

13 America's Relationship with Sport Sets a Standard

What a culture believes about excellence, whether it is accessible, whether failure is information or verdict, whether talent can come from anywhere, shapes what that culture actually produces over time. Organisations that treat these as abstract questions of values rarely examine how concretely their daily practices answer them.

American sporting culture offers one of the most instructive available examples of what happens when those beliefs are embedded seriously and over a long period of time. The mechanisms behind that are worth examining not because the model transfers wholesale, but because the principles underneath it do, and because those principles are considerably more actionable than they first appear.

Michael Jordan, whose career produced six NBA championships and is still regarded as the definitive standard of excellence in the sport, described his own relationship with failure in terms that cut through most of what is written about high performance: "I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." The statement is not false modesty. It is a precise description of what a culture that genuinely normalises failure as part of the path to excellence actually produces in its performers.

The Ambassadors Sport Produces

It is a fair argument that American sports figures and film stars have had more positive impact on the international stage than the majority of American political leaders over the last sixty years. Great sportsmen have been among the greatest ambassadors for the American culture and the American dream, uniting people in ways that politics rarely manages. Sport has a unique capacity for this: talent and skill can be admired with genuine objectivity across every cultural and political divide.