

While the terms *sport* and *athletics* conjure many of the same images--individuals competing in games of physical skill, athletic prowess exhibited on the field, the pitch, the court, or the ring, and human engagement and excitement that comes by displaying or watching such strength, speed, grace, and determination--they are not necessarily synonymous. Indeed, one could argue that they occupy points on the physical competition spectrum that are at odds rather than interchangeable. On the one hand, *sport* can be seen as possessing the harsher and baser side of competition such as winning, competitive edge, and the complex built with money to fund and feed this gargantuan. Meanwhile, *Athletics* evokes the purer spirit of competition for the beauty of the activity, the code of honor that values fairness by engaging but not at all costs, and the mutual respect derived from competing at any level, especially the highest.

As we watch the myriad feats of physical ability demonstrated at the ongoing Olympic games, who is not awed by so many amazing moves, plays, and routines. The human body active in space in ways that have the power to inspire us, excite us, and motivate us. Again, *sport* and *athletics* possess similarities in expressing these accomplishments. Yet, perhaps trying to differentiate the two may provide important light as to who we are as humans and how we see this type of activity.

Because the prowess of these athletes is so impressive, it is easy to see how they become idols for many, placed on a pedestal that, at times, recognizes their gifts, and, at others, offers them unwarranted power, prestige, and reputation. The business and the interests that have invaded *sport* will benefit from such a scenario. While this genie of the modern sporting world cannot be placed back in the bottle, it might be nice to appreciate the competitors without turning them into gods. *Athletics*, and its root in the ancient Greek system, might allow for such an understanding. The athletes are seen as a whole. Certainly they possess gifts, *and* they also have clay feet like all of us. We can admire, but worship heads us down a path plagued with trouble and disappointment.

Indeed, the situation surrounding gymnast Simone Biles at this Olympics is a thumbnail for the larger ills of the sporting world. Her decision for mental health reasons to pull out of the gymnastic team and the all-around competitions created a stir throughout the world. A generation ago she would have been pilloried for such an act. Thankfully, more compassionate and mature minds have prevailed, at least in some quarters. However, the *sport* complex drives the antagonistic and jaundiced views that proliferate on social media and other sectors of the web. Phrases such as “suck it up,” and, “deal,” and, “take it for the team,” are dispatched to critique what Biles did. They deny her reality and believe that all one really needs to do is focus and get over whatever difficulty may exist. Again, the sponsors, coaches, federations, and fans all have something to lose if Biles does not compete. Thus, the personal difficulty of an athlete is not taken into consideration. They become another object to manipulate.

But Simone Biles is not an object. She is a human being. Her childhood story, abuse by an American Gymnastics physician, perch at the highest level of the sport for almost a decade, and not to mention living through a pandemic are any number of reasons why she felt unable to participate.

Because the *sport* world obsesses about winning and losing, making money off of the accomplishments of competitors, and competing at all costs, it is easy to treat athletes as replaceable parts that keep the cogs of the sporting world complex turning. *Athletics* hopefully reminds us of a different reality. One where each person is valued for who they are. A world where competition is appreciated but it is not the ultimate reality. And a universe where we recognize that athletes allow us to delve more fully into the aesthetics of our life so as to more fully appreciate that life and the life of the world around us. We are not cogs. We are human beings amidst a similarly holy and hallowed creation, equally deserving of care, respect, and honor.

While the terms *sport* and *athletics* can elicit similar ideas within our minds, perhaps we need to probe them--and other terms--to appreciate more fully what we seek in life and how we seek to live as well. Indeed, a few letters can make a world of difference.