

When Plus is Greater than Minus

Last Friday after school, I watched our Badminton team play Queen's College at the Harbour Road Sports Centre in Wanchai. I had been told that Queen's College is one of the top two badminton schools in Hong Kong and I was keen to see how our boys would perform, particularly after hearing last week about their successful training trip to Beijing. The match was very exciting and each member of the team played exceptionally well in their individual and double games. Queen's College was strong and a skilful and talented opposition. However, our A team won while the B team lost narrowly.

A few things impressed me while I was sitting in the stands at the gymnasium. Firstly, there was the sheer determination of our players to do their very best. Secondly, there was the support from the rest of the team when one team member was playing their game; everybody clapped and cheered every point scored. Thirdly, there were a number of parents, old boys and current students of the school who had come along to give their personal support to the Badminton team. You could tell by looking at our team members that they really appreciated the encouragement and that the support helped them perform at their very best and enabled them to give their opposition a hard fight.

We all need encouragement at times and certainly require the support of those around us. This is certainly true of sporting teams but it is also true in music, the SA clubs and activities, and in the classroom. I really want to show my appreciation to the Badminton team on their efforts last Friday afternoon, in the same way that I really want to show my appreciation and thanks to the SA organisers of the Sponsored Walk, or to the organisers of the many stalls and displays at the Carnival, or to those boys who are busily rehearsing for the anniversary concert. The list goes on and on.

One way of showing my appreciation is to acknowledge their performances and their efforts here in assembly. I can also arrange for their names to go up on the school website. But congratulations such as this have a tendency to be temporary; praise today but forgotten tomorrow. The question I ask is how can we have a permanent reminder of accomplishments, commitment and dedication? It does seem strange to me that we take a rather different approach when it comes to punishment, as you are all no doubt very aware. While praise is temporary, punishment has a habit of being permanent. Indeed, being late to school today will appear on your conduct sheet, a permanent reminder of your failure to get yourself properly organised on the morning on the 27th November 2006.

Recently, a prominent old boy, who graduated in the 1970s, asked for a copy of his school record that he needed for an official document. During the course of our conversation about his life after SPC, the alumnus apologised to me about his school record and the fact that he had received a B Conduct Grade when he was in Form 3. He told me that he was 'ashamed' of his Form 3 record, particularly as he had achieved an A Grade in every other year at school. When I looked at his personal file I was expecting to see a series of major offences by this gentleman, 'crimes' that would be worthy of him feeling 'ashamed'. I was rather taken aback, however, to see that his 'terrible' Form 3

Conduct grade was based on one minus conduct mark, a conduct mark he had been given for failing to hand in his homework on three occasions. There it was, in black and white, his misdemeanor from 32 years ago.

In that old boy's file was also a record of the plus conduct marks he has been given for a variety of activities he had participated also while in Form 3; for good behaviour in the classroom; and for being particularly helpful to the teacher. Unfortunately, he had obviously forgotten those positive aspects, remembering only the B Conduct Grade. To him, punishment was permanent, while praise was temporary and then forgotten.

I am not suggesting one little bit that action should not be taken when school rules are broken; when homework and assignments are not submitted; when students are rude to each other or to their teachers; or when there are cases of bullying or stealing. I will continue to support teachers as they take appropriate action when boys are in the wrong. What I am saying, however, is that there needs to be a balance. Too often, it is easier to criticise and to punish but harder to praise and to reward. To accept the argument that it is necessary to punish is also to accept the argument that it is necessary to reward.

Earlier this year, after consultation with last year's senior prefects and the Discipline Master, I modified the School Rules regarding conduct marks to say that a boy with one or two minus conduct marks in any given year would still be eligible for an A grade. Previously, of course, one minus conduct mark automatically prevented you from achieving an A grade. I know that this decision met with general approval from the prefects, the teachers on the Discipline Team and I assume from each of you.

I have also had a close look at the all the conduct marks handed out last school year. There is a great deal of interesting information in this data. What I can tell you this morning, however, is that from September 2005 to June 2006, for every three minus conduct marks given to students there were two plus conduct marks awarded. I will say is that I was somewhat heartened by the figures because I was expecting the 3:2 ratio of minus to plus conduct marks to be much higher in favour of the negative marks.

I hope that the day will come soon when positive conduct marks are in the majority. This will not be accomplished however, by teachers simply stopping handing out minus conduct marks; although you might think that this is the best solution. There are two things that need to happen to reverse the ratio. Firstly, you need improve your behaviour, your attitude and your commitment to study so that you reduce the number of minus conduct marks that are given. Secondly, you must display a level of conduct that teachers believe is worthy of recognition and reward. I am also looking at appropriate ways that we can recognise more formally positive conduct and activity. A Certificate that recognises 'the positive' is one way that this might be done. Indeed, I welcome your thoughts and ideas on how this can be achieved.

You need to understand that each of you must take responsibility for your own discipline. This year, we have rewritten the School Rules to emphasis the importance of managing your own behaviour. The Discipline Master and I have spoken on numerous occasions

about the Charter of Rights and Responsibilities that sits at the beginning of the School Rules. This is an important change in how members of St. Paul's College need to conduct themselves. Rules are important and there will be no relaxation in our position when it comes to the list of Thou Shalt Nots. For example, thou shalt not be late to school; thou shalt not be rude to teachers; thou shalt not bully a fellow student; thou shalt not steal, and so forth will continue to apply and be dealt with appropriately.

However, I would hope that we can suggest additions to the School Rules, new rules based not on Thou Shalt Not but simply on Thou Shalt. For example, thou shalt take pride in your appearance and with your manners; thou shalt say thank you to your teachers for giving you extra help and guidance; thou shalt make others feel safe at school, and so forth.

Again, I welcome your ideas. Maybe over the next week or two a Form Class or a group of friends or the Prefects or an individual student can give me a list of six or ten "Thou Shalts", specific ways that we can emphasise the many positive qualities of our school and its students.

It is when this when we get to this stage that we can proudly say that Plus is Greater than Minus.