

Three Strikes and You're Out: Reasons to Eliminate Sports from Schools

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The overgrowth of sports in our society has resulted in a host of potential problems for the young athletes who associate with the sport culture found in schools. Although the positive elements of sports are routinely touted, the negative aspects are oftentimes overlooked or trivialized. Most of the positive personal and social aspects attributed to sports are unproven, overstated, or subverted by the culture of sports as it exists today. Sport culture creates understandings of the world and self that are frequently at odds with the civic mission of schools in a democratic society. The essay proposes that sports be taken out of schools due to the deleterious effects they have on the moral, physical, and social development of youth.

There is no denying that sports influence youth in today's society, and that the culture of sport reaches deeply into many aspects of young peoples' lives. Sports are firmly ensconced in almost all institutions of education and at every level save the early primary grades. It would be difficult to find a junior high, middle school, or high school without numerous opportunities or pressures to participate in sports. There tends to be an increasing significance and emphasis placed on the meaning and importance of sports as students move through school and the privileging of athletes in schools across the country only makes more transparent the valued position of sports in educational environments. The importance of sports in education stems from the overgrowth of sports in society and has resulted in a host of real and potential problems for the young people who associate with the sports cultures found in schools. Although the positive elements of sports are routinely touted, the negatives are glossed over and dismissed. This paper contends that most of the positive claims of sports are unproven, overstated, or subverted by the culture of sports as it exists today. The paper also proposes that sports culture creates understandings of the world and self that are at odds with the mission of schools in a democratic society. For these reasons, it is suggested sports be removed from schools.

Strike One: Character

Research indicates that there is no empirical evidence to suggest that participation in sports positively builds or enhances character, and the claims of sports being linked to leadership skills, positive moral development, and good citizenship appear to be without foundation. (Frey

& Eitzen, 1991; Ogilvie & Tutko, 1971). There is, however, research that has examined the relationship between sports and the moral reasoning needed to understand ethical principles and to act virtuously (Stoll & Beller, 2000). According to interviews with 40,000 athletes, prolonged participation in sports in high school and college leaves many adults with moral reasoning typical of junior high school students, i.e., athletes become stuck in the lower developmental stages of moral reasoning. According to this research, sports create a “moral callousness” among those who participate, with an increased callousness among those involved in team sports. This insensitivity has especially affected female athletes’ moral reasoning skills, which have been steadily eroding over the past 10-15 years. Studies have consistently found negative correlations between length of time spent playing sports and demonstrating sports conduct such as playing fair, being respectful and being non-threatening. One of the reasons this degradation or stagnation in moral reasoning might occur is that sports do not consistently offer athletes opportunities to reason or act at the higher stages of two widely accepted moral orientations--care and justice. It has been suggested that female athletes are being socialized into a commodified model of social interaction that permeates the sport culture. Prolonged exposure to this culture replaces caring for others with a self-serving ethic that privileges sentiments such as: “What’s in it for me”; “Whatever it takes to win”; “What someone in authority tells me is right”; “I have little of no concern for others”. (Beller & Stoll, 1992).

Sports may militate against the attainment of higher levels found in these two moral orientations primarily due to the nature of intense prolonged competition and the pressure of coaches, parents, and peers on athletes to win. If one looks to sports with an aim to discern evidence of a principled or caring ethos one will find a “perverted” sense of the modality due to sports being framed by competition and lacking a clear moral imperative. In sports, it is the outcome, the winning or losing of the event, that frames most ethical choices, actions, and the moral reasoning associated with the action. One cannot care about, or for, the other team; in fact, one is likely to be insensitive or hostile to it. Even caring for one’s own teammates must be tempered by the latent competition that exists among members of a team—there is always the danger that one of your teammates could take your place. Justice or fairness for the opponent is rarely pursued on the field, since keeping a relative advantage is the key component to winning. Justice and fairness certainly become issues if a referee or umpire on the field is accused of

making a “bad” call that leads to a change in advantage, but justice, care, and fairness as principles guiding the game are rarely observed.

In classrooms, an ethos of care or justice can easily exist or be instantiated in the daily interactions among all members of the school as part of its mission. Both the actual and hidden curricula are concerned with establishing, among other things, notions of caring for others, being fair, building character, and acting in a principled manner. Some schools have been created to explicitly incorporate caring and justice principles in the running of the school and classrooms in the form of community awareness and service learning.

If sports cannot be counted on to strengthen moral reasoning, and, according to studies, seems to be corrupting the moral sensibilities of youth, why are they afforded such high status in schools? Any other activity that was shown to injure the moral fiber of students would be eliminated from schools. If data suggested that participating in the debate club at school contributed to a lowered ability to act or reason morally, there would be no debate club. If the debate club offered anecdotes claiming that participation built character, there would be calls for proof. Proponents of sports offer evidence suggesting that athletes receive better grades and do not drop out as proof of sports’ positive influence, but it cannot be shown that these phenomena are correlated to participation in sports. In a recent study of the eighteen values that athletes associate with playing sports it was found that the number one value athletes derive from playing sports is public image: the largest percentage of athletes rated the choice “I look good” as the primary value they see in sports. Sportsmanship, captured by the descriptor “I am well mannered, sporting, and not a bad loser” came in next to last. (MacLean, 2008) With schools given more responsibility to address ethical and character issues it is unacceptable to expose young people to the negative influences found in prolonged sport participation. The alleged positive benefits of sports cannot be verified while the harmful effects are detected by research.

Strike Two: Identity

Schools, especially middle and high school, are important places and spaces for the creation of identity among young people. Sports have also become critical to many an individual’s sense of self. During the creation of identity in adolescents many factors come into play, such as the need for role models, ideals of masculinity and femininity, and the affirmation of defining traits such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and race. Cliques and peer groups

begin to exert more influence on the norms and values that the young person incorporates into the burgeoning sense of self. The type of identity that sports environments and competitive teams can cultivate is one that does not routinely value the critical thinking skills that lead to questioning authority, or criticism of an authority figure's decisions and actions. Sports impress upon individuals that their duty is to follow and accept the decisions of those in charge. Composing the self in a sport-dominated environment makes it possible for an individual to think it is normal to be comfortable and comforted by a binary world of us/them, with/against, win/lose, right/wrong; to dismiss gender equality on (and off) the field; to simplify situations rather than wrestle with their complexity; to value only the objective ends over the subjective experience.

The personal values and characteristics emerging from the norms of sports culture are more indicative of warrior identification than of citizen identification. The individual whose identity is primarily formed by the values and practices found in team sports is more likely to find exclusive practices, parochialism, and homogeneity more inviting than inclusion, cosmopolitanism, and multiculturalism. This individual is less likely to tolerate androgyny--the synthesis of masculine and feminine traits in an individual: male athletes involved in high profile team sports are often vocal in their refusal to tolerate the sexual crossing of borders, and their reluctance to respect those considered outside the team's norms and labeled "other." The warrior ethos created and valued in sports culture is one in which the individual or team competes against others for control and dominance. The athlete in school is being initiated into a tribal mentality that is captured to a large degree by Benjamin Barber in his description of tribalism that coheres around

"...a different set of virtues: a vibrant local identity, a sense of community, solidarity ... narrowly conceived. But it also guarantees parochialism and is grounded in exclusion. Solidarity is secured through war against outsiders. And solidarity often means obedience to a hierarchy in governance, fanaticism in beliefs, and the obliteration of individual selves in the name of the group. Deference to leaders and intolerance toward outsiders (and toward "enemies within") are hallmarks of tribalism—hardly the attitudes required for the cultivation of new democratic women and men capable of governing themselves."(Barber, 1992)

Schools are invested with a responsibility to help create the next generation of citizens preparing to function in a collaborative democracy. Citizenship requires students in schools be

educated in the theory and practice of working with those with whom they disagree in order to reach consensus; understanding and accepting other perspectives and realizing that the good life depends on cooperation with diverse populations--not competition against them; that critics and the opposing side are not enemies. The challenges of living in a democracy cannot be anticipated by lessons learned in competitive activities or unquestioningly following a prescribed set of plays. Sports encourage a zero sum mentality concerning one's interactions with others; a winner-takes-all framework places everyone in a hierarchy in which some are valued and others are not. Democracy requires that we understand when to cooperate with those outside our immediate circle and when to debate and maneuver, keeping in mind, above all, that we are all in this together.

It is important that sports culture and its values not be legitimized by the schools because students could take on, as part of their developing identity, the perverted sense of loyalty, discrimination, and heteronomous (looking to external authority to determine right and wrong) morality inherent in that culture. Citizens in a democracy need to achieve an identity that is informed by tolerance, discussion, justice, caring, and diversity of ideals. Proponents of sports would argue that the fraternal bonding which takes place on teams is a positive element that is not easily or as readily found in other activities. But that bonding is accompanied by an inability to see others in all of their humanity. The college where I teach, and I am sure, many others, highlights the sports culture and encourages the practice of having students identify with the college teams. I also see that people on my campus despise students at our rival college ten miles down the road, with an intensity that is usually reserved for those who have given grievous offense. I am sure that the feeling of detestation is reciprocated at the rival college. The unfortunate outcome is that students who are very similar to each other are unable to see their common humanity and value.

Sports are also held up as giving individuals opportunities to construct personal traits such as loyalty, commitment, and respect. When examining the construction of identity it is widely accepted among researchers that many young adolescents find themselves in a "foreclosed identity" (Marcia, 1966). Different identity statuses are described in terms of level of commitment to ideals and willingness or opportunity to explore alternative ideals. The foreclosed identity is characterized by strong commitments that do not come from reflection or experience, but rather handed down from parents, authorities, and the environment. The

foreclosed individual is more likely than other types of identity constructions to show “high levels of authoritarianism, stereotypical thinking, obedience to authority, and external locus-of-control.” (Kroger, 1993) The sports environment is ripe for engendering unquestioning adherence to a set of values, and if adolescents, throughout middle school, high school, and college, are persuaded by parents, coaches, and the media that the ideals and goals of sports are worthy of commitment it could undermine the process of exploring other ideals, leaving athletes in foreclosure; making it more difficult for them to create the independent and critical identity needed to sustain autonomous citizens in a thriving and healthy democracy.

Strike Three: Injury and Violence

Sports do more than corrupt the moral sensibilities and personal identities of young people; it is dangerous for the participants. During the 2005-06 season, high school football players sustained more than half a million injuries nationally (Center for Injury Research and Policy Columbus Children's Hospital, 2007). Serious injury and death occur every year among those high school and middle school athletes who play football, basketball, soccer, and baseball. “Football is the worst offender, but is not the only sport that poses risks for children and young adolescents. Soccer, considered by many to be a relatively "safe sport," and baseball, are responsible for thousands of injuries to young adolescents between the ages of 10 to 14 every year” (McElwain and Dickinson, 1996).

Looking at school sport injury statistics from the last few years puts the damage to human potential in perspective, especially when it happens within an institution that is supposed to be creating the next wave of physically and mentally healthy citizens. What other activity that resulted in even one mortality a year would be tolerated in schools? And yet, every year, young people suffer concussions, broken bones, severe injury or even death playing a school sponsored sport.

Steroid use among high school athletes has risen dramatically -- so much so that New Jersey Governor Richard Codey recently issued Executive Order #72, establishing a program of random and thorough testing for steroid use among high school athletes, in an attempt to stop this abuse of the body and sport.

Closely connected to the inherent danger in sports is the violence associated with sports. Sports contribute to the violence in young people's lives—psychological, emotional, and physical. The models of violence most commonly found are:

- 1) fighting due to the stress of the game. Fights can quickly turn into mob attacks such as the recent Miami-FIU football game that became the scene of a 20 minute brawl involving almost all of the players on both teams. Players fought, cleated one another, and attempted to render some players unconscious by beating them about the head. Police had to be called to restore order.
- 2) initiation into the group. Hazing violence which lets one join the team-- such as the three Rancho Bernardo high school baseball players at who pleaded guilty to sodomizing a freshman teammate with a broom handle. The students said that varsity team members would routinely threaten to sodomize first year players as part of the team's hazing ritual.

A quick internet search will uncover scores of similar incidents. The question is not whether violence is endemic to sports, but rather why it is increasing in intensity and scope and the effect this will have on young people. Violence, as a condition of playing sports, is being pushed into the lives of our younger athletes under the guise of striving for excellence; proponents of intensive training and pressure argue that coaches and parents need to push young athletes hard in order to help them achieve their potential. This can result in excessive training, verbal abuse, and failure to provide proper care in the "heat of the game." Coaches have a special relationship with their athletes and "it is generally accepted that coaches can humiliate, shame and derogate athletes to push them to be the best they can be. Athletes are expected to respond to humiliation by being tougher competitors." (Coakley, 1998)

In schools, as in society, sports are no longer primarily concerned with healthy competition, they are driven by, and legitimize, an ethos of domination. Etymologically, "competition" comes from the Latin *competere*, meaning "to seek together." In other words, the original goal of a competition was to work cooperatively so that opponents might seek the best in themselves while helping others reach their best. This seeking together implies mutual support, empathy, and fairness. Today sports are little more than opportunities for one person or team to

dominate another. The psychology of domination makes it necessary that others submit to your will. You do not dominate others by asking them to do something, you force them to do it—to dominate is to control. If a team or individual feels that the goal of sports is to dominate the other, then it makes little difference how that is accomplished. During a game the need to dominate can result in players fighting, cheating, ridiculing, and taunting.

Once domination and control become a part of sports, then any extension of sports will include those as legitimate means to an end. Fighting during or after a game is one way to show dominance, raping a younger team member is another. The feelings and actions centered on true competition should not lead to violence, while feelings and actions centered on domination will lead to violence. This might explain why so many aspects of sports are imbued with violence, when we examine the behaviors and attitudes coming from those players, coaches, and fans who have adopted a belief in domination, instead of an interest in athletics. Following the logic of domination, it makes sense that when a team is losing a game on the scoreboard, they will see no problem intimidating the opposition to show themselves and others that they, in fact, can dominate the team by other means—simply put—“If I can’t outscore you I can still physically intimidate you,” or “If you do something on the field or court I don’t like my first response is a violent one.”

If a school chess tournament were interrupted by the two teams brawling over the loss of one of the games, or if we witnessed five scholastic bowl tournaments in one year containing any hint of violence, these activities would be eliminated from the school’s curriculum for violating the school’s mission. Yet violence against student athletes by teammates, coaches, and competitors happens every day in sports. Why are sports condoned in schools? The overgrowth of sports in this country, and the adoption of the highly-competitive nature of sport as a guiding or normative element for social and interpersonal interactions for a generation of young people who are still developing their bodies, identities, and minds, is problematic. It is socially irresponsible that it happens in the institution that is charged with preparing democratic citizens. Competitive sports should be removed from the schools and parents and students should be given opportunities to critically reflect on the nature of sport.

Out--Game Over

I acknowledge the claim made by proponents of sport that athletic activities lead to good health and fitness-- so how do we ensure the positive aspects of healthy exercise in schools? Athletic Clubs would allow students to work with each other under the guidance of a coach to enhance skills, ability, and finesse. Examples of activities that could be considered athletic and achieve the health related goals that sports are used to address are dancing, diving, orienteering, biking, and Tai Chi. The athletic club, divorced from the competitive arena would promote the healthy benefits of athleticism without the negative influences of sports on the minds, emotions, and bodies of those in schools.

But the purpose of this essay is not to offer alternatives to sports as much as it is to question why sports continue to exist in schools when they have such a deleterious effect on so many young people's social, physical, and cognitive development. It is as though adults have collectively decided it is permissible to sacrifice the integrity of many children's lives in order to make sure that a small number of athletes have the opportunity to play the game in the hope of eventually playing at the college and professional levels. But it ceases to be a game when it damages or limits children's emotional, social, and psychological futures and therefore should not be housed in an institution that is supposed to prepare them for lives of possibility and promise.

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