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Sportsmanship in Youth Sports

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Perspectives from Sport Psychology

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Sport psychology provides crucial insights for improving behavior in sports.

This article provides theoretical and practical information about sportsmanship in youth sports. The authors first define the concept of sportsmanship and discuss how competition influences it; then, a brief overview of the theoretical underpinnings of sportsmanship and relevant empirical findings from physical education and sport environments are provided. Next, the article reviews two recent initiatives, from Australia and the United States, that were developed and implemented to deal with recent behavioral issues in sport. Lastly, the authors make suggestions that can be implemented by today's practitioners to make their sporting environments better for all involved.

What is sportsmanship? In today's sporting culture, most people would find it difficult to give a clear definition of the term and would defer to the "I know it when I see it" approach. Unfortunately, to some youth sport participants, coaches, and parents, the practical application of the concept has been reduced to little more than the mandatory shaking of hands at the end of a game.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2003) defined the concept as the

set of behaviors to be exhibited by athletes, coaches, officials, administrators and fans (parents) in athletic competition. These behaviors are based on such fundamental values as respect, fairness, civility, honesty, and responsibility. (p. 15)

Taking the concept a step further, the NCAA's bylaws state that those associated with intercollegiate athletics must also abide by a code of ethical conduct that is defined as the

set of guiding principles with which each person follows the letter and spirit of the rules. Such conduct reflects a higher standard than law because it includes, among other principles, fundamental values that define sportsmanship. (NCAA, 2003, p. 15).

Shields and Bredemeier (1995) emphasize these values in their succinct definition of sportsmanship as the virtue of coordinating play with competition "in light of moral goals."

Competition and Sportsmanship

Competition is inextricably linked to sportsmanship. Psychologists distinguish between two "orientations" that people have toward competition: ego orientation and task orientation. Individuals driven by ego orientation choose to compete in order to

beat their opponents. Through winning, they seek to affirm and display their superiority. To individuals with strong ego orientations, winning is achieved by all means and at all costs, even if it means cheating or hurting their opponents. Other people are driven by task orientation. Competitors with strong task orientation concentrate their energies not on winning, but on the task at hand. These individuals choose to enter into competition in order to continually improve their skills. Competition thereby becomes a contest with themselves. They focus on setting personal performance goals that are part of larger goals. It should be noted that this line of research has demonstrated that both constructs exist simultaneously in individuals; however, the relative degree of each construct will vary (Sleek, 1996).

When ego orientation is dominant, sportsmanship takes the back seat. Unfortunately, today's sport culture, especially the model of professional sports, enhances this view of competition and thereby undermines the development of sportsmanship in young athletes. Among some selfish and self-absorbed professional athletes, gracious losers and winners are hard to find. Instead, attempts to cheat, taunting, and head butting are the norm. When youth sport participants are constantly exposed to such models, it is no wonder that they show little sportsmanship and respect for their opponents.

Research suggests that ego orientation is common among youth sport participants. One study, for example, found that 84 percent of teenage soccer players reported that they would deliberately foul an opponent to keep her or him from scoring (Raspberry, 1998). But is this a smart tactic, or is it cheating and unsportsmanlike behavior? Most people would probably agree that deliberate low blows in boxing, kicking a downed player in football and soccer, and spitballs and corked bats in baseball are wrong. The encouragement of "dirty play" by coaches, spectators, and parents is also considered by most people to be wrong. But hard-core believers of this view of competition argue that such behaviors are merely smart tactics and if participants "can't take the heat, they should stay out of kitchen." They argue that competition is a biological, innate drive that has to be fostered and promoted among youths. In his "Defense of Elitism," for example, culture critic William A. Henry, III (1995) laments how schools and other organizations avoid competitive sports and undermine the development of competitiveness by adapting challenges to individuals' ability levels (e.g., adjusting the height of basketball hoops to fit players' abilities).

But scientific evidence seems to refute Henry's contention. Murphy (1994) pointed out that using eight-foot-tall basketball hoops, or using narrower and shorter soccer fields, allows children to learn skills rapidly and receive useful instruction. This promotes task orientation—striving for task success and exceeding personal performance goals. Such a view emphasizes the coexistence of competition and sportsmanship, rather than their mutual exclusivity. Examples of this view do exist in professional sports. Cal Ripken, for example, is often cited as an athlete who symbolizes true sportsmanship because he

focused on mastering basic skills and achieving his personal goals. Fans responded by celebrating not only his competitive drive and physical prowess, but also his humility and respect for opponents. Michael Jordan is viewed and celebrated in the same manner. If these two great athletes succeeded in seamlessly blending competitiveness and sportsmanship, surely it must be possible in youth sports.

However, in the authors' view, the main obstacle is parents as spectators. Many parents fail to acknowledge that youth sports are not adults' recreation, but children's play (Iso-Ahola, 1980; Iso-Ahola & Hatfield, 1986). Many parents want their kids to win badly because their own ego is overly identified with their children's performances and because they envision future college scholarships and professional sport riches. As a result, they get so carried away that they even engage in fistfights with the opposing team's parents. A recent study by Goldstein and Iso-Ahola (in submission) found that over 50 percent of youth soccer parents became angry while watching their children's games. The idea that youth sport participants should enjoy the journey, rather than being judged by the final score, seems far removed from the minds of such parents.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that sportsmanship and friendly rivalries are easier for girls than boys. Recently, Paul Gilbert (2005), a girls' softball team coach, described how the girls on his team played to win, while maintaining good sportsmanship. His team had a "post-game ritual where the losing team would run over to the winners' dug-out, form a London Bridge-type tunnel, and pat the victors on the back" (p. 19). Gilbert stated that winning mattered to his girls, but they were not consumed by it.

Moral Development in Sport

From the perspective of sport psychology, the sphere of research that encompasses the key concepts of sportsmanship, ethics, and morality has been termed "moral development in sport." It is essential to make one further distinction at this juncture: moral education has been defined as the "deliberate and intentional activity of cultivating both moral growth and moral judgment" (Stoll & Beller, 1998, p. 22), whereas moral training involves conformity to the social norms of a particular group. Although specific programs may have different goals for moral education, most involve teaching children about moral principles and autonomous decision making in a manner that requires progressively higher moral reasoning. In general, this domain of research seeks to answer the age-old question: "Does sport build character or characters?" (Broun, 1941).

Theoretical Perspectives

Social cognitive theorists (e.g., Bandura, 1986) posit that moral development is a result of the internalization process of modeled and reinforced behaviors from significant adults, such as parents, coaches, teachers, and peers. More recently, Bandura (1991) emphasized the reciprocal nature of the relationship between individual differences (i.e., affective

reactions), environmental influences (i.e., group norms), and previous “moral” behaviors. Since morality is socially defined within the context of a given society, culture, or group, the perceived motivational climate that is put forth by leagues, clubs, coaches, and parents has had an increasing influence on children’s moral behaviors in sport.

Structural-developmental theorists (e.g., Haan, 1977; Kohlberg, 1969; Rest, 1984) recognize the influence of the environment and the individual’s psychological growth on moral development. However, they distinguish between a person’s moral cognitions (thoughts of right and wrong), behaviors, and reactions at a given point in time (moral content) and the evolution of the cognitive structure that organizes those processes (moral structure).

Kohlberg (1969, 1976) proposed that an invariant, universal sequence of moral developmental stages is divided into three levels. Individuals approaching moral problems through an individualistic or egocentric approach exemplify the pre-conventional level. Typical of young children, judgments of right and wrong depend on the anticipated consequences (i.e., “it’s cheating only if I get caught”). The conventional level is exemplified by individuals approaching moral problems through the orientation of gaining or maintaining the approval of significant adults and peers. Typical of most adolescents and many adults, judgments at this level are based on shared agreements, social norms, rules, and moral responsibility. The post-conventional level is exemplified by individuals approaching moral problems through the orientation of universal values that are not tied to any one society’s norms. Typical of many adults, judgments at this level are based on principles of justice (i.e., “playing within the spirit of the game”). An example of the latter is a defensive lineman who refrains from his coaches’ directives to use the legal, but aggressive, tactic of going after the opposing quarterback following his throw. Kohlberg proposed that moral education (i.e., the progression to the next level) was achieved by means of a moral conflict or disequilibrium and subsequent cognitive restructuring and assimilation.

Focusing on actual life simulations, Haan (1977, 1991) proposed an interpersonal alternative to Kohlberg’s model that was derived from three basic concepts: moral balance, moral dialogue, and moral levels. Moral balance refers to the need to balance the informal and unstated “give-and-take” of mutual rights, obligations, and privileges. Moral dialogue refers to the means of communication—direct, indirect, verbal, or nonverbal—used to express one’s needs, wants, and desires in order to maintain one’s perceptions of moral balance. Moral levels refers to the three developmental “phases” that are traversed as one’s moral reasoning goes from ego-oriented to society-oriented to principal-oriented. Haan’s model stressed the importance of social disequilibrium and inductive reasoning.

Haan also considered the role of the coping and defensive processes and their influence on the interpretation of environmental cues. Consider a scenario where parents are

watching a youth soccer game in which a defender makes a legal but hard tackle while their child is dribbling the ball towards the goal. If the score is tied and it is late in the game, the coping process may give way to the defensive process, especially if the parents place an emphasis on winning. Hence, while the parents’ logical analysis would have been that the child from the other team made a good defensive play, the parents may instead yell at the referee about a missed foul.

What are the psychological underpinnings of moral behavior? Rest (1986) and his colleagues proposed a four-component model of the processes that influence moral reasoning, moral thought, and moral action. The first component, moral sensitivity, involves using empathy and role-taking skills to accurately identify a situation as a moral one. The second component, moral judgment, involves choosing which possible courses of action are morally right and wrong. The third component, moral motivation, involves weighing the importance of the chosen action against various competing values. The fourth component, moral character, involves implementing a moral plan of action based on reasoning and intent. Developed as a framework for research and moral education, the model emphasizes the reciprocal nature of the relationship between each component. This theoretical framework demonstrates the important influence that coaches and administrators have in shaping sport environments that enable young athletes to learn the moral skills necessary to develop into not just better athletes, but also into better human beings.

Bredemeier and Shields (1994, 1996; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995) applied Rest’s model to the context of sports, expanding it so that each component included the influences of personal competencies (i.e., role-taking ability, moral-reasoning stage, achievement goal orientation, and social-problem-solving skills), social-contextual factors (i.e., goal structure, moral atmosphere, motivational climate, and power structure), and ego-processing variables (i.e., empathy, logical analysis, sublimation, and concentration). By focusing on the interaction between contextual and personal variables, the model stresses the notion that deficiency in any number of variables may result in moral failure in a situation. Given the complexity of the paradigm, it is easy to see that it will take some time for researchers to examine the interplay between the multitude of variables that compose this model.

Empirical Studies

In a field experiment at an instructional sports camp, Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, and Shewchuk (1986) examined the improvement in children’s moral reasoning during a six-week program. Children (ages 5-7) were randomly assigned to one of three groups (social learning, structural developmental, and no-treatment [rule compliance]) whose instruction centered on such themes as fairness, sharing, aggression, and justice. The results indicated that while there was no significant change in the control group from pre- to post-intervention, the moral reasoning in both experimental

groups increased significantly. Thus, children as young as six and seven years of age were shown to benefit from moral development interventions.

In an experiment that took place in a public school physical education class for fifth graders (ages 10-11), Romance, Weiss, and Bockoven (1986) examined the effects of an eight-week structural developmental curriculum on life and sport moral reasoning. The experimental group discussed issues related to moral dilemmas, stressing the rights and responsibilities of the students in the group. The results indicated a significant improvement in both types of moral reasoning for the experimental group, while the control group had a slight decline in their ability to morally reason. The post-treatment measurements indicated that the experimental group scored significantly higher in both types of moral reasoning and was observed exhibiting more prosocial and fewer antisocial behaviors than the control group.

In a series of studies, Gibbons and her colleagues (Gibbons & Ebbeck, 1997; Gibbons, Ebbeck, & Weiss, 1995) evaluated a Canadian initiative, Fair Play for Kids. The program was based on five principles: (1) respect the rules, (2) respect the officials and their decisions, (3) respect your opponent, (4) give everyone an equal chance to participate, and (5) maintain your self-control at all times. In the first study, fourth through sixth graders were assigned to one of three curriculum groupings: fair play in physical education and classroom, fair play in physical education only, and no fair-play curriculum (control group). The results showed that both treatment groups scored significantly higher on four measures of moral development than the control group, but no significant differences were found between the two treatment groups. In the second study, Gibbons and Ebbeck (1997) examined the impact of different instructional strategies on the learning curve of children. The subjects (fourth through sixth graders) were assigned to one of three conditions: a social-learning group, a structural-developmental group, and a control group. The results showed that both the treatment groups scored higher on three of the four measures of moral development at both three-and-a-half and seven months. Further, the structural-development group scored significantly higher on the fourth measure of moral development, moral reasoning, than either of the other groups. Taken together, the results of both studies indicated that the teachers fully embraced participation in the program. This suggests that an important component to an effective intervention is that the key change agents (in this case, the teachers) must “buy into” and see the benefits of such an endeavor.

At the high school level, the Sport for Peace program was implemented in six urban schools (Ennis et al., 1999). Based on Siedentop's (1994) sport education model, the curriculum used such techniques as team membership and leadership roles. It also aimed to teach conflict resolution skills, to create a sense of community, and to increase participation in the various programs. Using a three-phase qualitative methodology, the results showed an increase in students' activity involvement, regardless of skill level, and positive



Photo courtesy of the National Alliance for Youth Sports

Girls seem to practice good sportsmanship more readily than boys, according to anecdotal evidence.

social interactions that centered on themes of trust, responsibility, and respect.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that using the essence of fair play and incorporating moral development initiatives (from either a social-learning or structural-developmental perspective) within the physical education setting can be beneficial to students, regardless of age. However, in most jurisdictions, school budget cuts have precluded students from participating in these types of activities for more than two 30-minute sessions in a week. Until this changes, most parents will continue to seek sources for their children's physical activity from extracurricular organizations. Hence, the next section of research reviews the moral development initiatives that have been instituted both within and outside of school-sponsored programs.

Research on Moral Development in Sport

In one of the first studies to examine the relationship between children's level of moral reasoning and prosocial (sports-

manlike) behaviors, Horrocks (1979) asked fifth and sixth graders to respond to a hypothetical dilemma from daily life and sports. Additionally, teachers rated the children on such behaviors as sharing, taking turns, and adhering to the rules. Moderately strong relationships were found between moral reasoning and prosocial behaviors.

Using two junior high school basketball teams, with one serving as a control group, Wandzilak, Carroll, and Ansoorge (1988) implemented a season-long (9-week) moral development program that incorporated a mix of social-learning and structural-development strategies. The experimental group spent time during team practices discussing basketball-specific moral dilemmas, the meaning of sportsmanship, and examples of good and bad prosocial behaviors. The results indicated that only the players in the experimental group showed significant gains in moral reasoning and sportsmanship, when compared to the pre-intervention measurements of those variables.

At the United States Military Academy, a common-sense intervention was introduced to the school's intramural program based on good and bad behaviors that transpired during the program's basketball games. The West Point Fair Play Project (Butler, 2000), a four-year longitudinal study, required that participants attend a fair-play workshop that focused on issues of respect and used observed scenarios to stimulate group discussions. In addition, during their games, teams were awarded bonus points depending on their fair-play behaviors. These bonus points were combined with points accumulated from the teams' win-loss record to create a composite score. As a result, the league championship was not always awarded to the team with the most wins. As was expected, the results showed improved sportsmanship behaviors throughout the program. This type of moral educational program and behavior-based, incentive scoring system could easily be replicated in most recreational sport leagues.

From a social-psychological perspective, Vallerand and his colleagues (Vallerand, Briere, Blanchard, & Provencher, 1997; Vallerand, Deshaies, Cuerrier, Briere, & Pelletier, 1996) sought to define the construct of sportsmanship and to create a valid measurement instrument. The researchers collected definitions and examples of sportsmanship from one group of athletes, combined the themes into 21 scenarios, and had them rated in terms of sportsmanship by a larger group of athletes. Factor analysis revealed the following five dimensions of sportsmanship:

1. "Full Commitment" refers to a respect for personal improvement through maximal effort and recognizing one's mistakes as a learning opportunity.
2. "Social Conventions" refers to an athlete's respect for the sport and his or her engagement in prosocial behaviors within the competitive sport context.
3. "Rules and Officials" refers to an athlete's respect for, and willingness to abide by, the rules of the sport and the officials who enforce them.
4. "Opponent Dimension" refers to the level of respect

and concern an athlete holds for his or her opponent.

5. "Negative Approach" refers to the extent to which an athlete reacts negatively to his or her sports participation (i.e., "After a competition, I use excuses for a bad performance").

Based on this multifaceted construct of sportsmanship, Vallerand et al. (1997) developed the Multidimensional Sportspersonship Orientation Scale (MSOS). Although the scale's construct validity has been questioned (Bredemeier & Shields, 1998), several studies have found that, with the exception of the negative approach subscale, the measurement tool sufficiently meets the criteria for reliability (e.g., Ryska, 2003).

What Can Be Done?

How can youth sport environments be structured in ways that initiate and reinforce moral development and task orientation? A number of sport psychologists believe that today's children need greater opportunity to play "sandlot games" (i.e., to organize and adapt sports to suit the needs of all the participants). Recent cross-cultural studies have indicated that such situations are highly conducive to laying the foundations for creative problem solving, perseverance, and intrinsic motivation—qualities found in the champions of many sports (Côté, 2005; Salmela, 2005). Rather than having opportunities for sandlot-type play, today's children typically are coerced into playing scale-downed versions of adult sports that are organized, managed, and administrated by adults with little or no formal training in sports, recreation leadership, education, or youth development. As pointed out earlier, many of these adults hold a view of competition that emphasizes beating an opponent by any means necessary and at all costs. They are more concerned about their children's competitiveness than about sportsmanship and moral development.

A Lesson from "Down Under"

Citing the growing concern over the apparent increase in incidents of abuse and harassment, especially those directed at officials, the New South Wales (NSW) Minister for Sport, Tourism and Recreation in Australia initiated a pilot program aimed at stamping out "sport rage" on the regions' sporting fields (personal communication, August 2005). "Sport rage" encompasses the violence, bad language, abuse, and generally bad behavior by players, coaches, officials, and spectators (parents). In the 2004 winter soccer season, the Blacktown District Soccer Football Association (approximately 26 clubs and 2,000 families) partnered with the NSW Department of Sport and Recreation to test strategies to prevent and to deal with sport rage. The four-point program consists of the following components:

1. A positive behavior slogan, "Be a sport, just support," was displayed on banners at fields during the season.
2. Several sport-rage-prevention booklets were created and distributed to administrators, coaches, referees, and parents (available from <http://www.dsr.nsw.gov.au/sportrage/>).

3. Good-sport awards were given to the teams whose parents and players exemplified positive sideline and good-sporting behaviors.

4. Fun promotional days were conducted to reinforce the positive behavioral messages of the program.

From a legal perspective, clubs amended their by-laws to include conduct contracts for all active participants (players, coaches, and officials) and passive participants (parents and other spectators); these contracts outline policies and procedures for enforcement and appeal. From a logistical perspective, one of the interesting aspects of the program was the creation of the “game day ground official,” whose main responsibility was to intervene to stop breaches of the code of conduct and to promote the safety of the participants and spectators. While it was clear from the outset of the pilot study that volunteers in this position needed to be well-versed in the skills of dealing with difficult people in these situations, it became apparent that sport-specific conflict-resolution training was also needed. Based on the results of surveys (from coaches, players, parents, and administrators) and the decrease in the number of red cards (ejections), yellow cards (cautions), and sideline reports, the program successfully accomplished its goals. In February of 2005, the NSW Junior Rugby League adopted a similar program that included the distribution of 60,000 sport-rage-prevention booklets to parents and officials.

“Sports Done Right” in Maine

In an effort to radically reshape the youth sport culture, educators, student-athletes from the University of Maine’s College of Education, and others created an initiative entitled “Sports Done Right” (Maine Center for Sport and Coaching, n.d.). The program advocates that all levels of youth sport programs (youth, high school, and collegiate) should adhere to core principles in order to create an environment for children’s healthy development (physically, socially, and psychologically). The core principles (University of Maine, n.d.) recognize that

- sports is a means to teach and learn sportsmanship and essential core values such as discipline, respect, responsibility, fairness, trustworthiness, teamwork, good citizenship, positive competition, and the spirit of excellence;
- parents and the surrounding community are essential in creating and supporting the environment that can promote positive athletic experiences;
- coaches are the key to making the youth sport experience positive and educational;
- all students (below the level of varsity who meet eligibility standards) deserve the right to participate and learn through sport;
- the goal of sport participation should be to build self-confidence and to teach lifelong health and fitness routines; and
- athletic programs must be based on strong leadership, clear policies, adequate resources, and organization.

From a practical standpoint, the program attacks the per-

ceived problem on two fronts—the behavior of parents and the behavior of coaches. In each school-sponsored district, Sports Done Right is holding training sessions for parents to define “out-of-bounds” behaviors; it also requires the parents of each athlete to sign a “compact,” holding their future behaviors to higher standards of sportsmanship. In addition, the program is currently advocating the need for coaches to receive continuing-education classes in subjects like leadership, communication, and child psychology. Further, in an effort to counter the “professional model” of employing and compensating coaches for their win-loss records, the program recommends compensation based upon the coaches’ level of training.

Recommendations

To create a better environment for youth sports, the authors of this article suggest that providers of youth sports adopt the following practices:

- **Philosophy.** Require athletes, coaches, officials, parents, and administrators to adhere to such fundamental values as respect, fairness, civility, honesty, and responsibility.
- **Measurable Standards.** Require strict adherence to written policies and procedures related to sportsmanship and ethical conduct, and continually and aggressively communicate the policies and procedures to the participants, coaches, officials, parents, and administrators.
- **Education.** Provide sporting and ethical-conduct education to participants, coaches, officials, parents, and administrators. Resources that may be helpful in this process include Smith and Smoll (1990); Smith, Smoll, and Curtis (1979); Smoll, Smith, Barnett, and Everett (1993); and the Parents Association for Youth Sports (Bach, 2006; Eng, 1999).
- **Evaluation.** Undertake systematic and rigorous monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of sporting and ethical-conduct education efforts.

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