations in 2000. Human justice, health, and economic stability in the world will not happen in isolation—a new commonness of purpose and action is needed.

What is needed is a new strategy to change ideas, to change self-defeating traditions, to change attitudes, and to change negative role-modeling behavior. As with every generation, the young hold the potential for a better future. But considering the forces in the world that have lead us to ongoing conflict, physical and economic exploitation of the weak and poor, and hatred of those seen as different, we need new strategies to support the next generation in reaching a higher ethical reality. We need to develop new models that foster the ability to resolve conflict by negotiation within accepted rules of law, a respect for our fellow man and woman, and the ability to win and loose with honor. These are key factors in our fight against HIV/AIDS. The more comprehensive fight against HIV/AIDS is a fight for basic social change.

By a series of beneficial accidents, I have become involved in a small way with a new initiative undertaken by the International Labor Organization in conjunction with the United Nations and the International Olympic Committee. This initiative, known as the Universitas program, builds on the report of the U.N. Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace and has at its core the goal of using the many positive aspects of sport and recreation to facilitate social change and development. The objective of the program is to bring local leaders, government officials, community advocates, social service providers, and representatives of international organizations together to develop ways to meet the U.N. Millennium Development Goals in individual countries and communities using sport as the mechanism for collaboration. The goal is not to teach individuals to play sports but rather to use the positive environment that can be produced around sport, especially in the young, to address significant social issues. As indicated by Mr. Adolf Ogi, special advisor to the U.N. Secretary-General, “Sport is the best school of life.”

When you think about it, sport does hold potential as a strategy for education, attitude formation, collaboration, and friendly competition within a framework of rules. Coaches can play a vital developmental role in modeling positive attitudes, values, and character expressions. In relation to HIV/AIDS, coaches can be valuable teachers for prevention, role models for nondiscrimination, and promoters of advocacy for persons with HIV/AIDS. Coaches can work with local nurses, social service providers, and teachers to link youth to programs that promote health and education and provide support that gives hope for the future. Although elite athletes can play an important role in drawing attention to social issues such as HIV/AIDS, violence, and poverty, the real action takes place in small towns and villages, on playing fields, and at recreation centers. In these settings, youth have the opportunity to observe in adult role models character and a sense of respect for others. Additionally, there are opportunities to link youth to new attitudes and resources that promote a better life. Although certainly not the complete answer, the principles underpinning the Universitas program (see www.ilo.org/universitas) are worth considering. They may well be components of this initiative that you can use to help craft a more comprehensive response to HIV/AIDS in your community. What we have done thus far has not solved the problem. Maybe we can use this 2005 International Year of Sport and Physical Education as a time to explore new and less obvious approaches to fighting HIV/AIDS.