* **The spirit of the game**
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Just like culture and heritage, sport is important to any nation. In many ways it makes up the soul and spirit of a community and its people.

This has been true since ancient times. The nature of sport may have changed over time. But man essentially remains the same in terms of actions, thoughts and ambitions. It is for this reason that scientists, novelists, journalists, biographers and others have written extensively on sport from their own particular perspectives while movie directors have converted the drama of the competition on the field or track into award-winning films and documentaries. Many of us would list at least one such production as a favourite.

It is sad that by moving away from sport we have given up so much of our past and of our spirit. No one cares any longer if a former gold medalist stands by a vending cart in one of our major cities searching for customers or sells his medals simply to sustain his family. At one time the great sportsmen of the era were revered and looked upon as virtual gods. It is unclear why this has not continued.

The result is that even with the National Games coming up in Peshawar no one seems interested. There has been limited coverage for the event in the media, and the evocative video clips produced by the sporting bodies organising the 33rd Games have not been widely aired on TV screens. Instead we remain obsessed with talk shows that never seem to end and that touch upon the same topics over and over again.

There is a great deal that sport can offer a nation. It brings people together and unites countries in a way that nothing else can. For this reason, team sports in particular have been compared to the wars of past ages. But we need sports for other reasons too. In today’s world it reflects the ability of young men and women. It is encouraging that even in a city as traditionally conservative as Peshawar women will be participating in 25 of the 30 disciplines making up the National Games which were first organized by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, just a year after Partition, despite the other problems that confronted the newly created nation at the time. Perhaps Jinnah understood that sports could play a critical role in drawing that nation together and gluing together the various portions of territory that made it up.

A nation after all should not consist of pieces of land surrounded by a demarcated border, but also of people who hold things in common and enough common interest. Sport helps build this idea of commonality reaching across class, ethnicity, religion and other differences. It is also encouraging that in the Pakistan of today more and more women are taking up sport with women players performing exceedingly well at various levels and in a variety of disciplines. It is equally encouraging that both men and women from less developed parts of the country including Gilgit, Balochistan, Hunza and strictly rural areas are bringing in international honours for Pakistan.

It is however important that we look beyond cricket. There are many other sports which have strong roots in Pakistan and of course our children and young people have potential of all kinds. If India can produce a female Olympic-level gymnast there is no reason why we cannot do the same. Instead we have lost footing even in sports where we once enjoyed supremacy. At the top of the list is of course filed hockey a sport which has brought Pakistan its largest number of medals at international early.

Today, there are children in the country who have never held or even seen a hockey stick. While the national passion for cricket has its own place in the culture we are building, room must also be made for other sports. This can happen only if we begin making the effort at school level and then moving up to clubs, districts and provinces. In this sense, the prime minister’s suggestion that departments should be eased out of sports makes sense. But the truth is that at the present time in a resource-starved country only the departments are able to spend on sports and their sporting teams.

We must also study why people on the whole have become distanced from sport and the playing fields. The lack of interest in any game, other than cricket is in some ways shocking. Even in cricket the shortened T-20 version of the game has gained greater and greater popularity, even though many would argue it does not represent cricket in its essence. Many other sports are of course exiting to watch and an important means to encourage healthier, more active lifestyles. It is unfortunate they do not gain sufficient promotion.

Pakistan has a large number of young people who are unemployed as well as teenagers and younger children who have dropped out of school. Sport offers a way to keep them off the streets and remove them from the more dangerous activities of life. There is more and more research that shows that even mobile telephones are highly damaging to health and have addictive properties just like some groups of drugs or video games that draw in more and more young persons. It is important to give them alternatives. Iceland as a country has turned this into a national policy and opened up for its youth a range of activities that include martial arts, soccer, bungee jumping and other pursuits which can help teenagers of all ages move away from the culture of alcohol and drug use that had developed in that country.

Other European countries are following that example. Perhaps we too should consider it given the higher rates of tobacco use and drug use in our country. If the figures frequently cited by the minister for narcotics, who says most schoolgoing children in Islamabad are addicted to dangerous substances, then this is a very real reason for the government and our policymakers to look at how the problem can be combatted.

The media too can play a role in this. Heroes exist at many levels, and not just on the cricket field. Highlighting their achievements, and especially promoting those of girls and boys from impoverished areas such as Lyari who have attained immense sporting success could offer many benefits. At the moment more sporting events which do not involve cricket go ignore. This is in some ways a tragedy and holds back Pakistan from finding its true potential and status in the world where it currently stands increasingly isolated and looked upon as a country capable of producing only terrorists.

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