IF you've seen Woody Allen's “Annie Hall,” you’ll remember Alvy Singer's line about physical education: Those who can’t do, teach. And those who can’t teach, teach gym.

The line’s funny enough, but it also reveals something about our culture’s attitude toward sports and education. We like it when kids have good coaches and good gym teachers who get them into shape and teach them the rudiments of games. But I don’t think that as a culture we see what a serious business physical training actually is.

The training of the body is directly related to the development of a fundamental aspect of the human psyche: what Plato, that pre-eminent teacher of teaching, called thymos. In English we don't have a word for this concept, but it encompasses both bravery and the urge for glory. Perhaps the closest we have is “spiritedness,” as in “a spirited competitor.” Plato knew that thymos is a marvelous quality that needs to be developed and strengthened, especially in those who represent the community as soldiers.

But Plato also knew that thymos can be dangerous. The spirited part of the soul can take control and turn what would have been an admirable man or woman into a beast. At one point in “The Republic,” Plato imagines a state in which the ruling value is spiritedness. He calls it a timocracy, and he is fully alert to its dangers: constant battles for first place and ongoing war.

In paying close attention to both the promise and the peril of thymos, Plato knew something that we apparently have forgotten. When we think about what it is to be human now, we too rarely take thymos into account. I know of no influential mode of modern psychology that takes up the Greek wisdom and treats spiritedness and the education of the spirited part of the soul as central aspects of human development.

Evidence of our neglect is everywhere. Day after day we see athletes, especially male athletes, behaving badly. The players of the most violent sports, football in particular, are too often finding their way to the front pages of the newspaper for crimes like rape and assault. These are young men who have been encouraged to develop speed and strength and, most of all, aggression. Their spiritedness has been amped up by their training.

We need a more thoughtful and sound philosophy of educating the body and the spirit than we currently possess. The athletes who are raising their quotient of thymos with every collision need to be helped to understand what a wonderful but dangerous power they are unleashing in themselves.

Am I saying that athletes ought to be reading Plato and Homer and using them to think about their lives? At first that may sound absurd. But what is a student-athlete if not someone who is learning a sport but also learning about the meaning and value of sport? There are good coaches who try to guide their players, no doubt about that. But to my knowledge there are no
college programs (and none in the pros) that explore the relationship between playing a game and developing the spirit.

There need to be. Coaches often aren’t in a position to offer this kind of instruction; they know X’s and O’s but not Homer. And most serious professors who teach at schools where big-time sports rule are kept at a distance from the athletes, who are encouraged to take courses that tend to be basic, sometimes remedial, and decidedly not philosophic. But that’s the wrong way to go. If schools are going to be educating athletes, we need to educate them as athletes.

How might we begin to do this? At the center of any syllabus should surely be Plato’s rebuttal to Homer, whom Plato strove to displace as the central teacher of the Greeks. Homer’s primary hero is Achilles, a man who is all spirit and who fears nothing. Achilles is a great warrior; there is none better. But he’s also capable of reckless behavior and rage that makes him almost inhuman. When his Trojan foe Hector asks him to make a compact so that the loser will receive proper burial honors, Achilles answers with horrible contempt. I am so enraged with you, he tells Hector, that I could eat your flesh. That is the way of the beast, but not the man. Yet in the Homeric world (if probably not quite in the eye of Homer himself) Achilles is the most admirable of men.

In “The Republic,” Plato seeks to correct the values of Homer’s warriors. Courage, he tells us, is not being absolutely fearless, the way Achilles is. Courage is knowing what and what not to be afraid of. Knowing: Plato believes that reason should always rule the drive for glory. He thinks we should never risk turning ourselves into beasts by letting our hunger for glory rule us, even for a moment.

Which path is better for the spirited individual: the Homeric or Platonic? Should the athlete on the field risk suspending reasonable control over his or her passions in order to win? Should he do so, knowing that what Plato suggests might be true: that once he has allowed the hunger for domination to rule unchecked on the field, that same hunger might manifest itself in other venues? Or should we look at sports in another light and see them, as Aristotle might, as opportunities to rid ourselves of dangerous emotions by venting them in a designated space?

These aren’t easy questions, to be sure. But they are well worth trying to answer, for athletes and for all of us. We’ve got to entertain the idea that the hunger for glory and even for supremacy is part of every individual. In some people it’s nearly as strong as the hunger for food. All of us, but athletes and warriors in particular, have to understand how to deal with that hunger. As Plato told us, the spirit needs education just as much as the mind.