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Sports Build Character?!

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Abstract

Participation in sports continues to be a major part of our society. Individuals participate in sports for health and fitness reasons, but also for "other" reasons; such as character building and socialization.

Whether sports builds character is an ongoing debate. This paper adds to the discussion by providing insights into what character is and what it looks like in sports, and reviews some of the literature and research on whether sports does build character.

Sport is an extraordinarily pervasive social phenomenon.

(Eitzen & Sage, 2003, p. 1)

Not just in the United States, but worldwide, sports is a major part of all societies and cultures. Sport participants range in age from the very young to the very old, and the level of play ranges from solely for fun and recreation to the professional level. Schools, clubs, businesses, and community centers offer sport and recreational opportunities for a myriad of age groups. It is the exception if children do not participate in recreational or organized sports. On college and university campuses throughout the country, students participate in sports at the intramural, club, and intercollegiate level. As Michener (1976) states: "Young people need that experience of acceptance; it can come in a variety of ways…but in the United States it is sports that have been elected primarily to fill this need" (p. 19).

People participate in sports for a variety of reasons—health and fitness, stress management, socialization, relaxation, and others. One of the "other" reasons is character development. "Sport builds character" is an often used phrase. Unfortunately, sport may not build character.

A major and consistent problem in sports today, at all levels, is the prevalence of improper behaviors and poor character. Cheating scandals, drugs, violence, disrespect, and other inappropriate behaviors in sport, have almost become expected or the norm. Brenda Bredemeier (personal conversation, February, 2005) describes that the way athletes behave in sporting events is different than they would in "real" life—a term referred to as "bracketed morality." Bracketed morality means that in a sporting contest, anything goes. Athletes will often display pro-social behavior (the way they think they should act) in a sporting context. Some research (Bredemeier & Shields, 1985; Eitzen & Sage, 2003) appears to show that sporting behavior is different and separate than real life.

While some claim that because sport and play are separate from real life, this disconnection justifies inappropriate behavior, others say sport mimics real life (Coakley, 2001). Sport, like business, education, socializing, and war, are all part of the real world. These different modalities

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are all subsets of real life, but they are still real life. Philosophical discussions or theories that separate sport from the real world are encouraging to sport participants and provide them with an excuse for abhorrent or inappropriate behavior. Bracket morality cannot and should not be a "blank check" for behavior in sports. Just as in war where there are laws of warfare (the Geneva Conventions) and standards of conduct, in the sporting life, there are "rights" and "wrongs." Discussions to the contrary, although beneficial from an academic and philosophical standpoint, actually contribute to the problem of bad behavior in sport.

Can positive character traits be developed through a sporting experience? Absolutely. But it will not happen by chance or hope. It can and will only happen when coaches, teachers, and administrators make a conscious decision to make character development an outcome (objective) of the sport experience. How that can be accomplished is a topic for another day.

This article adds to the discussion of whether sports can build character by defining character, looking at character in a sport setting, and reviewing some of the literature on character in sport.

Definition of Character

The world championship was in the balance when Briana Scurry, the American goalkeeper, strode to the goal line on July 10 in the Rose Bowl. The American goalkeeper had picked out her victim, the third Chinese player to take a penalty kick in the shootout, that would decide the Women's World Cup…..it was one thing to choose which opponent was most likely to be weak. It was another thing for Scurry to choose her tactics.

By her own admission, Scurry decided to improve her chances by ignoring the rules of the penalty kick. In a quick and practiced move, Scurry bolted two steps forward—in violation of the rule—and cut off the angle for Liu Ying, her opponent. With superb reflexes, Scurry then dived to her left and tipped Liu's shot wide of the goal. That one stop would shortly give the U.S. the championship….Scurry's position was staked out soon after the final game when she told The Los Angeles Times: 'Everybody does it. It's only cheating if you get caught.'

(Vecsey, 1999, p. 13)

The significance and importance of character are hardly an arguable point. Although this point is not empirically based, it is so well established in society that it cannot (should not) be argued. The characters of persons, in conjunction with their personalities, make up who they are and how they act (Brody & Siegel, 1992). Additionally, who they are and how they act are important because the daily lives of people involve interactions with other people. Consequently, in all aspects of society—politics, business, education, relationships, religion, and entertainment—the character of individuals (along with their personalities) plays a significant role in influencing the nature and quality (positive or negative) of human interactions. A person's character is indisputably an important part of who a person is and how that person interacts with others.

However, while character is often exalted, discussed, and studied, it is rare when people can agree to what character actually is. People can certainly agree that character is of the utmost importance. However, they will be just as quick to disagree on exactly what character is. So, what is character?

The numerous definitions of character come from a variety of sources—none of which are necessarily wrong. Philosophers have tended to define character from an esoteric perspective and have considered both life in general as well as a person's behaviors and actions. For example:

The shortest and surest way to live with honor in the world is to be in reality what we would appear to be. All human virtues increase and strengthen themselves by the practice and experience of them.

(Socrates)

What you're doing speaks so loudly that I can't hear what you're saying.

(Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Scholars often take a more theoretical perspective in defining character. Some refer to character as an internal state that is manifested in behavior (Bredemeier & Shields, 1995). This internal state guides decisions and actions while defining the qualities that make up a person's nature (Marrella, 2001). Bredemeier and Shields (1995) indicate that character is the inner dimensions of a person in which the processes of moral action become one's behavior. Brody and Siegel (1992) define character in terms of the sum of a person's moral qualities. Marrella (2001) believes a person of character seeks the truth, decides what is right, and has the courage and commitment to act accordingly.

According to some scholars, an effective and common way to discuss character, and what it is, is from a virtue and/or trait approach (Bredemeier & Shields, 1995).

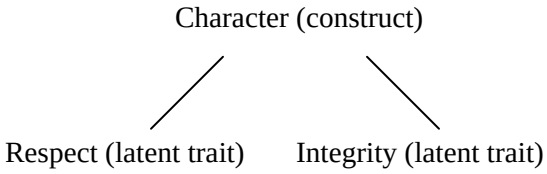
People with good moral character come to possess a wide range of virtues and are willingly disposed to act upon them both in their own long term interests as well as in the interests of others (Arnold, 2001). For example, a person of character displays traits of respect, integrity, honesty, responsibility, courage, compassion, fairness, and civility. Bredemeier and Shields (1995) describe sport character in terms of four virtues: compassion, fairness, sportspersonship, and integrity, and believe that the possession of these qualities or virtues facilitates the consistent display of moral action in sport (Bredemeier & Shields, 1995).

Within the sports world, many successful coaches have long personified and taught the virtues of character in sport. The legendary basketball coach at UCLA, John Wooden (Wooden & Jamison, 1997), addressed the importance of character and what character does for an individual by stating that "ability may get you to the top, but it takes character to keep you there" (p. 199). He also said, "be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your reputation is what people may think of you, while your character is who you really are" (p. 199). Mike Krzyzewski (2001) believes that a person's character is reflected in how he or she reacts to difficult and trying situations. Dean Smith, John Thompson, and Joe Paterno are other successful coaches at the intercollegiate level who stressed character development in their programs.

In the military, character is defined as how a person acts when no one is looking. In practice, this translates to what a person does—how he or she acts. The United States Army uses the following seven traits as the minimum acceptable standards of conduct and behavior—which define a person of character: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honesty, integrity, and personal courage.

To more accurately define character, it is helpful to breakdown it down (as with any psychological construct) into the latent traits that reflect the construct (see Figure 1). The author's view is that a person of character displays behaviors that show respect and integrity in a sport setting (or a lack of character if the behaviors are disrespectful or lack integrity).

Figure 1. A Model for the Construct of Character.



Definition of Latent Traits

Simply put, we did not respect them, and you cannot do that.

> (Vladislav Tretiak, goaltender for 1980 USSR ice hockey team, commenting after losing to Team USA in the 1980 Winter Olympics, "The Miracle On Ice." This win by Team USA is considered one of the biggest upsets in the history of sports and is partially attributed to Team USSR not respecting Team USA or giving them even a remote chance of winning.)

Respect is how you treat and regard others. Respect is a verb; it is something you do or fail to do. Respect is "to feel or show deferential regard for others" (American Heritage Dictionary, 1982, p. 1052). It is the regard for the fundamental worth and dignity of every human being (Marrella, 2002). Many people refer to respect as "The Golden Rule." "Respect is not something one can imitate, but something one must embody…a person has a disposition to act with respect, it is only in the individual acts of respect that the quality becomes actual….respect is maintained by the respectful acts of individuals" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000, p.10).

These definitions include respect for teammates, opponents, fans, coaches, and referees. Examples of respectful behaviors include shaking hands, helping a teammate or opponent, and listening. Behaviors that show a lack of respect include taunting, trash talking, yelling at a coach or referee, cheating, or running up the score against an inferior opponent.

Fraleigh (1994), McNamme, and Parry (1998), and Shea (1996) argue that respect in sports primarily means how an athlete approaches both the game and his/her opponent. A lack of respect would be "treating one's opponent as a mere means to the goal of victory….the objectification of opponents" (Fraleigh, 1994, p. 86). One research participant stated, "I am so rotten that I have total disrespect for the guy I am going to hit" (Fraleigh, 1994, p. 85).

Integrity refers to doing what is right in word and deed. It is a "steadfast adherence to a strict moral or ethical code" (American Heritage Dictionary, 1982, p. 667). If a person is doing and/or saying what is "right," he or she is acting with integrity. This definition of integrity also includes, but is not limited to, not lying, cheating, or stealing. Integrity entails a sense of duty or doing what an individual is supposed to be doing , that is, being responsible. In a sport context, this definition of integrity includes being on time to a practice, being prepared for practice, obeying a coach's instructions, and giving one's best effort in practice and games.

Delettre (1971) powerfully and succinctly addresses integrity in a sports setting in this way: "competing, winning, and losing, in athletics, are intelligible only within the framework of rules which define a specific competitive sport. A person may compete at a game or cheat at it, but it is

so logically impossible for him to do both. To cheat is to cease to compete. It is for this reason that cheaters are the greatest failures of all in competitive athletics, not because of any considerations of winning or failing to do so, but because they fail even to compete" (p. 136).

Although there will always be healthy debate as to what virtues make up a person of character, some traits appear to be universal. In a 1996 State of the World Forum at the Institute for Global Ethics, involving over 250 participants, representing 40 countries and more than 50 different religions, a survey found that truth, compassion, responsibility, freedom, and reverence for life were considered the "most important values in daily life" (Marrella, 2001, p. 11). Additionally, from a practical perspective, the business of the world (economics, travel, government, education, foreign affairs, etc.) could not function properly if such universal traits as responsibility and truth did not exist. In a sporting context, contests could not be played if there were not a fundamental expectation (responsibility) that the participants would follow the rules and regulations that govern the sport.

A person of character displays behaviors that show respect and integrity (or a lack of character if the behaviors are disrespectful or lack integrity). The definitions of character addressed above all speak to an action or behavior—a person's character is revealed through his or her behavior. This theoretical position is contrasted with a statement of belief or an attitude, which is not the same as an action. A person may think one way, but act another. Skinner (1971) reports that people behave in certain ways because they possesses a philosophy, and we thus infer the philosophy from their behavior.

Moral behavior is often, but not necessarily, the result of moral reasoning. The link between behavior and reasoning is a topic of much scholarly research. Thoma (1994) states that there is a clear link between moral reasoning and moral behavior. Rest (1979, 1986) does not believe that moral judgment and morality necessarily correlate with character or behavior. He, like most, believes that behavior is determined by numerous complex factors, and that moral reasoning and judgment only play a small role in the explanation of moral behavior. Lickona (1991) argues that good character is a result of feelings and cognitive processing. There is certainly a moral reasoning component to moral behavior.

However, in sports, participants' behaviors are often instinctive and instantaneous. Sports are highly emotional, physically stressful, fluid, involve uncertain situations, and are often aggressive. Time for moral reasoning and cognitive processing often does not exist in sports. Athletes often just act and the reasons for their behavior are many. But when they do act, that behavior is a reflection of who they are.

The author concurs with Skinner's (1971) belief that a person is responsible for his or her behavior because there are consequences for good and bad behaviors. Individuals can and should control themselves in accordance with a built-in set of values. There is a significant level of personal responsibility to a person's character, which is revealed in his or her behavior. If a person's *behavior* does not reflect his or her character, then this individual is not being true to his or her values, and lacks character. An individual's attitude and beliefs are important, but actions are more important. An individual's behavior is of his or her choosing. He or she can or should not shift the responsibility elsewhere.

Character Development and Participation in Sports

With the incredible popularity of sports worldwide, character development is (and should be) a part of the sport experience—at the youth, collegiate, and professional levels. According to Piagetian theory, a benefit of physical activity is that an individual's psychological processes and structures will grow (Bredemeier & Shields, 1995). Sport is a reflection of the value trends occurring in society. Sport is an environment that symbolizes cultural values and is a medium

through which young people learn about and experience many of the core values of our society (Bredemeier & Shields, 1995). These experiences are a major part of *their* character development.

Sport does not build character. Character can be taught and learned in a sports setting. A sport experience can build character, but *only if* the environment is structured and a stated and planned goal is to develop character. This kind of environment must include all individuals (coaches, administrations, parents, participants, etc.) who are stakeholders in the sport setting. Coakley (2001) has recommended a sports setting where participants are rewarded more for how they play, sportsmanship, rather than for winning and losing. Hellison (2003), Parker, and Stiehl (2004) clearly believe that positive character traits (such as personal and social responsibility) can and should be taught and learned in a sport or physical activity setting. Sport programs at all levels can be specifically designed to develop both an active lifestyle and positive character traits (Alberts, 2003). The goal in these settings is that appropriate and responsible behaviors and values that are developed in sports and physical education classes will also be used outside the school, in the home, and out in the community (Parker & Stiehl, 2004).

Additionally, Bredemeier and Shields (1995) point out that with proper methods of teaching and coaching, and an emphasis on character development, sport and physical activity *can be* an appropriate venue for character development. Hellison (2003) supports this position and runs his after school sports programs in Chicago for at-risk youth with just such goals in mind. Sports programs at any level have the *potential* to develop character.

However, *positive* character building is not inherent to sport participation (Gerdy, 2000; Hellison, 2003). Athletes, especially on team sports, tend to score lower on character tests (Krause & Priest, 1993; Beller & Stoll, 1995; Dunn & Dunn, 1999). George Sage (personal communication, May, 2004) believes that sport in America has reached a "crisis" point and that most athletes' sports experiences are detrimental to their character development. The majority of the research reports that there is a *negative* relationship between participation in sports and character development (Krause & Priest, 1993; Dunn & Dunn, 1999; Silva, 1983; Beller & Stoll, 1995; Bredemeier & Shields, 1984a, 1984b; Bredemeier, 1995; Hahm, 1989).

Summary of Research on Character in Sport

A longitudinal study by Krause and Priest (1993), from 1989-1993 at the U.S. Military Academy found significant differences between individual and team sport athletes in moral reasoning and moral behavior. Their longitudinal study of the USMA Class of 1993 showed a decrease in ethical value choices over a four-year period. The results showed that on their entrance to USMA, as well as just before graduation, intercollegiate team athletes scored lower on the Hahm-Beller Values Choice Inventory (HBVCI) than other athletes, including intercollegiate individual-sport and intramural-sport participants. The findings confirm the observation of Miller and Jarman (1988) that team sports and individual sports have different ethical climates (Krause & Priest, 1993).

Beller, Stoll, and Calmeiro (2004) used a Portuguese version of the Rudd-Stoll-Beller-Hahm Value-Judgment Inventory (RSBH-VJI) with 238 (87 male, 151 female, mean age = 16.93) student athletes. Besides attempting to validate a Portuguese version of the instrument, they report, in concurrence with other findings in this area, that athletes scored lower than non-athletes, and that males scored lower than females.

Beller and Stoll (1995) also sampled 1400 high school students using the HBVCI. Their results showed that non-athletes used a significantly higher reasoned approach to moral dilemmas in sport as compared to their team and individual athlete peers. Beller and Stoll also take their results a step farther by emphasizing an on-going problem with education in a sport setting. Coaches and parents say they are teaching respect and fair play, but the results do not show it. If

coaches and parents are using sport as a venue to develop character in young athletes, and many say they are, either they are teaching and modeling the wrong behaviors, or the kids are not learning (Beller & Stoll, 1995).

Rudd and Stoll (2004) used their RSBH-VJI to compare college athletes to non-athletes in an attempt to understand the effects of sport participation on moral and social character. Their participants were 595 college students across all levels of sport (Division I, II, III, NAIA, n= 370) and those that considered themselves "non-athletes" (n= 225). Their results showed that non-athletes scored significantly higher on the moral character index. Further, individual sport athletes scored higher than team sport athletes, and females scored higher than males.

Bredemeier and Shields (1985) interviewed 120 high school and college athletes and non-athletes to determine if they differentiated in their moral reasoning and behavior between on and off the field of competition. Their results indicated that most of the students clearly perceived there was a difference between how one acted in sport and in everyday life. Behaviors that would be unacceptable in everyday life were deemed acceptable in a sports setting. Both groups used a lower level of moral reasoning for sport related activities. Participating in an athletic competition lowered their moral judgment. One respondent went so far as to say, “when you’re on the field, the game is football, before and after you deal with people morally” (p.32).

Hahm (1989) studied over 400 college age students from America and Korea on their level of moral reasoning and moral behavior. The purpose was to determine the difference in moral reasoning and behavior between athletes, students studying physical education, and the general student population. The HBVCI and the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1979) were used to indicate the level of moral reasoning of the sampled students. The results were “frightening in that physical education majors and student athletes had significantly lower scores than general students on moral reasoning and had less principled moral thinking than general students” (p.1). Again, athletes displayed lower moral judgment than did non-athletes.

Goeb’s (1998) study of levels of moral reasoning and behavior was similar to Hahm’s (1989) in that he used the HBVCI with 56 coaches and 366 student athletes from a Division II school. No significant differences were found between coaches and athletes; and no significant differences were found between individual and team sport athletes. These results differ from what Krause and Priest (1993) found. The difference may be explained in that the Krause and Priest study used Division I athletes and Goeb’s study used Division II athletes. The research does show, as with most research in this area, that as the level of competition goes up, the level of moral reasoning and moral behavior goes down.

Results of other studies, which follow, did not look specifically at character in sport, but did investigate deliberate rules violations and/or aggression in sport—both of which are behaviors that can be interpreted as a lack of character.

Silva (1983) investigated 203 undergraduate and graduate students (male and female, some athletes, some not) in an investigation of their reaction to slides depicting different rules violations in sport settings. His results showed that males who participated at higher competitive levels for longer periods of time were more likely to legitimize rule violating behaviors. Other types of rules violation, such as deception, dishonesty, and the display of intense anger, were condoned and supported by these participants. Silva also found that females were less likely to accept or participate in overly aggressive or violent behavior than males.

Dunn and Dunn (1999) studied 171 young (M = 13.08 years) elite hockey players and found that they become so focused on the end result of their sport experience that their moral concerns about the means of achieving those ends often declined. Athletes were delineated in two ways: (1) the ego oriented, or more focused on themselves, the end result of their participation in sports, or comparing themselves to others; and (2) the task oriented, or more focused on simply becoming a better player. Results suggested that high ego orientation may

have a detrimental effect upon an athletes' moral reasoning in sport when the players' needs to maximize their superiority over their opponents become more important than the competition itself. These findings supported the notion that the ends justify the means; or a "win at all costs" goal, rather than providing evidence of character building through sport.

Morgan, Meier, and Schneider (2001), in *Ethics in Sports*, are convinced that sports builds character because "it is competition, physical, and emotionally demanding, and it pushes people to the limits" (p. 5). But, the issue is, what kind of character—good or bad?

Does an individual's sport experience make up the totality of his character development? Obviously not! As many scholars and researchers on moral/character development have shown, character development is a lifelong, holistic process that is primarily influenced by contextual variables throughout a person's life. But if sport is part of a young person's life, then the sport experience will influence his or her character development—and hopefully in a positive way.

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