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Democracy Can Work if We Follow the Rules

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Your Turn
Alan Garfield
Guest columnist

Democracy can work if we follow the rules

Some prioritize winning above all

I don't know the politics of Donna Kelce, the mother of NFL superstars Jason and Travis. But it strikes me that the even-handed manner in which this woman shows her love and devotion to her sons, even when their teams are battling on the gridiron, may hold a lesson for the rest of us Americans.

When Jason's team, the Philadelphia Eagles, plays Travis' team, the Kansas City Chiefs, Donna famously wears a hybrid Eagles/Chiefs jacket. In each of these games, Donna's teams both win and lose, but she is steadfastly there to celebrate the joy of a good game and her appreciation for those who played it. Her two sons mirror their mother's commendable example when inevitably, at the end of a game, they embrace, acknowledge each other's efforts and the losing brother graciously congratulates his winning sibling.

This admirable sportsmanship contains a broader lesson for all of us. It is a lesson about our democracy and how to protect it.

What can we learn from Donna Kelce?

All members of the American community — the "We the People" referred to in the Constitution's Preamble — are players in the one of the most important games in the history of human existence: democratic self-governance. It is a profoundly serious game in which citizens — not monarchs, czars or politburos — decide upon their country's direction.

As with any game, American democracy works only if players honor the rules, which in this case is the rule of law. American democracy also depends upon good sportsmanship which includes treating opponents as worthy adversaries and graciously accepting defeat.

Perhaps most important, for democracy to succeed, the players, like Jason and Travis Kelce in football, must give the game their best efforts, both in preparation and execution. For citizens in a democracy, that means making a sincere effort to educate themselves about issues and candidates, being open to opposing views and showing up (to vote) on "game day." These are not simple obligations. In a media landscape swirling with misinformation and appeals to people's base instincts, it requires determination to search out reliable sources of information and to rise above prejudices and self-centeredness.

Too many Americans don't meet those obligations

Regrettably, too many American citizens fail to meet these obligations. Some have become suspicious of the rule of law, treat adversaries as enemies and refuse to accept defeat. These tendencies can lead to a dangerous outcome — prioritizing winning above all else, even when that means deliberately lying, threatening public servants, and resorting to political violence. If our nation continues down this path, the current generation of We the People will betray future generations by reneging on their constitutional obligation to "secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."

Much of the blame for the recent rapid deterioration in the rules and norms that sustain American democracy lies with Donald Trump, a man who puts himself above all else, and all others. He believes that playing by the rules is for losers. In his single-minded pursuit of winning, he is willing to resort to bald-faced lying, to branding opponents as "vermin" to be rooted out, and to incitement of political violence.

There is an alternative model of leadership that was exemplified by

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Abraham Lincoln, who served the country at its most dangerously divided moment. In Lincoln's First Inaugural Address, a month before the Civil War be-

gan, Lincoln stressed that "we are not enemies, but friends" and appealed to "the better angels of our nature." In his Second Inaugural Address, shortly before the close of the war, Lincoln called for "malice toward none, with charity for all."

Lincoln exemplified everything Trump is not. While Lincoln sought uni-

ty, Trump manically sows division to serve his own selfish goals. He is guided by no "better angels." He has malice towards all, and charity toward none.

Just as Americans want football players who play by the rules, respect their opponents and graciously accept defeat, we need political leaders who will do the same. But, unlike football,

democracy is not a game for entertainment. To the contrary, our rights and liberty are at stake. If our democracy fails, it is not merely a disappointment. It is a tragedy for Americans and all who look to us for inspiration.

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