Intercollegiate Athletic Programs Deepening Their Educational Impact

Robert A. Bonfiglio suggests that a more explicit and systematic approach to moral development is necessary for the learning benefits of student participation in sports to match its claims.

By Robert A. Bonfiglio

For the past 20 years, I have been the “athletic direct report,” in the parlance of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. That means that I have been the direct supervisor of two directors of intercollegiate athletics at the two colleges I have helped lead as vice president for student affairs.

I have wanted to believe the athletic programs I have overseen have been educationally purposeful and aligned with our overall focus on student development. Nevertheless, I have been unable to extinguish the nagging thought that intercollegiate athletics in higher education falls far short of that ideal, and the reality is perhaps better depicted in Richard Bausch’s novel Thanksgiving Night, which states “how empty the highly touted values [sport] supposedly teaches actually are: if you don’t get caught, no penalty; if you get a chance to [do something] beyond the rules, take it . . . ” (p. 200).

So which is it? Are athletics a positive or negative educational force? The viewpoint widely shared across academe is that participation in intercollegiate athletics has a positive impact on students and contributes to learning and moral development. Often, this notion is captured in the phrase “character development,” a shorthand way to describe the individual development that stems from participation in athletics. To test this assumption, I have examined the literature of sport and student development for the relationship between participation in intercollegiate athletics and student development, especially as it pertains to the developing moral reasoning. In reviewing this research, a consistent theme emerged, exemplified in these passages from Sport Ethics, by Angela Lumpkin, Sharon Kay Stoll, and Jennifer Beller:
• “Moral reasoning research on (sport) is rather clear. It does not matter whether the athlete is a Division I athlete or Division III athlete. . . . It does not matter if the athlete is male or female, black or white, red or yellow. All competitive athletes are negatively affected in their ability to reason about ethical questions in sport . . . the need to win—for whatever price—appears to adversely affect the moral development of the competitor” (p. 66).

• Although many coaches and administrators state that they stress ethical play, research finds that little or no concentrated moral education exists in sport. (p. 200)

• A strong body of qualitative and quantitative research exists . . . supporting that the longer athletes participate in sport, the more their moral reasoning is adversely affected by the competitive experience. (p. 200)

• It would appear from the research that sport does not model, challenge, support, or teach the critical reasoning skills paramount to making good moral decisions (p. 200).

In addition to impacting on individual moral development, participation in intercollegiate athletics is also presumed to contribute to the development of leadership skills—another component of character development. The research in this area should also give us pause. How College Affects Students by Ernest T. Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini reports that no relationship has been found to exist between intercollegiate athletics participation and the development of leadership skills. It states, “Although the public in general, and collegiate sports backers in particular, may believe that participation in intercollegiate athletics promotes leadership skills, the jury is still out on this claim” (p. 247). They continue, “Contrary to widespread public opinion, intercollegiate sports appear to confer no advantage on athletes in terms of leadership skills . . . ” (p. 616). The findings described in How College Affects Students also mirror those of Lumpkin, Stoll, and Beller in reference to the lack of relationship between participation in sport and the development of moral reasoning.

Still other research studies have documented the lack of relationship between intercollegiate athletics participation and other forms of student learning and personal development. In “The Value of Educationally Purposeful Out-of-Class Experiences,” George Kuh, Megan Palmer, and Kelly Kish cite a study by Gregory Wolniak, Christopher Pierson, and Ernest T. Pascarella that concluded, “Participation in intercollegiate athletics has little impact on learning for self-understanding, preferring higher order cognitive activities and motivation for academic success” (p. 3).

Taken collectively, these findings are quite clear. As summarized by Andy Rudd and Sharon Stoll: “Since the early part of the 20th century, participation in American sport has been widely and strongly viewed as a vehicle for developing character. In response to this claim, researchers from a variety of disciplines have empirically tested the popular notion that sport builds character. Contrary to what many believe, results from these studies have suggested that sport does not build character” (p. 1).

If there is no causal influence between intercollegiate athletic participation and principled moral reasoning or behavior, leadership skills, self-understanding, motivation for academic success, cognitive development, or what we tend to describe as character, why do so many of us still hold onto the lofty ideal of collegiate athletic participation as an educational force? Perhaps there is a problem with how we define the impact of intercollegiate athletics. When we say sports build character, what do we really mean?
In *Character and Coaching*, John M. Yeager, Amy L. Baltzell, John N. Buxton, and Wallace B. Bzdell define character as “the formation of and action on universally desirable traits such as respect, responsibility, courage, moderation/balance, care and compassion, trustworthiness, generosity and humility . . .” (p. x). Traits, values, and skills that have been linked to good character, in addition to those cited above, are teamwork, sportsmanship, discipline, self-confidence, leadership, honor, communication skills, self-understanding, appreciation for diversity, patience, perseverance, and hard work.

Lumpkin, Stoll, and Beller have described how, taken together, these attributes form a categorical imperative for athletic participation: “A categorical imperative is a universally accepted maxim that holds regardless of the situation because it is based on undeniable moral principles.” They go on to offer the following categorical imperatives for sports:

- True sportspersons play to the best of their abilities within the letter and spirit of the rules (principles of justice, responsibility, and honesty).
- Seeking to win is acceptable only if the letter and the spirit of the rules are followed (justice and responsibility).
- An opponent is not the enemy but a worthy athlete deserving to be treated exactly as everyone would wish (responsibility).
- Retribution is never acceptable regardless of the unfairness or violence of the initial action (beneficence).
- Games are not played to intimidate; the ideal purpose is a mutual quest for excellence through challenge (justice and beneficence).
- Sportsmanship requires modesty and humility in victory, praise for winners, and self-respect in defeat (responsibility) (p. 67).

As this list of categorical imperatives shows, when we speak of organized sport as a mechanism for developing character, we are not merely referring to how athletic involvement impacts on individual lives, but the social context in which athletic competition takes place. Yet it is my sense that character in athletics is nearly always defined in terms of what it means for the individual, and not in a social context.

It is noteworthy that the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, the regional accrediting body for the institutions where I have worked, expects that “recreational, intercollegiate, and intramural athletic programs should be consistent with, and actively supportive of, the institution’s mission and goals and consistent with the academic success, physical and emotional well-being, and social development of those who participate.”

Rudd and Stoll point out the nature of the distinction between character development and social development:

> Despite [all] the well-published and disseminated research, we have continued to hear from coaches, parents, and the media that sport builds character or that athletes frequently display character. . . . From the character development literature, newspapers, media, and personal communications with coaches, parents, and the general populace we discovered that many individuals appear to define character from a social perspective rather than a moral perspective. Thus, many define character in terms of social values such as teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, work ethic, and perseverance which may be considered as “social character” as opposed to “moral character” which has been denoted by moral values such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility.

> . . . There is evidence from our study to suggest that sport may build social character, e.g., teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, work ethic, and perseverance which may be considered as “social character” as opposed to “moral character” which has been denoted by moral values such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility.

> Where, as educators, should we place our focus? Should we be content with the development in individuals of social values and skills that will serve
them well in life and help buttress their success, or should we be concerned with their individual moral development?

As I see it, education, and especially higher education, is unmistakably a moral endeavor. As Elizabeth Kiss and J. Peter Euben recently wrote for Inside Higher Ed, “The question is not whether colleges and universities should pursue moral education, but how. Moral (or perhaps immoral) education goes on constantly, if not always self-consciously” (p. 1). If we are seriously committed to the aim of building moral character, and not merely social skills, the athletic administrators and educational leaders who supervise them must be explicit about the direction of their programs. The question remains how to approach this ambitious aim. To consider this requires us to reflect on how moral development occurs and how organizations promote it.

Edward Shea has broken down the primary components of the process of character development in the context of sport in Ethical Decisions in Sport. Shea also describes the kinds of athletic programs that promote the development of individuals’ moral reasoning that leads to moral action. According to Shea:

1. The program must function under a sound educational philosophy, that is, competitive sports must exist as a means to an end, not as an end itself.
2. The program must function under competent educational leadership.
3. The program must be properly directed and controlled.
4. A high level of expectancy related to character development should permeate all phases of a structure which includes competitive sports (pp. 192–195).

As underscored by the research, few athletic programs are so intentionally designed, led, and implemented that they nurture the type of moral development equated with character development. Joseph Doty writes in “Sports Build Character??” “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” (p. 2). Therein lies our challenge.

Or, to paraphrase Carwyn Jones and Mike McNamee, while it is true that there is not a body of evidence that supports the idea that sport contributes to moral development, the ability of sport to cultivate moral virtues depends in large part on how sport is administered and coached (pp. 50–51).

Until we get it right, we may just be engaged in wishful thinking.

Notes