

The Values of Sports

By

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What do Henry Kissinger, Jack Welch, Condoleezza Rice, and Jon Bon Jovi have in common? Each credits sports with teaching lessons fundamental to their success.

We believe that sports are important because of the values that can be learned, including good sportsmanship, believing in others and learning that others can help us achieve more by being united than by acting on our own self-interest.

Yet, in past months, dozens of athletes have been in the news for steroid abuse, sexual assault, gambling, hazing, and phony admission standards. More and more we hear of those who question whether sports do teach positive character traits. NPR reported that obsession with sports actually retards boys' academic achievement. "*The Chronicle of Higher Education*" calls college athletes "ethically impaired." A scholar is evaluating how college athletes rate on moral reasoning.

Sports in the United States represents a \$400 billion market, almost as big as the retail food industry. Young people see the large contracts and bonuses a few athletes receive and dream of a chance at the pros. Yet, of about 500,000 high school basketball players, roughly 50 will make it to the NBA. The odds of a high school player becoming a professional in football are approximately 1 in 6,000. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), fewer than 2% of high school athletes will ever receive a college athletic scholarship. And only one in 13,000 high school athletes will ever receive a paycheck from a professional team.

In the face of these facts, there are major policy issues organized sports and their promoters must face at the professional level, at the college level, and in youth programs? In the pros, we must include "pay before performance" and performance enhancement. At the youth level, we should include equity and access, including over-emphasis on competition among six to eight-year olds, coaches acting like teams are incubators for the professional ranks, gender balance and race/ethnicity issues, and 11-year olds as "professionals." At all levels, we must be concerned about the influence of money.

We need to do a better job in managing the parents and coaches who press the limits. We need to tell the truth about Title IX and other attempts to advance gender and racial equity. Title IX has not caused the elimination of men's teams, and has been of great benefit to our sisters and daughters.

We need to influence media coverage, especially for NCAA Division I. We know that NCAA Divisions II and III generally have healthier practices overall toward student-athletes, yet are overlooked by the media, even in markets like Long Island where the

Division II student-athletes were lionized by the same media when they were in high school.

Some look at sports as a form of "worship," with stadiums as cathedrals and coaches and captains leading prayers to surpass their neighbors, even as church attendance declines. Do we promote a system with prayer in the huddle but foul play on the field? According to Donna Lopiano of the Women's Sports Foundation and Don McPherson of the Adelphi Sports Leadership Institute, most coaches are neither licensed nor certified. So those without training and without knowledge of best practices, are teaching our children without regard to a child's psychological or physical development.

There are some good examples of states, towns, and schools attempting to overcome the apparent "win-at-all-costs" mentality of school, college and professional athletics. One example is Nassau County's "Fair Play Agreement." Now, we need to address the ills of low graduation rates from college as well as obesity due to a lack of exercise in a nation obsessed with sports. It is ironic to have both this growing obsession and an epidemic of obesity among school-age youth.

We want to have hope that sports will in fact advance individual and group development for the good. Each of us, educators, parents, school board members, and collegiate boards of trustees must work to help ensure that sports are organized to achieve the maximum benefit for individual development, and that play does not lose out to primetime.