Florida State University, once a prominent women's liberal arts college, is now a large state university with a highly visible NCAA sports program. Few university athletic programs are likely to have a more loyal supporter in their president than Thomas Kent “T.K.” Wetherell, an FSU graduate with three degrees, a former member of the FSU football team, and a life-long supporter of FSU athletics.

Thomas Kent “T.K.” Wetherell grew up naturally loving sports. His father, who was a minor league pitcher for the Daytona Islanders, helped to kindle this passion, and his small town community, Port Orange, Florida, encouraged their young men to play football and baseball. In his small town, a young person could gain recognition by excelling in athletics or music. He chose athletics.

Born Dec. 22, 1945, in Daytona Beach, Wetherell attended Port Orange Elementary School and Mainland Senior High School. He fondly remembers his two high school coaches Jim Mathews and Tom Owens. At this time, religion played a central role in sports in his little community; team prayers before and during football games were routine. Young team players were members of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and they professed their religious affiliation openly. This affiliation was almost always Southern Baptist. In those days, says Wetherell, church attendance was limited to one religious institution: the coaches in Port Orange assumed that their players and parents went to the First Baptist Church.

Wetherell later attended Florida State University on a football scholarship. Even in college in those days, religious beliefs of athletes were not as diverse as they are on athletic teams today. Today, players are recruited from many cultures and geographical areas, and consequently have varying religious beliefs. A college team may have a player who follows the Islamic faith, another one, Judaism, etc. Consequently, coaches today, he argues, must be much more sensitive to the varying religious outlooks of their players.

Although Wetherell asserts that there is no official sports chaplain at Florida State University, there is a local minister who has volunteered as team chaplain for the Seminoles since 1988. Does the “unofficial” presence of Clint Purvis, who is on the First Baptist Church of Tallahassee staff as minister to college students, influence students to behave in a certain way? Do football players who do not practice the same religious beliefs as coach Bobby Bowden (also a member of the First Baptist Church) feel in any way pressured? Wetherell noted that players’ participation in any religious activities such as team prayer is voluntary. He acknowledged, however, that this arrangement may raise concern among those who feel that players may feel being ostracized or discriminated against if they do not take part in such activities.

Asked how coaches can be a positive moral influence on their players, President Wetherell stated that coaches cannot merely talk about moral development. Instead coaches can teach young people how to make ethical decisions by examples of moral outlook and choice the coaches embody. In addition, an

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individual learns how to live morally by the demands that athletics make on the playing field. Wetherell made the following points in expounding upon his views concerning morality and sports:

1. **Everyone should be given an equal opportunity to succeed.**

   Wetherell explained that on the athletic field, it “doesn’t matter who your daddy is. You are judged on how well you do. Sports teaches you that being prepared and performing at your best are more important than where you came from.” When the coach gives each player an equal opportunity to succeed, he or she is modeling the virtue of fairness.

2. **Mistakes are opportunities for growth.**

   Inspiring coaches assure their players that the mistakes they make both on and off the field are opportunities for growth. These coaches teach young people how to take advantage of these missteps instead of viewing them as liabilities. The toughest job for a coach is convincing a young person that it is okay to make mistakes and that he or she can overcome these setbacks and bounce back. Often players take these setbacks personally, and the coach must restore their confidence. As a result, when the coach helps students to forgive themselves, he/she is also modeling the virtue of forgiveness.

3. **Community is formed through interdependence and encouragement.**

   Often, practice begins in August of the school year, and players are molded together as a team throughout the year. They learn to rely on one another as well as to be responsible to one another. Thus players learn to be accountable to their teammates—the members of their small community, those who are dependent upon them. With their coach as role model, they practice fairness, forgiveness, and responsibility to others in the interdependent organization where all play a crucial part.

But Wetherell said that that there are new moral challenges that college student athletes must face today. For example, student athletes must be continually cautious about any acts of kindness that are shown them. A member of the booster club cannot buy a student-athlete a pizza. A car dealer cannot offer an athlete a better deal on an automobile based on his knowledge that the buyer is an athlete. Each athlete must be aware of the NCAA rules even if the intent is kindness.

In addition, an athlete must handle the situation of his/her own celebrity. In such cases, players are placed in situations where they are greatly tempted. Although athletes attend numerous sessions on NCAA restrictions and policies and learn about the dire consequences of the violations of these policies, athletes still occasionally defy rules. Florida State’s share of athletes making wrong ethical decisions has not been disproportional. One of the hardest things a coach must do, says Wetherell, is to see their players who have had many opportunities to be positive role models for others act in ways that disappoint the people who have depended upon them or looked up to them. Celebrity can also penalize athletes for what may be considered minor offences, such as illegal parking, in the sense that the public hears about these offenses immediately—the smallest infraction can make front page headlines.

Wetherell acknowledged that there has been much criticism about the profuse attention paid to college athletics today, attention that often overshadows what many claim to be the real purpose of colleges and universities: providing an academic education for future citizenry. Yet Wetherell strongly asserted that athletics can make a huge contribution to the overall growth and improvement of colleges and universities. The money that state legislatures devote to higher education is little, Wetherell argues;
yet considerable governmental oversight limits how that money is spent. Sports, on the other hand, can generate large amounts of money for academic institutions.

Wetherell, himself, is a former state legislator and served as House Speaker. What he finds today to be his greatest challenge as president of a large public university is convincing his former colleagues to support the improvements he deems most important and to recognize that Florida’s university system is a vital cog in the state economic future as well as a key component in the state K-20 system. It is a university’s mission, he explained, to educate the student with the skills and knowledge he or she needs to be a responsible citizen and to serve others by means of his/her vocation. For Wetherell, sports, and coaches who are positive role models, can play an important part in that mission.