

# Virtue In Action

Superbowl and Olympics Highlight Excellence in Sports and Virtues

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

The Superbowl and Olympics give us an opportunity to witness exceptional performances and exceptional character.



Chanda Gunn:  
U.S. Women's  
Hockey Team

Hines Ward: Superbowl XL MVP



**The Superbowl and the Olympics** have given us the opportunity to enjoy the exceptional performances of some of the best athletes in the world. In these events, we can explore some of the athletes' individual stories and see how the virtues have helped them achieve success. We commonly expect virtues such as perseverance and discipline to be at the core of athletic success. In this lesson we will see how in addition to these virtues, other virtues such as the love and dedication of a mother and self respect come into play in athletes achieving the pinnacle of success.

### **Olympic Goalie Confronts Epilepsy**

Before Chanda Gunn became a hockey player, she was a swimmer. She began having **epileptic** seizures at the age of nine, and they were life-changing. Doctors told her she would have to discontinue swimming due to the risk of drowning from sudden seizures.

Chanda transformed what could have been discouragement into opportunity. Instead of giving up on sports she **persevered** through the obstacles of her illness by dedicating herself to the pursuit of excellence in other sports, including street hockey. Although Chanda still had epilepsy, she learned to how to manage it and live with it.

Chanda became so good at hockey that she was offered a scholarship at the University of Wisconsin. She had a bright future ahead of her until in her freshmen year the seizures came back daily, and even multiple times a day. She was hospitalized for over a month. Chanda made the mistake of not notifying the university of her epilepsy during the application and scholarship process. The University of Wisconsin decided to revoke her scholarship and membership on the hockey team.

For months doctors adjusted Chanda's medication, trying to find the combination that would enable her to function with a normal lifestyle. No one knew whether she would again be able to play hockey. The doctors and Chanda finally succeeded in finding the right combination of medication, and with the epilepsy once again under control, Gunn was determined to return to the ice.

### **Perseverance and Discipline Lead to Success**

Instead of giving in to the obstacles presented by her illness and being dropped by her team, Gunn **persevered** by being proactive in writing letters to any school that might give her a chance to play. Finally she was offered an opportunity at Northeastern University. After a medical red shirt year, Gunn proved to be an outstanding goalie – making finalist for National Player of the Year three times and setting school records for most saves and highest percentage saves. She has achieved another dream in earning the position of goalie for the U.S. Olympic Women's Hockey Team.



**Discipline** is another key to Gunn's success. Rising at 4:30 a.m. she rides her bike six miles to practice. She then does personal work outs for two hours before an hour with her hockey coach. She then practices with the team for four hours. After that, she heads to her job at another ice rink.

### **Charity**

Gunn hasn't limited her pursuit of excellence to athletics. She was recognized last year as college hockey's finest citizen and honored for sportsmanship. Chanda was honored for her **generosity** in the giving of her time and talents for a number of charitable endeavors. She has made time to serve in hospices and soup kitchens, work with children in camps, and act as spokeswoman for the Epilepsy Foundation of America. She also founded an

inner-city youth hockey program and helped raise money for multiple charities. “She extends herself to anyone in need and genuinely places others’ well being above her own,” said her Northeastern University hockey coach, Joy Woog. “I don’t know how she finds the time and energy to be so dedicated to hockey and still manage to be a servant to others.” Possibly, the same sense of discipline that has enabled her to succeed in hockey also enables her to set priorities in making time to help others.

### **Mother’s Love Forges Player of Steel**

Hines Ward is the leading receiver for the Superbowl XL champion Pittsburgh Steelers. He was also voted the Superbowl MVP. A four-time Pro Bowler, Ward clinched the Superbowl title with a late game touchdown.

He says he owes it all to his mother who taught him with her actions how to **persevere** through hardships and never give up. However, Ward was not always so proud of his mother. Ward’s father abandoned Hines and his mother soon after the father brought them from South Korea to America. Ward’s mother did not know English and had little ability to provide for herself or her child. A U.S. court deemed Ward’s mother unfit to care for him and gave him to his father.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade Ward ran away from his father, deciding that he wanted to live with his mother. In his early life Ward viewed himself as being African American from his father’s side, and didn’t realize how it would feel to live with his Korean mother. “I was ashamed of that side of my family,” he said, “because I couldn’t really understand. I had grown up around all black people before moving in with my mom, so coming into a predominantly mixed neighborhood, that was something that was new to me and something that I was ashamed of as a little kid.”

When his mother would drop him off at school, he would duck down in the back seat and then run out so other kids would not see them together. One day he looked back and saw that his mother was crying. He then realized he would rather accept who he was than make his mother cry.

Possibly Ward was beginning to appreciate all that his mother was doing out of **love** for him. After the court took Ward away from his mother she could have returned to Korea, but decided instead to stay in America and prove that that she could provide for her son. She succeeded in overcoming cultural and language barriers working three different jobs just to provide Ward with the basic necessities of life. She worked so many hours that she was only able to sleep a few hours each night, but always made sure Hines had clean clothes, lunch, and a hot dinner.

Ward was learning from his mother a powerful lesson,

that a person isn’t defined by their ethnicity or color, but by their character –their commitment to helping others and living out the virtues. As Hines was learning to **respect** his mother, he was likely also learning to respect himself, realizing that he had dignity and value in who he was, not how teasing school mates viewed him. Hines found his own sense of self respect in following his mother’s example by setting goals, working hard to achieve them, and the maintaining his priorities. Hines excelled in both sports and academics, following his mother’s advice to remain focused on his studies.

Ward’s character also shines through in the way he plays football. Ward is known for his focus on teamwork. In college Ward switched positions numerous times, moving between quarterback, running back, and receiver. He would do whatever was necessary for the team. Early in his NFL career, when he wasn’t getting many passes, he focused on becoming an excellent blocker. Teammates and opponents alike recognize his **strong work ethic**. “I love playing against Hines and playing with him in Pro Bowls,” New York Jets Pro Bowl cornerback Ty Law says. “He’s not as flashy as most receivers. He’s all about doing the dirty work, not just dancing in the end zone after scoring a touchdown.”

Ward has chosen to honor his mother and their shared heritage by visiting Korea for the first time in April. “My mom is the reason why I’m here today,” he said. “All the values that she instilled in me, that’s who my mom is: a hard worker, nothing ever given to her, worked her tail off. I am here today because of my mom. “I could never pay my mother back for what she did for me.”

### **Dreams Do Come True**

Seattle Seahawks linebacker and special teams captain, Isaiah Kacyvenski has had an uphill battle from the day he was born. In fact, he spent much of his life below the poverty line. During a recent NFL Films interview Isaiah pointed out the garbage dumpster where he and his family often went for food when their food stamps ran out. At times they lived during winter months with little heat, and once had to live in a tent for three months. Isaiah’s father was an alcoholic and often brutally beat him and his siblings. Living through this type of poverty and abuse, it would have been understandable for Isaiah to sink into depression and to have a low sense of self-worth; however, when it got to be too hard to handle, he looked to his mother for support.



Isaiah’s mother was raised for 12 years in an orphanage, and then married an abusive alcoholic. Kacyvenski commented, “She was never shown love in her life, but instead of continuing the vicious cycle, she flipped it and showed us love that had no boundaries...that gave us some self esteem.” And likely also gave Isaiah the strength and will to move on and to strive for a better life.

**Boundless Determination**

Isaiah recalls that at the age of 9 he decided that he wouldn’t allow himself to remain poor for the rest of his life. At that young age he devised a plan to focus on football and his schoolwork to earn a scholarship to college, and work his way out of poverty. During his freshman year in high school Isaiah had another epiphany that he wasn’t working hard enough and was headed toward mediocrity. “It hit me I had to max out on everything I did — football, the classroom, everything”. Discipline, hard work and sacrifice were to be his hallmarks. Every morning, Isaiah would rise at 5:30 a.m. to begin workouts. His goal was to put in what most people considered a full day by 7:00 a.m. After school, he would stay and work on his schoolwork with his teachers.

Isaiah’s hard work paid off, as he became captain of his high school football team. But as if Isaiah had not had enough challenges in life, tragedy struck as a car accident killed his mother. It happened on the morning of his team’s state playoff game. Isaiah decided that he should still play and his exceptional performance was decisive in their victory. Only weeks later his dream came true as he was offered a full scholarship to Harvard University.

“When I got to college, I made a sign on a poster board and put it on the ceiling above my bed. That way I’d see it every morning when I woke up. It said, ‘Let No One Outwork You Today.’” And no one ever has – Isaiah remains the only player in Harvard history to start every game of his collegiate career. He holds a number of other Harvard and Ivy League football records, as well. After graduating with a Pre

Med Degree from Harvard, Isaiah was drafted in the 4<sup>th</sup> Round of the NFL draft.

In his six seasons with the Seattle Seahawks, Kacyvenski has been a key to the team-first attitude that has served as the backbone of Seattle success. “There’s kind of like a family atmosphere with the team right now, and that’s really hard to do in professional sports because there are guys with their own agendas and guys making crazy money.”

Kacyvenski has also focused on repairing the relationship with his father through honesty and **forgiveness**. Instead of trying to forget or run away from the abuse of the past, Kacyvenski has asked his father, now a recovering alcoholic, to admit his mistakes so that Kacyvenski could forgive him. Kacyvenski has forgiven his father and even asked him to receive his diploma when he chose to miss his graduation for football camp.

From time to time, Isaiah will question whether he should share so much about his personal and family history, but even this is motivated by compassion and love. “Sometimes I wonder if I should reveal the things I do, but then I think there are other kids who’ve gone through the same kinds of things. I want them to know, just because you’re poor and have nothing, you still have the right to dream.”

Once again the Olympics and Superbowl have highlighted the importance of the virtues in helping athletes to achieve their best in athletics and in life. Perseverance and discipline are obviously important for athletic success, but we have seen with Chanda Gunn that these same virtues enable her to succeed in charity. The mothers of Isaiah Kacyvenski and Hines Ward also illustrate for us the power of love in repairing emotional wounds and in giving young people a sense of well-being to go out and strive for higher goals. Most of us will likely never be in the Superbowl or Olympics, but we can harness the power of these same virtues to accomplish our personal best and to live fulfilling lives.

**Vocabulary**

**Compassion** - Deep awareness of the suffering of another with the desire to relieve it.

**Discipline** - Training expected to produce a specific character trait, moral or mental improvement; self-control

**Epilepsy** – Any of various neurological disorders characterized by sudden, recurring attacks of motor, sensory, or psychic malfunction with or without loss of consciousness or convulsive seizures.

**Generosity** – Freely giving of our time, talents and resources

**Perseverance** – Trying hard and continuously, despite obstacles and difficulties

**Self Respect** – showing full appreciation of the worth and dignity of one’s self

**Teamwork**- Cooperative effort by the members of a group or team to achieve a common goal.

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## Lesson Goals

- ▶ Develop understanding of the virtues of perseverance, discipline, generosity, self-respect, forgiveness and family support
- ▶ Help students see how these virtues can help to establish the foundation for success in life
- ▶ Inspire students to live out these virtues by giving them examples from accomplished athletes
- ▶ Inspire students to set goals and to work toward them
- ▶ Model for students how obstacles, even very serious ones, can be overcome

## Discussion Question Options

1. For each athlete let's list the virtues they, and others related to them, have lived out in their lives. Which of the three athletes strikes you most and why?

Which virtues highlighted in these stories are the most important to you?

2. How did Chanda Gun overcome the obstacles of losing her scholarship and being removed from her team? What can this teach us about our approach in dealing with obstacles that come into our lives?
3. Let's list the elements of a person's life that we look to and our culture looks to in defining whether, and the degree to which, we respect another person. How does Hines Ward's life speak to this?
4. What factors motivated Isaiah at the age of nine to figure out a plan to improve his state in life, and to then have the discipline to implement his plan?
5. How does self respect factor into the lives of both Hines Ward and Isaiah Kacyvenski? Who helped them to attain this sense of self respect?

6. How did Kacyvenski come to forgive his father? Do you think this is a good model for us to follow, both when we inflict harm on someone else, or we are harmed in some way?
7. Do you know anyone personally who has had to overcome great challenges in life? What has been a key for that person in overcoming the obstacles?

## Journal Writing Options

1. Write about an obstacle in your life, how it affects you now and then, map out a realistic plan for overcoming the obstacle.
2. Write about a time when you experienced a physical limitation – whether health related or other – and how that limitation affected you. Were you able to find a way to overcome that limitation? How?

## Extended Learning Activities

1. You probably think your day is full of activities. Think of one thing you can add to your day – whether at the start or finish – that will help you be a better person. Develop a motto to encourage you or remind you of your commitment, and write it in a place where you will see it each day. Teachers may use this as a writing exercise or ask students to share their commitments in small teams.
2. Determine someone in your life who has made a commitment to ongoing sacrifice for your benefit. Decide what you will do in return (write a card or letter, offer to help them with their work, help someone else in need).

3. Universal virtues: To help students develop multicultural tolerance and appreciation for virtues that span different cultures, have them find stories on the Internet of athletes from different countries. On pieces of poster board, write different virtues, one per sheet (discipline, generosity, perseverance, teamwork, etc.). Students decide which ones their athletes show, and paste them on the appropriate piece of poster board.

4. Break the class into two teams. Have Team One research the History of the Olympics and make a presentation on its origins to the class. Team Two will research and present on the motto and goals of the Olympics, as well as reporting on modern historical boycotts (Russia boycotting the LA Olympics, US boycotting the Moscow Olympics) relative to the stated Olympic goals.

## Internet Resources

**Epilepsy Foundation, Steelers' Alan Faneca:**  
<http://www.epilepsyfoundation.org>

**Epilepsy site, featuring Chanda Gunn:**  
<http://www.epilepsy.com>

**Official Website of USA Hockey (Women and Men):**  
<http://www.usahockey.com>

**Official Olympic Movement:**  
[http://www.olympic.org/uk/index\\_uk.asp](http://www.olympic.org/uk/index_uk.asp)

**Big Brother / Big Sister:**  
<http://www.bbbsa.org>

**"Respect" Quotes:**  
<http://quotations.about.com/cs/inspirationquotes/a/Respect1.htm>