In the past several months, sports fans have been saturated with high-profile sporting events in this country and abroad. We have watched some of the world’s best athletes compete and have seen the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. Victory seems to boost city and national pride, and defeat may be associated with national disgrace and/or mourning. It is clear that the population has endless adulation for sports heroes. The number of young and not so young who wear logo jackets, caps, shirts, shoes, etc. is astonishing—it is a billion dollar business. Perhaps it relates in part to the need to belong, to be part of something exciting. There is a tremendous sense of unity and camaraderie when one joins a stadium full of cheering fans. Victory, especially over a hated rival, seems to suffuse the happy throng with a glow of success and accomplishment. Maybe this all helps to make some people forget about their unhappy or humdrum lives.

Even with the skyrocketing salaries of top athletes, we merely shrug our shoulders. We feel much more outraged by the multimillion dollar salaries of CEOs of the for profit-managed care organizations. A few nights ago I watched our local major league baseball team play a game. The star makes as much money in five games as I make all year. Does the home run he hit that night have that much intrinsic value? From the accompanying cheers and applause, one would have thought so. Does the school teacher in elementary school who makes only a tiny fraction of his salary but molds the citizens of tomorrow have a more important job? I definitely think so.

What about the fans who attend these sporting events? Are the riots at some soccer games just a natural extension of team loyalty or do they reflect some deeper rage that can only be displayed openly at the stadium? When people are maimed or killed at such events, it is difficult to justify such behavior as “zeal” for one’s team. One sports commentator made an interesting tongue-in-cheek suggestion that we switch audiences at sporting events. The quiet and polite crowds at the U.S. Open (golf) would certainly tone down the World Cup audience. Similarly, the rowdy soccer fans would change the world of professional golf forever.

Many young fans are clearly trying to emulate sports heroes. As role models, however, they generally don’t measure up too much when one considers the totality of their personal and professional lives. On the one hand, we have a Dennis Rodman of the victorious Chicago Bulls; at the other end of the spectrum we have a Lee Jantzen who quietly carried his own bag before the fourth and final round of the U.S. Open to help his caddy out. He is a winner in every sense. Although some athletes do provide good role models, they are the small minority. The best picture at the World Cup was the American and Iranian soccer players smiling, shaking hands and posing for friendly group photos. The score of the subsequent game paled in importance by comparison.

Our obsession with sports has fueled television (ESPN ESPN2, CNN-S1 and all the major networks), the newspaper (always thick, separate section), magazines (hundreds) plus the internet and any other communication medium you can think of. What should we make of all this sporting frenzy as it relates to our every day work of caring for patients and their health? The following summarizes some of my thoughts:

1. The quiet good deeds done around the world every day have far more intrinsic value than winning any sporting event. These are the quiet deeds of a caring physician, a concerned schoolteacher, a loving parent, a faithful friend.
2. Monetary reward has no relation to good deeds or their intrinsic societal value. Other, higher incentives provide the right motivation, and the payment is mostly in warm, fuzzy feelings.
3. Belonging to the family of man is more important than being attached to a specific team or sports hero. Volunteerism to help the needy is more important than voice-losing cheering at the stadium.

4. Beware of the applause and cheers of the world—it might go to your head. Often the loudest cheering is for the least worthy of events as, for example, television wrestling.

5. Enjoy sporting events for what they are—an exciting organized competition between superb athletes; no more and no less. I do.

Here in San Francisco the city is plastered with signs which say “Go Niners.” With all of the problems in the world, wouldn’t it be wonderful if the sign in everyone’s head said “Go help.”