

# 'The Hand of God' and the Legacy of Integrity

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I have always been a sports fan. So when England reached the quarterfinals of the 1986 World Cup against Argentina, I dared to dream that reliance on the distant glories of 1966 could finally be banished by lifting the ultimate prize. However, I remember crushing disappointment turning to disbelief and anger when TV replays clearly showed that the officials had missed Diego Maradona punch the ball into the net, launching his team toward the final four and dragging football into the gutter in the process.

Rather than express contrition for a disgraceful act of deceit, the unrepentant Maradona dared to attribute his villainy to the 'Hand of God'. I stopped short of wishing a bolt of lightning would strike him down, but I had hoped that some kind of retrospective action would be taken to make this man pay for his crime against football. However, rather than vilify him as the cheat who brought disgrace on his country, Maradona was deified into the pantheon of footballing gods by a nation who prized success over integrity. Apart from righteously indignant Englishmen, the world just seemed to bow at his feet marvelling at the sublime genius of a second goal that sealed Argentina's passage into the World Cup semi-final.

As I later reflected on what Maradona did, the importance of the game itself lost its significance. After all (Bill Shankly notwithstanding), it is just a game, right? Yet despite my self-soothing rationalisations, my thoughts began to run on matters of a moral legacy. I remember thinking to myself, 'How can this man look at his winners' medal and take pride in his achievement?'; 'What will this guy tell his kids and grandkids, when they are sitting on his knee asking innocent questions about how he won the World Cup?' What will he tell them if they get caught cheating on a test or stealing from a sweet shop? Our words can only have impact if they are consistent with the lives that we ourselves live.

The thing that really left a bad taste in my mouth was the fact that the most talented player on the planet, on the greatest footballing stage on earth, told millions of admiring fans and especially idolising children that it's OK to cheat as long as you get away with it. Today, Maradona's tainted mantle is worn by a host of overpaid prima donnas who kick lumps out of each other; perform over-elaborate dives, roll around like they've been shocked with 250 volts; wave imaginary red cards; tug shirts, grab each other at set plays like they're grabbing their wives; and do whatever it takes to gain an advantage. I listen to football pundits trying to rationalise cheating as gamesmanship that's 'just a part of the game' - 'these things happen in football'. Well, they happen because people make conscious decisions to cheat. They happen because the footballing authorities do not have the moral courage to stamp it out. They happen because we live in a society that values status above character. They happen because we have been conditioned to value the trivial and to trivialise the valuable. Many have embraced as their credo, 'Winning is not the main thing, it is the only thing.'

If this was just about football, I probably wouldn't have spent the time putting my thoughts on paper, but football is a reflection of the values we embrace as a society. In the end analysis, winning at all costs is much too high a price to pay when the ultimate cost is our ability to experience and live out truth. We are the product of the choices we make. If we practice deceit, even in minor things, duplicity will become a way of life when it comes to weightier matters. Long after the roar of the crowd had died down, the limelight has faded, and our hollow victories have turned to ashes, the one thing we are left with is our characters. Jesus put all of these things into perspective with a poignant question. "What indeed, shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, but lose his soul? (Mark 8:36).

The Apostle Paul recognised the reality of competition in life when he wrote, "And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown" (1 Corinthians 9:24). We are all engaged in the battle for our lives, "The Great Controversy". The battleground is our minds. The Word of God is our weapon and truth is our defence. Our imperishable crown is eternal life. Our victory is guaranteed if we rightly exercise the great determinate factor, our power to choose. How we conduct the fight not only impacts our personal destiny but can also inspire those who fall within our sphere of influence. It's not just about us. We have a responsibility to consider the wellbeing of those around us, especially our families.

I recently watched a YouTube video contrasting the attitudes of Christian Ronaldo and Lionel Messi while both were in competition to end the season as top scorer in La Liga, the Spanish football league. It showed Ronaldo's visible disappointment when his own teammates scored ahead of him. In contrast, Messi is shown surrendering the opportunity to score a penalty to allow teammate Neymar to get on the scoresheet and joyfully celebrating with him when he successfully converted the spot kick. My mind ran on Jesus words, "for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14).

The greatest thing we can achieve in life is a good character. The greatest legacy we can pass on is an example of truth, courage, integrity, honesty, honour, selflessness, self-respect and a host of other characteristics that give true value to our lives and to the lives of those we influence. Shakespeare was correct when he wrote, "the evil that men do lives after them", but it is just as true that the good does too. The Psalmist states, "But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.

Although Maradona's flippant "Hand of God" comment was his attempt to evade personal responsibility for his unsporting conduct, it nonetheless points to a powerful reality. The "Hand of God" represents His sovereign power operating in our lives to save, protect and strengthen. Our ability to prosper in this life and our capacity to influence future generations is dependent on His hand guiding our affairs. Joshua 4:24 assures us that we, "may know the hand of the Lord, that it is mighty, that you may

fear the Lord your God forever.” He promises us, “I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand’ . . . For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand” (Isaiah 41:10, 13).