

The Drawbacks of Warrior Culture

by Julian Maldonado

In the tenth year of the Trojan War, the infamous Greek general Agamemnon finds himself in a tough situation after finding that his troops, namely the great Achilles, no longer want to continue fighting. A crippled man named Thersites speaks out against Agamemnon, rightly accusing him of being a cruel leader and arguing that the war is not worth fighting. Odysseus, an ally of Agamemnon, rises and rebukes Thersites, declaring that he is a sorry excuse of a man, unfit to “stand up alone against princes.” Odysseus goes on to publicly humiliate Thersites, mercilessly beating him over the back with a scepter, bringing welts and tears as well as raucous laughter from the crowds. Thersites, ashamed and helpless, scuttles back into the crowd.

The scene serves as to reinforce the power dynamic of warrior above commoner, and while the words of Thersites prove to be sage advice for the Greek army, his arguments mean nothing due to his crippled and ugly appearance. Camp Pasquaney is not a Greek war barracks (save for the days when Bill Talley is COD), but one characteristic can be observed in both, conforming to a personality shaped by competition rather than a set of ideals. The Greek crowd cheers when Odysseus beats Thersites not because of the wisdom of his rebuke but rather because of the restoration of the social hierarchy. All men are in competition at the war camp, constantly trying to prove they are the better speaker, warrior, and man. Thersites cannot claim superiority in any of these spheres and thus cannot command the respect of his peers.

In the coming weeks on the hillside, we will compete in everything: swimming, acting, hiking, composing a table setting. We strive for the respect of our peers through victory in these fields; however, this competitive environment can prove to be toxic.

My entire life, I have motivated myself to work harder in order to be better than others at fencing, schoolwork, or running. I put in extra hours at the fencing gym or in the library to feel pride when I finish strong in competitions and get straight A's. This system has worked well for me, and I am thankful that it has motivated me to do more. However, this past year I found myself crippled by the anxiety of losing and failing to achieve my own expectations.

I lost in the first round of all of my fencing competitions and racked up an impressive collection of low midterm grades. My expectations began to suffocate my performance as I watched my classmates and teammates succeed while I felt like a failure. Under the pressure of a new fencing coach who was convinced that I didn't understand anything about the sport and under professors who spoke in sentences that I had to write down and google later, I found myself trying to escape my problems by going out four nights a week. I stopped speaking to my teammates and showed up to practice exhausted every day. My captain sent me an email about working harder, and a professor spoke to me after class about my lack of participation. In order to replace the success that had I felt from competing in grades and fencing, I turned to competing in unhealthy behaviors.

We Pasquaney men pride ourselves in winning. It feels like there's nothing better than your name on a plaque in Mem Hall or your performance talked about years later or even getting the most free-time because you're the best at table duty (even if it involves snatching silverware from the back of the kitchen). However, when our goals are shaped by simply winning some competition, we stray from our ideals. Kindness and respect are thrown by the wayside when we are solely focused on beating others. The last situation we want to find ourselves in is a society that lifts up only those who will sacrifice everything to win: a warrior culture.

In a warrior culture, shame and defeat motivate our every action. Thersites is reminded by the scepter of Odysseus that he doesn't belong in the conversation or even in the Greek Army. This culture is exclusive, violent, and extraordinarily harmful to the development of boys and men—elements that work against Pasquaney's core mission.

There's nothing wrong with trying your hardest to succeed; in fact, it's one of the parts of Pasquaney I enjoy most. Competition can bring out the best in us, building individual toughness and sharpening our teamwork skills. But when we focus solely on winning, sometimes we face a fear of failure that can lead us to measures we would never resort to otherwise. For example, the fear of not winning a simple wallball point can lead us to lie about whether the ball skimmed the ground or not. One's honesty is compromised when we choose competition over our values.

Another example is that, even at camp, I frequently notice boys bragging about their masculinity and prowess with girls, treating women as objects in an effort to impress their peers. Sometimes, the imagined competition can bring us to homophobia, shaming the sexuality and lifestyle of others in order to feel superior. Buying into some sort of social hierarchy and enforcing it by putting others down in order to feel like a “winner” can lead us to dangerous behavior, which is hurtful to others and suffocates our own individuality. The fear of the shame that comes with not fitting in can be an especially poisonous form of warrior culture.

I learned this the hard way my freshman year. I discarded my usually responsible and mature nature in order to impress people I didn't know. In doing so I found myself in dangerous situations, and at times I even risked the money my parents had set aside for my education. Fitting in and searching for the feeling of success through reckless behavior proved to be not only unnecessary, but also left me falling into the same trap the Greek soldiers found themselves in millennia ago.

Thankfully, I was able to pull myself out from this rut by reevaluating my use of competition as a fuel for success. The problem wasn't that I was incapable of performing at the level I needed to but that my goals had become skewed. Rather than actually improving, I was more interested in getting a higher grade than the student sitting next to me or winning a practice bout at the gym. To quote Jordan Peterson, “Do not compete against the man beside you, but rather against the man that you were yesterday.”

When I compared myself to others to feel like a winner, I lost sight of one of the most important teachers, failure. I learned nothing when I won among my friends late on Friday and Saturday nights. I refused to understand that I could develop from the shortcomings I experienced in sports and academics, so I lost the chance to use the ultimate fuel of failure. When we fail, we are never more within ourselves. Processing defeat is the most personal form of self-improvement. Warrior culture, however, discourages this process and instead forces us to smother our failure, trying as quickly as possible to forget the shame.

At Pasquaney, we have no reason to fear the fate of Thersites; no soldier looms over us with a scepter, threatening to beat us down in front of crowds if we speak out. Winning to avoid shame will push you to sacrifice the things that matter most to you. This warrior culture

mindset is toxic and will prevent the introspection necessary for us to mature into successful men and, by forcing us to forget our failures, will wear away who we really are. Your individualism is truly one of the most valuable things to those around you. Cherish it as you compete with others, and use the ample reflection time provided to you every day in order to process the personal struggles you encounter.