

Masculine Virtues

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January 27, 2019

Boys Will Be Boys

Have you seen the **Gillette ad**? Everyone's seen the Gillette ad. And after my last post on masculinity, everyone's been asking me what I think of the Gillette ad.

Well, I used to shave with Gillette and I've dumped them... back in 2014 when I realized that Dollar Shave Club sells basically the same razors for \$1 each.

And the ad? Eh, it's fine.

Gillette is a division of a consumer products company selling bathroom items. No one is forced to watch their ads or use their razors. Clay Routledge put it brilliantly: we are living in an era of woke capitalism in which companies pretend to care about social justice to sell products to people who pretend to hate capitalism. Woke capitalism is silly but it gives Gillette customers what they want, which all you can expect of a corporation.

In contrast, APA is a professional organization of health care providers, writing guidelines for practicing therapists who deal with vulnerable men who come to them for help. The standards are quite different.

The content is quite different also.

Here is a list of things APA considers "harmful", under the umbrella term of "traditional masculinity":

- Stoicism.
- Competitiveness.
- Aggression.
- Dominance.
- Anti-femininity.
- Achievement.
- Adventure and risk.
- Violence.
- Providing for loved ones (if you're a black man).

Here's a list of things the Gillette ad is against:

- A mob chasing a teenager.
- Texting someone *"FREAK!!!"*
- Old TV shows.
- Catcalling and butt-grabbing.

- Patronizing your employees.
- Six-year-olds fighting.
- Chanting “boys will be boys” in unison.
- Sexual assault and sexual harassment.

What do the two lists have in common? Violence, which is never the answer, is the only answer. Find the traditional man closest to you and ask them how many things on Gillette’s list they approve of; it’s not going to be many. “Traditional” men tend to complain they it’s no longer OK to hold doors open for women or take their kids hunting, not that in good ol’ days you could bully people over text or grope ladies on the street.

Here are the things Gillette is in favor of:

- Terry Crews.
- Accountability.
- Demonstratively protecting women from other men.
- Fatherhood.
- Using your superior strength to break up fights between smaller males.
- Teaching all of the above to your son.

Those are remarkably **traditional** male traits and behaviors, in the sense that they are present and praised among men in almost every modern and pre-modern society. With the exception of Mr. Crews, all of those predate the human species.

Gillette’s ad is in no way against *traditional* masculinity. The list of behaviors they come out against is referred to as *toxic* masculinity, including by Gillette themselves.

Those who hate men or who gain status from pretending to do so will continue to conflate masculinity with the terrible (and not particularly masculine) behaviors portrayed in the first half of the ad. Toxic/traditional is a perfect setup for motte-and-bailey: “*I like extreme sports. – Ah, a traditional male. I bet you grope women on the subway.*” But it’s equally *toxic* to conflate Gillette with APA’s attack on traditional manhood.

Gillette’s Best Man

If I had to pick a role model of masculinity I would name Roger Federer. Federer is the best tennis player ever among men, the best gentleman among tennis players, philanthropist, father of four and husband to one.

Federer is also the best exemplar of the not-so-subtle distinction between toxic masculinity and traditional masculinity. Roger has been Gillette spokesperson for more than a decade, and he also makes an absolute mockery of the APA list.

Stoicism? Federer won tournaments playing through injury, on sweltering Melbourne days and chilly London nights. While the best female tennis player in history garnered a

reputation for furious outbursts at umpires and fans, Federer is legendary for never losing his cool.

Violence? Ok, even Roger has broken a racket or two in his career (so have I).

Competitiveness? Among the multitude of tennis records held by Federer are the 10 times he came back from two sets down to win a match. I was in the stands for #9 in New York when Federer outlasted Gael Monfils playing one of the best matches of his life. Even after Roger lost the first two sets while hitting 26 unforced errors and being outworked by the athletic Frenchman, not a single person in the crowd doubted Federer's ability to raise his game and ultimately triumph.

Providing for loved ones? Yes, even for black boys.

Aggression and dominance? When I was young and Federer always won, I used to root against him (because he always won). The same pattern would play out in dozens of Federer matches: the game would proceed evenly until something minor would happen that would shake the confidence of Federer's opponent a tiny bit. Perhaps the opponent would lose a break point opportunity, or miss an easy shot. And then Roger would transform into Darth Federer: a ruthless predator who would pounce on an opponent's single moment of weakness, breaking his serve and destroying his will to compete in the space of 5 or 10 minutes.

And yet, the other players on tour would revere Roger, much more than they did the equally talented Rafael Nadal or Novak Djokovic. The only tennis award voted on by the players themselves is the ATP sportsmanship award, Federer has won it 13 times.

What is it that Federer does so well and masculinity-haters resent? **Climbing Hierarchies**. When Federer was #1, he wasn't just first per the arcane schema of ATP ranking points. He was the best tennis players in the eyes of fans, journalists, sponsors, and, importantly, his opponents. #1 takes tennis skill, but it also takes stoicism, competitiveness, aggression, and dominance.

And I suspect that it's *hierarchies* that those who take issue with the above-listed traits are really against.

Who Hates Hierarchies?

There's a lot of bitching online about "the war on men", most of it tedious. *Group X thinks that men should have lower status, some guy says 'no, fuck you!', more at 10.* Jordan Peterson and Jonathan Haidt often get lumped in with that, but they are saying something entirely distinct. Peterson and Haidt are saying that there is a war on certain traits which are commonly coded as masculine: self-reliance, resilience, self-improvement through facing adversity, competence. They describe how parents, schools, and society as a whole discourage those traits, particularly in young people, particularly in young boys.

When I first encountered their writings, I found it too alarmist. But after reading the APA guidelines I remembered that Peterson and Haidt are both psychologists, the former practicing clinical psychology for twenty years. They saw this coming before everyone else.

What does a “war on competence” look like? Think of someone trying to get better at their work to get promoted, working on their writing to build an audience for their blog, or practicing a sport to rise in the rankings. Building competence doesn’t happen by itself. It requires focusing on a goal, taking on challenges, dealing with discomfort, risking failure, and overcoming problems on your own. Building competence (and getting recognized for it) is a crucial component of well being for all humans.

Of course, APA doesn’t mention this. All they have to say on the behaviors that build competence is:

Research suggests that socialization practices that teach boys from an early age to be self-reliant, strong, and to minimize and manage their problems on their own (Pollack, 1995) yield adult men who are less willing to seek mental health treatment.

If society values a particular skill or achievement (like work, blogging, or tennis) a competence hierarchy will form around it. That’s what it means for society to value a skill: those who display it get social rewards and status. But of course, not every hierarchy is a competence hierarchy. Those who got the rewards have a strong interest in removing the competence aspect, making sure that the goodies keep coming to them and not to more competent challengers.

This is why, according to Jordan Peterson, societies need both conservatives and progressives:

There’s space and necessity for a constant dialogue between the left and right. [...]

You have to move forward towards valued things, so you have to have a value hierarchy. There has to be hierarchy because one thing has to be more important than another, or you can’t do anything. [...]

No matter what you’re acting out, some people are way better at it than others. Doesn’t matter if it’s basketball or hockey or plumbing or law, as soon as there’s something valuable and you’re doing it collectively there’s a hierarchy.

So then what happens is the hierarchy can get corrupt and rigid and then it stops rewarding competence and it starts rewarding criminality and power. The right-wingers say that we really need to abide by the hierarchies and the left-wingers say: wait a second, your hierarchy can get corrupt and also puts a lot of dispossessed people at the bottom. And that’s not only bad for the dispossessed people, it actually threatens the whole hierarchy.

The progressive project is often about disrupting corrupt hierarchies, and it has done so successfully many times. But times change, and so do the requirements for identifying which hierarchies are broken.

In 1942, the New York Times staff was composed entirely of goofy white dudes. It's clear that being a goofy white dude is not commensurate with journalistic merit, and the composition of the staff changed. Today, the New York Times staff is a multi-ethnic and gender-diverse group of graduates from a small handful of elite colleges who share a political ideology and worldview. Is this a corrupt hierarchy of journalism or a meritorious one? This is a much harder question to answer.

Instead of dealing with hard questions, it's easier to reuse the tricks that worked in the past like saying that any majority-male hierarchy is nefarious and privileged. The APA was quick to point out that 95% of Fortune 500 CEOs are men. So are 80% of Google engineers and 80% of top-grossing actors. Also 99% of HVAC mechanics, but only 2% of dental hygienists. Are those examples of privilege or of competence?

The answers to all of the above are "almost certainly both, it's complicated". But this answer doesn't help you climb the hierarchy of progressive politics. To maintain that those are all examples of pure male privilege, one has to completely deny the role of competence. As people on the left compete to demonstrate their commitment to dismantling *privilege*, the entire concept of *competence* gets wholly ignored and the pursuit of it is seen as pathological. I think that this impulse is at the root of the "war on competence".

(The opposite happens to conservatives, who call every blatant example of privilege a meritocracy. Consider the belief that multimillion-heir Donald Trump is a self-made man.)

The traditionally masculine [1] traits are those required to climb hierarchies of competence: competitiveness, physical and emotional resilience, adventurous risk-taking, perseverance, the drive to achieve and overcome. Like all traits, they become vices when pushed too far. The most competitive basketball player of all time was a notorious jerk. People "kill themselves" in demanding careers or literally kill themselves running triathlons while ignoring signs of pain and danger. Entrepreneurs bet big on themselves and lose, or sacrifice what they can't afford to in order to win.

But ascending hierarchies of competence is vital even for the 99% of us who will not become elite athletes, CEOs, or superstars. Improving at a valuable skill is meaningful, and rising through the ranks provides validation of that meaning. It brings self-confidence and fulfillment. It demonstrates your worth to others and to yourself. When developed well, the masculine traits are virtues independent of any competition. They enable people to simply *live better* in the world, enjoying success as a well-deserved reward rather than a fleeting stroke of luck, and seeing setbacks as challenges rather than tragedies.

How do young people learn to develop masculine traits into masculine virtues? Schools and media are two of the institutions that are tasked with teaching young people, but those two institutions are among the most deeply entrenched in the progressive ideology that rejects competence and sees masculine traits as negative. You can turn to parents or friends, but not everyone has good role models around them. You can listen to a Jordan Peterson lecture, but he's liable to ramble about Jesus for hours on end.

Or, you can turn on the TV and watch some sports, and then sign up for a local rec league.

What Sports Taught Me

I hold a lot of opinions that are hugely controversial outside the rationalist community but are well subscribed within it. That self-improving AI is an existential threat, that status seeking drives most of social behavior, that you should correct for multiple hypothesis testing. I hold one opinion that is hugely controversial among rationalists and is unremarkable everywhere else: that the three hours I spent watching soccer last Saturday were time well spent.

I want to write one day about the beauty of sports as a deep and complex art form and on the link between watching professional athletes and one's own physical development. But sports are not just entertainment, they're a human activity built on the values of sportsmanship, and those values are worth paying attention to.

1. Protecting the game is more important than winning

There's a big difference between fans of competing political parties and of competing NBA teams. The former see only conflict in everything they care about. But the latter have something in common: their love of basketball. For this reason, almost all fans want their team to win fairly, and not by sabotaging opponents or bribing referees. Winning an NBA game is pointless if you destroy the NBA by cheating.

Sports fans recognize that the rules of the game are paramount. Not all the rules are written, of course, and there's room to push the boundary. But ultimately the participants in the game establish collectively what is cheating and what is fair play, and they're quick to punish cheaters.

Contrast this with journalists cannibalizing their own industry by replacing objective reporting with clickbait and scandal. Companies like Gawker Media took pride in destroying journalism norms for page views. And for a while, Gawker "won" the competition for eyeballs and attention. Now Gawker is gone, and the entire industry is in a death spiral.

2. Opponents are not enemies

A corollary to #1: the goal of sports is to outperform your opponent, not to destroy them. Even MMA fighters (for the most part) look to outfight their opponent in the cage, not to harm or humiliate them. At the end of the match, they are colleagues again.

The opposite is true in culture war and politics. People spend all their effort sticking it to the outgroup: getting someone silenced, banished, fired, ridiculed. Whether this actually helps your own cause or the groups you claim to fight for is an afterthought. The 35-day government shutdown harmed both Republican and Democrat voters, while both Trump and the House Democrats seemed to care more about making sure the other loses than helping their constituents.

Sports fandom is a channel for tribal impulses, but largely a benign one at that. Few fans and even fewer athletes forget the humanity of the person they compete against and the respect they're owed. Outside of sports, few seem to remember that.

3. It matters how good you are today, not what you did yesterday

Many people react to accolades and achievements by lowering their own standards. Think of an academic wasting their tenure on prestige squabbles instead of exploring bold ideas, or anyone on Twitter with a blue check next to their name.

In sports, the opposite is true. Winning a title grants you accolades, but it makes the road tougher in the future. Opponents will learn your strengths and weaknesses, fans will expect more of you. Roger Federer's past success doesn't earn him a pass, it just guarantees that every young opponent tries to play the game of their life against him.

An achievement can be a temptation to rest on your laurels or an opportunity to raise your game further. Our instincts push us toward the former, sports teach us the latter.

4. You will get hurt. That's OK

In a lifetime of playing soccer, I suffered bruised shins, twisted ankles, balls to the face, balls to the balls, elbows to the ribs, and a torn calf muscle. I also learned that none of the above is a big deal, certainly nothing worth sacrificing something as enjoyable as playing soccer over. If you watch sports you see athletes get hurt and recover all the time, but you almost never hear them wish they hadn't started in the sport in the first place.

There are many fun things we can do with our bodies. The most fun involve some risk of pain and harm: snowboarding, getting tattoos, climbing trees, having kids, lifting, BDSM, soccer, cliff jumping, punch bug. Sports provides exposure to physical risks, letting you decide which activities are worth the bruises.

It's possible to live life bruise-free, but I'm not sure you can call that "living".

5. You will lose a lot. That's OK

I noticed a strange thing recently: almost all my rationalist friends who are into sports also play competitive card games like Magic: The Gathering, Hearthstone, and Artifact. After much cajoling, I decided to jump in. And then it took me a while to get used to all the losing.

Most single-player video games, which are what I played before, are balanced to let the player “win” 80-90% of the time. Dark Souls aside, when a single-player game presents you with a challenge you can confidently expect to deal with it. Movies, adventure books, and single-player games often rely on the trope of “succeeding against all odds”, and yet the odds are very much stacked in the protagonist’s favor.

But in competitive games, you get pwned. A lot [2]. In fact, in games like Hearthstone, you will win exactly 45-50% of your games no matter how good you are. If you work hard at it, you will win 55% of your games for a short while before going back down to 45%, but with a higher rank number next to your name.

In sports, the odds are even tougher. Each year 32 NFL teams compete for a single trophy, which means that fans of 97% of football teams will not celebrate at the end of the year. Sometimes, a team’s season ends through no fault of its own: a bounce of the ball, a coin flip, a blown call.

But that’s how life is. Achieving anything meaningful is hard and entails a lot of failure on the way. As for NFL fans, as for everyone, it is important to take joy and pride in small achievements and marginal improvements along the way. And as for losses:

I wish you bad luck, again, from time to time so that you will be conscious of the role of chance in life and understand that your success is not completely deserved and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either. And when you lose, as you will from time to time, I hope every now and then, your opponent will gloat over your failure. It is a way for you to understand the importance of sportsmanship.

– Justice John Roberts (h/t Slarphen for the quote attribution)

6. In the end, it’s all up to you

Chance, bad calls and all the rest play an important role in deciding the outcomes of sports events, but sports fans ultimately have little patience for those who shift blame and responsibility. No one wants to litigate old grievances once the name is engraved on the trophy and a new season starts.

While sports teaches us that luck plays a role in outcomes, it also trains us to behave as if that is not the case. The team that benefitted from a lucky bounce was good enough to be in the position of a single bounce from victory, the team that lost weren’t good enough to ensure a margin for victory. Winners rarely apologize for luck, and losers are mocked if they complain about it.

Many institutions send the opposite message. They say: if you failed, it's not your fault. It was done *to* you, taken *from* you. The system will make it right and fix the injustice, all you must do is to surrender your life to the system.

Assigning responsibility for outcomes to your own actions is called "internal locus of control" in psychology. It is associated with a need for achievement, and also with a lower incidence of depression. The latter result is from a study published by APA in 1988 before it was trying to cure men of manliness.

The lessons of sports are useful and important, but it's not enough to read about them. Like all virtues, they require time to internalize by observing them in role models and practicing them in your own life. Sports are full of role models, both men and women, who have honed those traits to virtues. They are also full of cautionary examples of athletes who took them too far.

When one side of the culture war spectrum rejects all masculine traits and the other side uncritically glorifies them, watching Federer play a tennis match is the balanced meal that your soul needs.

Footnotes

[1] I am basically using "masculine traits" to mean "traits for climbing competitive hierarchies".

This is not an arbitrary definition. Males of many species have a much higher tendency than women to measure themselves against other man and arrange themselves in a hierarchy. The root cause of this is that the reproductive prospects of females are more equal, while those of males are highly varied – men need to prove their worth in a hierarchy to get to mate.

If you don't buy the evolutionary argument, it's not important to the main point I'm making. Consider my use of "masculine traits" a simple shorthand for "hierarchy-climbing traits".

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[2] Artifact is particularly brutal for starting players. It's hugely complex with barely a tutorial, the feedback loops are long which makes it harder to learn quickly, and the matchmaking will pit you against 14-year-olds from Slovakia who will drink your blood.

It does become very rewarding after you spend the time learning the game. There's nothing quite like edging the opponent by one lane with a brilliant combination of cards and being cursed at in Slovak. You can improve via phantom drafts, or by finding me on Steam for a casual match; my username is "Putanumonit".

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