CENTER VALLEY – Six feet, ten inches in height makes for a rather big person. Stand him atop a pitcher’s mound that is almost another foot high and he looms even larger. Raise his arm above his head to hurl a 90+ mile per hour fastball (or, even nastier, a sidearm slider), and fear ensues in the batter’s box. No wonder New Yorkers are euphoric at the prospect of Randy Johnson appearing in Yankee pinstripes.

But is bigger necessarily better? In professional athletics, size may seem to secure success, but performance does not necessarily follow from physical prowess, as every season demonstrates. In other realms of life, bigger can actually be dangerous. Obesity has become a large-scale crisis in our nation. Bigger burgers have morphed into wider waistlines and lead not only to the downfall of adolescent development but also to a financially precarious future for overweight individuals and the society that supports them.

The pre-season glee of Yankees’ fans, and the free-spending ways of the team’s owner, reveal an even bigger problem: our cultural penchant for wanting bigger as if it were somehow better. Whether labeled greed or gluttony, this all-too-human desire appears today in many guises – in corporations replete with shoddy accounting, in professions beguiled by conflicts of interest, even in education blinded by high-tech plagiarism. Its lure has the potential not only for physical or financial or intellectual problems, but even more so for social decay.

In his recent book, “The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead,” Daniel Callahan ably defends this thesis: “Two decades of change in American economic life ... hasn’t just shifted the financial incentives for individuals or the operating strategies of business organizations. It has deeply affected American culture overall, reshaping nearly everyone’s values. And not for the better.”
Peppered with numerous examples from various walks of life, Callahan’s study makes a strong case that our “winner-take-all economy has loaded up the rewards for those who make it into the Winning Class, and left everyone else with little security and lost of anxiety.” No wonder, then, that small-market teams and many other Americans (outside the Bronx, that is) think George Steinbrenner is ruining baseball!

Whether the Yankees’ owner is seen as a devil or a demi-god (and what Phillies’ fan doesn’t long for such deep-pocketed ownership!), this desire for bigger and better has let loose the prevailing mind-set that having more means being happier, that winning more means succeeding at life. But human existence and personal fulfillment are far more serious than a game, despite how high our national pastime ranks among life’s important issues. The ravaging force of a tsunami makes this truth hit home.

The microcosm that baseball is reveals a picture painted 18 years ago by Pope John Paul II in his letter on authentic human development (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis): “there are some people - the few who possess much - who do not really succeed in ‘being’ because, through a reversal of the hierarchy of values, they are hindered by the cult of ‘having’; and there are others - the many who have little or nothing - who do not succeed in realizing their basic human vocation because they are deprived of essential goods.” This scenario affects more than the markets for professional sports teams; excessive wealth and consumption are cultural realities that impinge upon every aspect of American life. Today, as Callahan points out, we buy more than we need, while at the same time we complain that our society lacks so much that is required.

Restricting free agency, or the free flow of goods and services, is not a long-term solution. What is needed is education in personal and social character, the formation of a new generation that excels in integrity. For the corporate world, this entails the development of a workplace ethic that focuses on persons and not just profits. For the athletic arena, this demands the eradication of illegal drug use and riotous behavior, enforced through the courage to banish abusers from the sport. And in the classroom this calls for a renewed effort, on the part of teachers and administrators alike at all educational levels, to combat cheating as something that “everybody does anyway.”

Owners and athletes and educators alike – indeed all of us, each in his or her own way – are responsible for the cultural values that shape our common life. If success in this kind of season depends only on size and might, then too many good people will continue to be on the losing side.

(Thomas F. Dailey, O.S.F.S. is director of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture at DeSales University in Center Valley.)