

Developing Character through Sport/Athletic Participation

Submitted by: Kent M. Farley, Candidate for Master's Degree, USSA

“Sport develops character.” This statement is heralded as a positive purpose of athletic participation in sports programs on all levels. This is contrasted by daily media reports of grave misconduct at every level of athletics. Numerous studies have been conducted to answer the question: “Does sport build character?” No specific consensus has been drawn by these studies, but they have generated a great deal of debate.

Can sports participation result in positive outcomes in character development? Can the sport environment be modified or controlled to optimize positive outcomes? Character development is more than simply developing specific positive personal qualities. It needs to be holistic and synergistic. A person of character possesses positive qualities which can be applied appropriately to decisions and effective outcomes. Brown (2003, p.39) defines the process as “this is what we believe, so therefore, this is what we will do, and this is what will be seen.”

What kind of an environment is effective in developing character? Is there an opportunity/ability to make choices? Are these choices threaded with accountability - defined as agency? Are there consequences associated with agency? Does there exist a way by which a person/s can reflect/assess use of agency in the context of time and inherent consequences. Is there a means by which choices can be modified and/or corrected? Is the need for tension created between positive and negative choices present, and the potential of choices of good/better/best?

These possibilities exist within the sport environment. Often, the sport environment is viewed as unreal - as just a game. As Tod & Hodge (2001, p.309) state, “athletes’ perceive sport as different from real life.” Yet sports participation surpasses reading, discussions, and role playing environments because it is “experienced”, and sport provides spontaneity - situations are unplanned, unforeseen, and unique. Responses are based on the application of concepts, and accountability becomes real, mirroring the agency found in real life. Sports participation is valued because it mirrors real life in that psychological states are attached.

Sport provides ethos and context (Jones & McNamee, 2000). The pursuit of sport may well be unique in that the activity itself provides a logical connection to

morality, and the opportunity to reveal/produce numerous desirable qualities (Arnold 1994). Sports participation can reveal a person's positive/negative character traits. Sports can establish perceptions about what character is, and it can contrast virtuous behavior with non-virtuous behavior.

Axiology defines three dimensions of value: the highest being intrinsic - individual uniqueness; the second highest being extrinsic - comparison such as good/better/best; and third highest being systemic - fairness (Clear Direction, Inc., 2001). Athletics has the intrinsic value of being fun, the extrinsic value of competition/comparison, and the systemic value of rules/fairness.

Often, tension and imbalance exist between the dimensions (Clear Direction, Inc., 2001). This means an athlete may love to win, but have an obligation to play by the rules. A player may enjoy playing the game, but to continue to play at higher levels must train and gain self-mastery. An athlete may desire to win so badly that he/she finds ways to cheat.

A further application is that richness/balance can be applied to life (Clear Direction, Inc., 2001). Possibilities exist for developing character through steady improvement in all three value dimensions and by maintaining balance, individuals and society can gain greater richness. If a person can achieve greater value in one dimension and maintain balance, then the value gained may transfer to the other dimensions. An example is Coach John Wooden. He worked daily on his Pyramid of Success, which incorporates all the value dimensions to establish balance. Due to this lifetime of effort/progress, his life has greater intrinsic value/individual uniqueness, greater extrinsic value through numerous accomplishments, and greater systemic value through fairness and honesty. Because he has maintained balance within the dimensions, his influence continues. An upward spiral in the attainment of character is gained through this process.

As the level of play becomes more elite, tension in the extrinsic dimension increases, with focus being on winning and self-improvement. Studies often show conflicting results about character development via sports participation, including positive moral and social character for youth participants (Fullinwider, 2006). Other studies show increases in social character and declines in moral character at more elite levels of sports participation (Stoll & Others, 1995; Rudd & Stoll, 2004). These studies seem to conflict, but an axiology application would be that through sports participation, initially, an athlete gains experiences in her/his uniqueness (intrinsic), gains comparison experiences (extrinsic), and gains experiences in a system of rules/fair play (systemic). These values may be skewed as the level of

play becomes more elite through the loss of value hierarchy and balance. Chandler & Goldberg (1990) expressed this in the idea of the zero-sum viewpoint, where winning means everything and losing has no value - “zero-sum viewpoint provides individuals with a limited and fragile base on which to formulate a personal identity and sense of personal worth.”

Refinement through practicing the proper focus, which can shift from one value/concentration dimension to another, is the essence of developing character. Character is the application of personal qualities and principles within the appropriate level of focus cognitively, emotionally, and with the appropriate use of a value-applied system. Character development is the practice of getting it right. Sport teaches the value of practice and personal development besides providing a pseudo-environment, allowing for correction and modification within the bounds of “real life”. Choices are easier through proper concentration and practice.

“That which we persist in doing becomes easier for us to do; not that the nature of the thing itself is changed, but that our power to do is increased.” -Emerson