Most adults who played sports as children assert without hesitation or qualification that sports build character. Asked to identify the specific virtues that sports build, the majority identify virtues related to achievement, such as hard work and perseverance. Some mention social virtues, such as teamwork and unselfishness. Sports likely instill a work ethic and teach life lessons about persistence and teamwork (Shulman and Bowen, 2002), but whether they help to develop morality is a question that is rarely investigated or even asked. No one brings up justice spontaneously. In fact, when asked whether participation in sports taught them fairness and other moral virtues, such as honesty, most athletes and coaches scratch their heads. It is instructive to note that in a 2010 blog while still at the height of his celebrity, Lance Armstrong listed three traits to describe his character: strong, helpful, and optimistic. He never included justice or honesty. What does this say about the virtues that we tend to emphasize in sports and the consequences of losing sight of morality as a component of character?

DO SPORTS BUILD CHARACTER?

School and sport administrators typically justify the inclusion of sports as an extracurricular activity by claiming that they promote character as well as physical development. For example, when challenged to demonstrate whether interscholastic athletics had any educational worth, a committee formed by the New York State Public High School Athletic Association (NYSPHSAA), drew up “An Educational Framework for Interscholastic Athletics,” which recognized the teaching of virtue as the primary goal of sports participation (2001). The committee reaffirmed the NYSPHAA’s mission statement that interscholastic athletics are to foster “the quest for excellence” and promote high standards of “competence, character, civility, and citizenship” (NYSPHAA, 2001). The NYSPHAA is not alone in justifying sports programs as contributing to character development. The mission statement of the
Moral and Character Education Through Sports

National Federation of State High School Associations states that sports “develop good citizenship and healthy lifestyles.”

In spite of the pervasive belief, at least among administrators, that sports build character, there has been a dearth of empirical evidence to support the claim. Recently, several studies indicate youth sports may have a beneficial influence on indicators of Positive Youth Development (PYD) (e.g., Gano-Overway et al., 2009; Zarrett et al., 2009). Yet these studies also show that the sports experience can have negative effects as well. While there are studies showing that sports participation can prevent delinquency, there are other studies indicating that sports participation can increase it (Mahoney, Eccles, & Larsen 2004; Hartmann & Massoglia, 2007; Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Zarrett et al., 2009). As Bredemeier and Shields (2006) rightly assert, there is no univocal sports experience. Athletes’ experiences of playing sports vary widely depending on the particular sport they are playing, the competitive level, the coaching style, the influence of parents, and so on.

SPORTS ARE PLAY

Before we can begin to analyze the ways in which the sports experience can build character, we must take into account the fact that sports are by nature play and, as such, have a critical role in child development. Huizinga (1955, p. 13) provides what has become the classical definition of play as a fundamental expression of human freedom:

[Play] is a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious” but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.

Huizinga’s (1955) description of play as having the paradoxical quality of being “non-serious” but, at the same time, utterly engrossing captures sports at their best. Sports played well bring about pure joy and a release from the cares of everyday life. Play provides a wide range of cognitive, social, and emotional benefits to people of all ages, particularly to children (e.g., Elkind, 2007; Fisher, 1992; Pelligrini & Holmes, 2006). Piaget believed that through playing games, children developed a sense of fairness and understanding of rules. Initially, children find the rules of games to be arbitrary impositions that constrain their free play. Yet through the experience of playing games with their peers, children gain ownership of them as “the free product of mutual agreement and an autonomous conscience” (1932/1965, p. 28). Piaget found that as children become competent to make their own rules they base those rules on the “spirit of the game,” making new rules to make their games more challenging and fair. In observing how children play games, Piaget found a model for moral education. The teacher, he proposed, should act as a “collaborator” and not a “master” (p. 404). Masters impose rules and expect obedience, while collaborators make rules based on reason and reciprocity.

Piaget’s research has had surprisingly little influence on recent discussions of sports as a character-building activity. This may be because the games that Piaget studied, marbles and hopscotch, are more like children’s informal pickup games than organized youth
sports. Children’s sports experience has changed dramatically over the last 40 years as adult-organized sports have almost completely replaced informal, children-controlled games (Chudacoff, 2007; Coakely, 2009; Scarlett, Naudeau, Salonius-Pasternak, & Ponte, 2005). This dramatic alteration of children’s lives is not confined to sports alone. In fact, as Chudacoff (2007) and Gray (2011) among others have pointed out, children’s play in general has been on the decline to the detriment of their well-being.

Most of the enjoyment that children experience in playing games comes from the fact they control their activity. Once young children have mastered the basic skills of a sport, like soccer, and understand the rules, they easily become engrossed in devising strategies on offense and defense. Yet in organized youth sports, coaches typically take charge of the strategic element of the game while leaving only the execution of their decisions to the children. In such cases, it would be more accurate to say it is the coaches who are playing rather than the children. This leads to two unfortunate consequences. First, the enjoyment of the game diminishes and second, the cognitive value of the game is reduced. Research in social cognitive development (Selman, 1980), suggests that competitive games encourage children to take the roles of others and to coordinate roles in developing strategies involving multiple players. Evidence from the study of youth sports suggests that the more children are involved in their games, the more likely they are to develop the creativity and the mastery needed to excel (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007).

As Piaget found, games do more than help children acquire activity-specific expertise, games help children to develop a morality of cooperation in which they learn through direct experience not only how to compete but the value of playing by rules. In the marble games that Piaget studied, the children were responsible not only for their strategies but also for assuring that the rules of the game were upheld and enforced. In organized youth sports, adult officials, referees, and umpires are given that responsibility. Yet instead of respecting officials for ensuring fairness in games, coaches, even at the elementary school level, often angrily criticize officials in front of their players (Shields, Bredemeier, LaVoi, & Power, 2005).

Youth sports can never realize their character-building potential as long as adults control them. If children are to develop moral virtues through sports participation, character educators must address the fact that the adult-dominated structure of youth sports is inherently flawed. Ironically, adult control also undermines the development of athletic excellence because adult control creates a high pressured, authority-constrained environment that discourages the experimentation and innovation necessary in the development of great athletes (Coakley, 2009). Such an environment also undermines the single most important motivational factor in youth sports—love of the game itself. In their study of the factors that contributed to US Olympians’ success, Gibbons et al. (2003) found that the “love of the sport,” acquired in the early years when teaching and learning is “playful,” is, as Bloom (1985) discovered in his pioneering educational research, the foundation for later excellence (p. 32).

It should not be surprising then that self-determination researchers are finding that when coaches support children’s autonomy by giving them choices and power over making decisions, children enjoy sports more and experience greater intrinsic motivation (Conroy & Coatsworth, 2007; Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2007). Although moral educators (Power & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2008) and self-determination theorists (Ryan & Deci, 2007) argue that children and adolescents should be given greater power over decision-making to foster moral development and intrinsic motivation, coaches are sometimes
reluctant to yield much power over decisions about play on the field or discipline off
the field. Coaches tend to coach as they are coached, and few models are available that
emphasize fostering athletes’ autonomy by helping coaches to foster discovery learning,
ask good questions, organize team meetings, and facilitate democratic decision-making
(Beedy, 1997; Giancola, 2010; Power & Sheehan, 2012).

Coakley (2009) notes the rise of organized youth sports, which began in the postwar
years of the 1950s and 1960s and was fueled by the following factors: 1) the need for
supervised outside of school activities caused by the rise in the number of families with
both parents working outside the home; 2) a redefinition of what it means to be a “good
parent” that emphasizes involving children in structured activities with measurable
markers of success; 3) a rising concern that left on their own, children will get in trouble;
4) a belief that organized sports will protect children from the dangers of the world; and
5) the rise in wealth, status, and esteem attained by elite and professional athletes. These
factors combine to “professionalize” youth sports (e.g., Brower, 1979; Coakley, 2009).
Youth sport programs have become increasingly dominated by adults who have imposed
“big league” structures and expectations on children. Professionalized uniforms, fancy
scoreboards, elaborate rules for drafting players, growing numbers of spectators, and the
imperial presence of adult coaches have transformed children’s play into highly pres-
sured and carefully scrutinized work (see Farrey, 2008).

**CHARACTER OR “CHARACTERS” DEVELOPED THROUGH SPORT**

Shields et al. (2005) undertook a study of youth sport behaviors, which raised disturbing
questions about the character-building qualities of the youth sport experience today. In a
sample of children between the sixth and eighth grades, over one-quarter of the children
reported that during their past sports season their coaches encouraged them to retaliate,
angrily argued with a referee, yelled at a player for making a mistake, and berated
an opponent. Not only did children witness coaches misbehaving, but also their parents.
The same study revealed that spectator behavior was no better than that of the coaches.
Approximately 40% of the children in the sample reported that fans teased them and
their teammates; and over two-thirds of the children reported seeing fans angrily yell at
an official. Given that this study focused only on one sport season, we can only imagine
what children witness from adults over their entire youth sport careers.

In spite of the negative behavior that they witness, most children report that they
have fun playing organized sports. Many children report that participating in sports
-teaches them about teamwork and about getting along with others (Power & Seroczyn-
ski, 2013). Yet to date, there is no empirical evidence that participation in organized
sports develops moral judgment (e.g., Conroy, Silva, Newcomer, Walker, & Johnson,
2001; Shields, Bredemeier, & Power, 2002; Stoll & Beller, 2000; Weiss & Smith, 2002).
Cross-sectional research (Bredemeier and Shields, 1986a; Kavussanu and Ntoumanis,
2003; Proios, Doganis, Arvanitidou, Unierzyski, & Katsagolis, 2004; Stevenson, 1998)
indicates that increased athletic experience does not lead to higher moral reasoning. In
fact, some studies with college level athletes suggest that sports experience can have a
negative effect on moral thought (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986a; Priest, Krause, & Beach,
1999; Stoll & Beller, 2006). Similar results have been found in studies of high school
sports (Beller & Stoll, 1995; Rulmyr, 1996). A failure to find that sports participation
promotes moral judgment at the high school or college levels does not necessarily mean
that sports participation cannot play a role in moral development at the youth level. It may be that, in spite of the lofty claims of their mission statements, the highly competitive nature of high school and college athletics compromises their effectiveness in fostering moral development. Yet the few studies that we have on the effects of organized youth sports on children's moral reasoning indicate that participation in moderate to high contact youth sports have a negative effect (Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Cooper, 1986; Conroy et al., 2001).

It appears to us that the organization and professionalization of youth sports coupled with the lack of attention given to cultivating athletes' responsibility for fairness at all levels of all sports (with the notable exceptions of tennis, golf, and Ultimate Frisbee [Power & Sheehan, 2013]) has rendered sports to be a largely amoral activity. There has been a broad consensus for some time now that if organized sports are going to influence moral reasoning and behavior, those who serve as coaches are going to have to undertake the task of character education in a deliberate way that is informed by research in moral development (e.g., Shields and Bredemeier, 1995; National Association for Sport and Physical Education [NASPE], 2006).

THE RISE OF CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN SPORTS
Character development has been an important goal of organized sports as they took root in the 1920s and 1930s. For example, in its mission statement at the time of its founding in 1939, Little League Baseball described its purpose as designed “to develop superior citizens rather than superior athletes” (Chudacoff, 2007, p. 207). Founders of youth sports organizations believed that sports participation would teach the virtues of loyalty, hard work, and cooperation; virtues needed for success in the emerging economic order. At that time, both Protestant and Catholic evangelists also promoted “Muscular Christianity,” an approach to physical education and sports that emphasized masculine virtues leading to physical as well as moral health (Putney, 2003). Although character development continues to be a major aim of youth sport organizations, character education is now also seen as a remedy for the perceived rise of bad behavior in youth and high school sports (e.g., Clifford & Feezel, 1997; Lumpkin, Stoll, & Beller, 2002; Martens, 2004; Power & Sheehan, 2012; Thompson, 1995; Yeager, Baltzell, Buxton, & Bzdell, 2001). Most character education programs do not present elaborate definitions of character, but offer lists of values and recommendations for coaches. Their content typically includes what Lickona and Davidson (2005) have described as two distinguishable types of character: ethical and performance. Ethical character includes relational virtues, such as justice and care, while performance character includes achievement virtues, such as effort and perseverance.

For example Jim Thompson (1995, 2003), the founder of the Positive Coaching Alliance, one of the largest coach education programs in the country, strongly advocates that coaches act as character educators. In his first book, Positive Coaching: Building Character and Self-Esteem through Sports, he describes character as made up of the following traits: 1) mental toughness; 2) having fun; 3) winning and losing with class; 4) courage; 5) setting and committing to goals (defined in terms of sports skills); and 6) effort and determination (Thompson, 1995, pp. 113–120). Most of these traits are related to achievement. The closest trait to a social or moral virtue in his list is winning and losing with “class,” which means displaying sportsmanship and refusing to cheat to win. In
his last book, entitled *The Power of Double-Goal Coaching: Developing Winners in Sports and Life*, Thompson (2010) puts the development of character on par with winning. He also gives more emphasis to the moral dimension of character by replacing the concept of showing “class” with “honoring the game,” which means acting in positive ways that show respect for one’s self, teammates, opponents, and officials.

In his popular *Character Counts Sports*, Michael Josephson uses the mantra “Victory with Honor” to temper the quest for winning with an appeal to virtue. Like Thompson, Josephson recognizes that winning is important, but he cautions that winning should not be pursued in ways that degrade the self, others, and the sport itself. Josephson and Thompson rightly frame their character education approaches to sport as an antidote to the corrosive pursuit of winning at all cost. Josephson’s list of virtues, the “six pillars of character,” concentrates on moral character virtues, such as “trustworthiness, respect, caring, and fairness.” Yet Josephson also values performance character by including under the virtue of responsibility “habits and life skills that lead to success” (Josephson Institute, 2006).

Thompson and Josephson’s understanding of character as consisting of virtues related to both high achievement and morality is typical of contemporary character education approaches (e.g., Lickona, 1992; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Vincent, 1999). These approaches regard moral education as a part of character education. Historically, however, the character and moral education approaches are somewhat different in the way in which they understand what virtues mean and how they are prioritized. They also differ in the emphasis that they give to moral reasoning and democratic deliberation. *Moral education*, as it is currently practiced, grounds itself in Piaget and Kohlberg’s cognitive developmental approach and in domain theory (e.g., Nucci, 2001 and Turiel, 1983), which is focused on morality as fairness or justice (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006; Power & Power, 2012; Nucci, 2009). This approach promotes the development of moral judgment by presenting children with moral problems involving conflicts of interest for discussion and democratic deliberation. The Play Like a Champion Today approach comes out of the moral education tradition as it also makes reference to the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance (Power & Sheehan, 2012).

In the 1980s, political conservatives, such as Secretary of State William Bennett, and traditionalist social scientists, such as Kevin Ryan and Edward Wynne, aligned to form the character education movement. Drawing on Aristotle’s virtue theory, they opposed certain features of the moral education approach and espoused what they regarded as a more common sense, authority-centered approach to teaching values. Ryan (1989) noted that in contrast to moral education, the character education movement was eclectic: it embraced a wide range of moral theories and pedagogical approaches. He maintained, however, that character education was grounded in tradition and sought to “pass on” and “preserve” the wisdom of the past rather than “to change the social order” (p. 15). Finally and perhaps most significantly, Ryan noted that the character education movement viewed children as “more malleable” and, therefore, needing “formation” and “a strong environment” (p. 16). Neither Ryan nor Wynne (1989) saw much value in democratic class meetings or moral discussions.

Under the influence of Lickona (1992) and Berkowitz (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005) among others, the character education movement shifted from opposing the methods of moral education to endorsing them alongside the traditional methods of didactic instruction and modeling. Both Lickona and Berkowitz made key contributions to the development
of moral education theory and practice, and both sought to add to the methods of moral education more traditional methods of direct instruction and modeling. This eclectic approach to character education exploded in popularity throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s as character education gained widespread popular acceptance in public as well as religious and private schools. The most significant challenge that the current character education movement faces is to maintain an eclectic embrace of different virtues and pedagogies while providing a coherent and meaningful moral stance. On the contrary, moral educators going back to Kohlberg (1981) put a clear priority on the virtue of justice before all other virtues (Power & Power, 2012). In fact, drawing from Aristotle as well as Kant, moral educators maintain that achievement virtues are only virtues if they are rooted in virtue of justice. The desire to win at sports can be so strong that achievement virtues that lead to success, such as hard work, perseverance, and self-sacrifice can easily become detached from justice.

One of the most sobering studies of the win-at-all cost mentality is a well-known study of cheating conducted by Bob Goldman in the mid-1990s (Bamberger & Yaeger, 1997). He asked 198 Olympic- or near-Olympic-level athletes to respond to two scenarios:

1. You are offered a banned performance-enhancing substance, with two guarantees: a) You will not be caught; b) You will win.  
Would you take the substance?

2. You are offered a banned performance-enhancing substance that comes with two guarantees: a) You will not be caught; b) You will win every competition you enter for the next five years and then you will die from the side-effects of the substance.  
Would you take it?

Goldman found that 193 of the athletes reported that they would cheat in the first scenario and over half would cheat in the second (Bamberger & Yaeger, 1997). Much attention has been focused on the fact that more than half of these athletes were willing to die for a medal. Yet should we be surprised that elite athletes who had already dedicated so much of their lives to attain the heights they had would be willing to make the ultimate sacrifice? Too little attention has been given to the fact that almost all of the athletes would be willing to cheat to win a medal if they could get away with it. How important is the virtue of honesty relative to other achievement-related virtues in sports? Is honesty the same kind of virtue as perseverance or courage?

Many of the character education programs that emphasize the development of virtues fail to take into account the distinctiveness of the virtue of justice and related moral virtues, such as honesty. The moral virtues bind categorically. Achievement related virtues are desirable in our culture but justice is obligatory in any culture. In the realm of sports where winning is so highly valued and rewarded, the achievement virtues are understandably emphasized. Character educators need to do more than advocate for lists of virtues. They need to put a priority on justice as the foundation for all virtue.

One implication of giving a priority to the virtue of justice is making clear that coaches should not allow injured athletes to risk further injury by continuing to practice...
or play. Under the guise of building virtue by “toughening up their athletes,” coaches often encourage their players to shake off injuries or to conceal them so they are not considered “soft” or lazy. A study by the Minnesota State Athletic Union revealed that over 21% of the athletes said that they had been pressured to play with an injury. As we are learning more about the risks of concussions, increased efforts are being made to educate coaches about their responsibilities to protect their players. It is important, however, that these efforts be grounded in a moral concern (i.e., fairness to the athlete) and not simply in a prudential concern to avoid the legal ramifications of negligence.

Giving a priority to justice also means that, whatever motivational or disciplinary value coaches may think that physical punishments have, the infliction of pain is abusive and a violation of athletes’ right to their physical integrity. Many coaches justify the use of such punishments as character-building and a time-honored part of sports culture. Yet the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (2009) calls them “inappropriate” and educationally “unsound” (p. 2).

Character educators face an even greater challenge in defending children’s basic rights to play and to engage in activities that promote their health and physical development. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child declares that children have a “right to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child” (Article 31). Recently the US Department of Education (2013) issued a directive declaring that sports are a “civil right” and that schools receiving federal aid should make accommodations to provide access to sports for children with disabilities. Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan (2013) argued that all children should be able to reap not only the health-related benefits of physical activity but the character benefits of sports participation:

Sports can provide invaluable lessons in discipline, selflessness, passion and courage, and this guidance will help schools ensure that students with disabilities have an equal opportunity to benefit from the life lessons they can learn on the playing field or on the court.

(p. 1)

At the most basic level, fairness demands that regardless of their abilities or disabilities athletes have an equal opportunity to participate in sports. Yet organized sports at all levels favor some children and adolescents at the expense of others. This is most obvious when considering the difference family income makes to children’s access to playgrounds and athletic facilities as well as to sports equipment, clinics, summer camps, and, of course, sports teams. However, income is not the only factor in determining the opportunity to play sports in the United States. Many youth sport organizations permit children of perceived low ability to be cut from teams or given little or no playing time. Not only is it unfair to exclude children from sports participation, it is also unwise from a talent development perspective. Throughout childhood and into early adolescence, sports organizations should be taking a long-term perspective on athletic development by keeping sports fun, avoiding premature talent identification, and helping all children to achieve their potential (Balyi, 2001).

Perhaps the single most important contribution that character education can make to youth and high school sports in America is to confront the injustices built into the structure of organized youth and high school sports. All children deserve access to the psychological as well as physiological benefits of sports. All children deserve the opportunity to
play and to develop the virtues of fairness and honesty as well as courage and friendship on the sports field. If character education through sport programs are to adequately address the win-at-all-cost mentality that corrodes the culture of sports today, they cannot emphasize performance character at the expense of ethical character.

THE ROLE OF THE COACH

Ideally, coaches should be mentor-teachers, who focus on developing each player. In the mentor-teacher role, the adult’s responsibility is to introduce the experience of different sports to children so that children can play those sports on their own. Typically, parents serve as children’s first mentor-teachers. They not only instruct their children by helping them to learn basic sports skills, such as throwing or kicking a ball, but they also initiate children into the culture of a particular sport by watching games with them on television, taking them to ball parks to cheer on local teams, and acquainting them with the lore and heroes of the sport. This mentor-teaching role is very different from the managerial role that coaches play from the earliest youth sport level through college. As managers, coaches become the primary participants in children’s games. They compete along with their players and they experience all of the emotions of competitors, becoming elated when their team wins and dejected when they lose. In fact, many coaches often feel these emotions more poignantly than young athletes.

When coaches become managers, winning may become increasingly important to them. As managers, they exercise almost complete control of their players. They assign players to positions; they design strategies in practices and orchestrate their execution during games from the sidelines; they decide who plays and when in order to maximize their competitive advantage. It is no wonder that many coaches become so consumed by their role as managers that they become confused about who they are serving, the athletes or their own ego.

Youth sport coaches should be child-centered and focus on helping children to develop their skills and enjoy the sport. However, as managers, they often become demanding and imperious; even to the point of berating and punishing their own players (see Shields et al., 2005). Coaches do not always set out to be managers; they are often the victims of a sports culture gone amuck. For example, starting his youth sport coaching career determined to “do it the right way,” “place sportsmanship ahead of winning,” and “involve all the kids,” volunteer Buzz Bissinger admitted that he quickly became the coach he vowed not to be:

I could see the pathology that was overcoming me, the sickness of winning and having my stomach ache when we didn’t win. The sickness of five-minute car rides home with my son that seemed like five hours, as I went through the litany of all the things he had done wrong. The sickness of seeing the frustration and tears in his eyes as he was forced to listen to my addled concept of what I thought it meant to be a coaching parent.

(Bissinger, 2008, p. 1)

There are two ways in which character educators can respond to the toxic culture of organized sports: the way of compromise and the way of confrontation. Most coach education programs take the way of compromise, which accepts the legitimacy of the
coach’s managerial role and adds to it the role of character educator. This way, which is implicit in slogans like “Double-Goal Coaching” and “Victory with Honor” does not force coaches to choose between winning and meeting the needs of children but holds out the promise that they can pursue both.

We believe that coaches must take the less traveled way of confrontation. This means presenting coaches at the youth sport level with an either-or decision about their primary aim, either coach to win or coach to develop each child. Those who choose to coach to win or who do not want to have to choose between them are better suited to coach at the high school, college, and professional levels. Children at the youth sport level deserve coaches who are committed to player development before all else. This does not mean that they should not care about winning. It does mean that all of their decisions should be aimed at developing each player and that they should not put one player’s development over another’s.

The litmus test for whether youth sport coaches are mentor-teachers is how they distribute playing-time. Giving children equal playing-time is a matter of justice and must be the bedrock of any educational approach to character. We cannot in good conscience maintain that sports contribute to children’s development and deny some children the opportunity to play. No child’s well-being, health, possible future athletic attainments, and character development should be sacrificed for the sake of winning and success. The data very clearly shows that children rank playing for fun far ahead of winning as a reason for playing sports (Hyman, 2010; Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk, 1992). Moreover, it makes little moral or educational sense to demand that children at an early stage of their athletic development “earn” the privilege of playing by demonstrating the very qualities (e.g., hard work, courage, and perseverance) that they are in the process of developing.

THE RELATION BETWEEN PERFORMANCE AND ETHICAL CHARACTER

Giving primacy to the virtue of justice and distinguishing moral from achievement virtues does not imply that what Lickona and Davidson call ethical and performance character are unrelated. Studies of athletes using achievement goal theory (Duda & Hall, 2001) find that athletes’ goal orientations are correlated to socio-moral judgment and behavior (e.g., Duda, 2001; Duda & Balaguer, 2007; Kavussanu and Ntoumanis, 2003; Kavussanu and Roberts, 2001; Sage, Kavussanu, & Duda, 2006). Achievement goal theory identifies two contrasting motivational orientations: task and ego. An individual with a task orientation sets self-referenced goals, for example, to increase one’s number of rebounds or decrease one’s turnovers. A person with an ego orientation sets social comparison goals, such as demonstrating superiority over others by winning (or not losing). Research shows that ego-oriented athletes are more likely to cheat and to engage in reckless aggression than task-oriented athletes (Duda & Balaguer, 2007). Achievement goal research also shows while all athletes care about winning and losing, athletes vary on the extent to which they incorporate task and ego goals in their self-evaluations.

COMPETITION

Shields and Bredemeier (2009) argue there is a point in which an obsessive desire to win can actually undermine the competitive spirit itself. They define this willingness to do whatever it takes to win as decompetition, not “true competition.” Decompetition
undermines intrinsic motivation by substituting the enjoyment of the play of sports themselves for the tangible (e.g., money) or intangible (maintaining self-worth) extrinsic rewards that come from winning. Decompetition can also undermine moral motivation by detaching winning from fairness.

Far more research is needed to examine how athletes think about winning in relation to achieving mastery, and playing fairly. Duda (2001) finds that the task and ego orientations are not mutually exclusive. Athletes can be and often are high on both. Research is needed to determine how athletes achieve a balance between these goals and how considerations of fairness factor into both orientations. The task and ego measure, the Task and Ego Orientation in Sport Questionnaire (TEOSC), does not address issues of fairness or rule-following explicitly. The measure assesses the criteria that athletes use in assessing the conditions under which they feel the most successful. Moreover, the measure does not directly assess how athletes manage to balance these two orientations when competing. Presumably those who choose to participate in sports value competition and enjoy it. The orientations give us some insight into what athletes value about the sport and what it is about the competition that brings value. From the perspective of Aristotle’s theory of ethics, competitiveness in sports is virtuous if athletes put the quality of their play ahead of the outcome. What is distinctive about performance character in sports as distinct from performance character in school is that the goal of playing well is inherently related to playing to win. For example, a task-oriented basketball player will feel most successful when she is putting forth her best effort and playing as well as she can.

Playing well in competition cannot be completely self-referenced; it will entail countering the moves of the opposition. In individual sports, like gymnastics, figure skating, and swimming, task-oriented athletes are able to focus on their own performance without having to pay much attention to what their opponents are doing. In either individual or team sports, striving to win does not take away from the virtue of competing well. In fact, in most situations striving to win is involved in playing well. Striving to win is actually a part of the implicit social contract that athletes enter into when they decide to play a competitive sport. In their review of the achievement goal literature, Duda and Balaguer (2007) find task but not ego orientation consistently predicts sport attitudes and behavior. One explanation for this is that there may be a positive and negative type of ego orientation. The positive type complements the task orientation by valuing competitive success as a way of demonstrating competence; the negative type is based on a fear that losing will reveal a lack of competence (Duda & Balaguer, 2007).

Although playing to win is a part of a virtuous competitive mindset, whether one actually wins is in an Aristotelian framework a consequent end or bonus. Aristotle makes this point in distinguishing a good crafts-person from a person of good character. The good crafts-person is judged exclusively by the quality of her or his product. The person of character, on the other hand, is judged by the quality of her or his actions and intentions, whether or not they achieve their desired results. Virtuous athletes understand playing well, which includes playing competitively, as their highest goal.

It is understandable that athletes who attach more importance to the outcome of competition than they do the quality of their performance may be more prone to cheat or engage in irresponsible aggressive play (Duda & Balaguer, 2007). On the other hand, many athletes with a high ego orientation still accept the constraints of rules and moral norms in competition. Rules are constitutive of games themselves and moral norms
assure that games are safe for all parties. No matter how badly they want to win or hate to lose, when athletes enter into competition, they implicitly enter into a social contract in which they agree to abide by the rules and observe principles of fair play and mutual respect. Cultivating a performance character can help them to enjoy their athletic experience more by focusing their attention on what they can control and detaching their sense of worth from whether they win or lose.

Lickona and Davidson (2005) rightly argue that a task orientation is an important component of performance character. Achievement goal research demonstrates that coaches’ goal orientations play a critical role in establishing the motivational climate on their team. This climate in turn has a significant influence on athletes’ goal orientation, moral behavior, and attitudes (Duda & Balaguer, 2007; Kavussanu, 2007; Kavussanu & Ntoumanis, 2003; Miller, Roberts, & Ommundsen, 2005; Roberts, 2001).

Duda and Balaguer (2007) point out that coaches’ ego orientation is a far more significant problem for moral functioning than athletes’ ego orientation. Coaches with a strong ego orientation undermine athletes’ pursuit of either achievement or moral virtues by focusing on winning rather than on their players’ development. It is clear from a growing body of achievement goal research that if coaches are to be effective character educators they should curb their own ego orientation and cultivate a motivational climate with a high task orientation. Such a climate will directly promote the development of achievement-related virtues and indirectly support the development of moral virtues.

GAME REASONING AND MORAL IDENTITY

The competitive nature of sports can lead not only to a strong ego orientation but also to a negative sports identity. As Bredemeier and Shields (1986b) have argued, sports, particularly contact sports, may lead athletes to adopt two different identities, one for off the field and one for on the field. In a study comparing male and female college basketball players with college students who were not athletes, they found that the athletes’ reasoning on moral sport dilemmas was significantly lower than their reasoning on non-sport moral dilemmas. They described those athletes using lower stage moral reasoning as engaging in “game reasoning,” which allows them to operate in an almost “morality free zone.” Bredemeier and Shields (1986b) also referred to the attenuated experience of moral norms within the context of a game as a “bracketed morality.” A bracketed morality is one in which athletes feel free to act in self-interested and highly aggressive ways that would not be permissible outside of the game. Weiss, Smith, and Stuntz (2008) give a shocking example of this phenomenon from an interview with NFL football player Brian Cox:

> When I’m on the field, I think about causing as much pain to the person lined up across from me as possible. During the three hours of the game on Sunday evening, I figure I can commit as many crimes as I want without going to jail.

(p. 198)

Although some sports can release some athletes from moral constraints and excuse cheating, reckless aggression, and even cruelty, sports need not necessarily lead to a split sense of identity or to anomie. Some athletes may be drawn to sports or recruited to
play certain positions in contact sports because they are unusually aggressive, prone to anger, lacking in empathy, or uninhibited. In the absence of responsible coaches and a strong team moral atmosphere, sports, like football and rugby, can provide them with an outlet and even social approval for rough play. Sports clearly have the potential to lead athletes down a path that inhibits the development of their moral reasoning and of a moral identity. Sports can lead other athletes to think of themselves as playing a role on the field, which is different from who they are off the field. Blasi (1993, 2009) describes identity as a developmental process of self-integration, which underlies different social selves. Although individuals may describe themselves as having different selves in different social contexts, character education should help athletes to construct a core identity that unifies their athletic persona. For example, a college football player explained that although he was highly aggressive on the field, he was not the “kind of person” who would take a cheap shot to intimidate a receiver. Acknowledging that he had been guided by a morally principled coach, he said he took personal pride in trying to follow the “golden rule” by treating his opponents as he would like to be treated.

We have precious little research on how sports participation influences pre-adolescent and adolescent identity formation. This is surprising because sports play such a significant role in the lives of so many children and adolescents. It is also troublesome because in a sports-crazed society, children can become local and even national celebrities for their precocious athletic prowess. Early stardom comes with a price. Children and adolescents are not psychologically prepared to have adults fawning all over them because of their early athletic success. Character development becomes a challenge for children and adolescents, who may come to believe that they are so exceptional that they do not have to abide by the same rules as others. In order to help children and adolescents to develop a moral identity through participation, character educators must address the culture in which children and athletes develop their identities. In our view, children and adolescents are best served in a culture that de-emphasizes exceptional athletic achievements and focuses instead on helping all children to focus on how they can serve others and develop themselves.

**ESTABLISHING A TEAM MORAL ATMOSPHERE**

Research in moral education suggests that the key to developing individuals’ moral identity and moral functioning more generally is to focus on the moral atmosphere of the sports team (Power & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2005). As important as developing a proper motivational climate may be, care should be taken to distinguish a motivational climate from a moral atmosphere (Kavassanu, 2007; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). A motivational climate cannot substitute for a moral atmosphere. A moral atmosphere relates to those features of the social environment that directly influence athletes’ moral functioning: their moral judgments, responsibility, and behavior. Extrapolating from what has been learned from studies of the just community schools (Power, 2002; Power et al., 1989; Power & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2008; Power & Power, 2012; Shields et al., 2002) as well as what we are now learning from our Play Like a Champion coaching clinics, the key to establishing a moral atmosphere is to have coaches focus on issues of fairness and team building. Concretely this means taking time to address issues such as how to treat referees and opponents with respect and how to become a good citizen of the team. It also means giving athletes a significant role to play in decision-making about team rules and discipline.
Power et al. (1989) argued that the peer culture is a key component of moral atmosphere. The peer culture arises out of the interaction of the members of a group. As Power et al. (1989) showed, peer groups set expectations for how members should behave and these expectations vary in the extent to which they reflect moral values. For example, it is commonplace for adolescents to put pressure on each other to exclude those who are deemed “unpopular” or outside of their clique. On the other hand, many sports teams encourage players to be friendly to everyone. Sports teams provide an ideal environment for establishing norms of caring and shared responsibility because teams bring individuals together to pursue common goals. With proper direction and support from coaches, sports teams can become truly moral communities with shared norms of caring, trust, collective responsibility, and participation (Power & Power, 2012). Research on socio-moral development shows that somewhere between the ages of 11 and 14 most adolescents develop their first understanding of a group as a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Membership in a group offers a sense of purpose as well as a sense of belonging (Damon, 2008). Sports teams may well be the best resource character educators have for developing civic virtues, such as loyalty and sacrifice for the group. Coaches have a unique opportunity to help their players to experience what it means to be a responsible citizen by taking the time to deliberate with them about how to put the common good before their private interests while also respecting the rights of each member of the team.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COACH EDUCATION

Research has established that coach education significantly improves children’s sports experience. Most of the existing research has been undertaken by Smoll and Smith and their colleagues (Barnett, Smoll, & Smith, 1992; Coatsworth & Conroy, 2006; Conroy & Coatsworth, 2004; Smith, Smoll, & Barnett, 1995; Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979; Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2007; Smith, Smith, Barnett, & Everett, 1993) using the Coach Effectiveness Training approach (CET) and a revision of CET, the MAC (Mastery Approach to Coaching), which is based on motivational climate research (e.g., Duda & Balague, 2007). This body of research indicates that coach training can be used effectively to increase the amount of encouragement and verbal rewards that coaches give their players. Young athletes perceived trained coaches as engaging in more positive verbal behaviors, in less negative verbal behaviors, and in more mastery behaviors than untrained coaches. In addition, youth playing for the trained coaches liked their coaches more, perceived their coaches as liking them more, reported sports improved their self-esteem, helped them to feel less anxious, had lower dropout rates, and demonstrated motivational gains.

In a study sponsored by the LA‘84 Foundation, Power and Seroczynski (2013) investigated the effectiveness of a coach education program designed specifically for character development. Coaches of boys’ and girls’ basketball in public middle schools were instructed in the Play Like a Champion Today coaching approach, which emphasizes establishing teams as moral communities through conducting moral discussions before and after practice. The trained coaches were given a manual with sports-related moral scenarios addressing socio-moral issues, such as how to treat an unpopular player on the team or whether players should take the risk of trusting their teammates on “help defense.” Players on the teams with trained coaches perceived their coaches as putting a greater emphasis on moral values and developing a sense of fairness than those on teams
with untrained coaches. Players on the teams with trained coaches also described their experiences on the team as more fun. Most importantly, the players on teams with trained coaches reported that they thought more about fairness and learned more about taking responsibility over the season than did their peers on teams with untrained coaches. No significant differences were found in players’ moral reasoning although the teams with coaches who held discussions lasting at least 20 minutes and involved most of their players showed modest gains in moral reasoning over a season lasting only two months. No differences were found in players’ self-reports of their own moral behavior or sportsmanship. This is not surprising given that previous research indicated that moral discussions must generally be sustained over several months to be effective (Higgins, 1980; Schlaefli, Rest, & Thoma, 1985).

This study has important implications for character education for three reasons. First, it shows that a character-oriented coaching clinic can lead coaches to engage in deliberate practices designed to promote moral awareness and development. Second, it shows that coaches can be taught to help players have a more enjoyable and morally engaged experience. Although much can be accomplished in a three-hour clinic, more time was needed to communicate the concepts and develop the skills necessary to foster the development of moral reasoning and behavior. Ideally, shorter, follow-up clinics should be provided for coaches to achieve greater mastery of the discussion approach. Third, it demonstrates that in order for coaches to educate for ethical character, they need to set aside time for team meeting discussions. To date, the only successful moral education interventions have been most successful in physical education classes and camp settings that are removed from the pressures of a competitive sports season (e.g., Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Shewchuck, 1986; Hellison, 2003; Romance, Weiss, & Brockovan, 1986). This study suggests that coaches can fruitfully incorporate team moral discussions into a competitive sports season. Future research is needed to investigate the effects of using moral discussions with different teams and over multiple seasons.

**CONCLUSION**

With direction and support from well-prepared coaches, participation in sports can and should help children and adolescents to develop moral as well as achievement virtues. In order for sports to realize their character education potential, coaches, particularly at the youth sport level, need to put the development of their players before winning. Character educators must confront a managerial mentality pervasive at all levels of sport in which coaches control children rather than teach or mentor them. Sports are meant to be played for the sheer fun of the experience, and children can reap the full benefits of sports only if they have control over their own games. Although character educators must focus on what virtues should be taught and how they should be taught, they also take responsibility for assuring that all children have a fair opportunity to play sports. At present, the income inequalities present in the adult society are reflected in youth and high school sports. While opportunities for affluent children to play sports are growing, opportunities for poor children are declining. Poor children are not the only children who are losing out. Children are cut from teams and sit on benches because they are perceived to lack the skills and abilities of others. Character educators ought to advocate for the rights of all children to enjoy playing sports and to develop their skills.
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