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A comprehensive guide for students and practitioners
Stephanie J. Hanrahan, Mark B. Andersen

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Kathryn A. Conley, Steven J. Danish, Cassandra D. Pasquariello
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Sport as a context for teaching life skills

Kathryn A. Conley, Steven J. Danish, and Cassandra D. Pasquariello

In this chapter we focus on how sport can be an environment for teaching life skills to athletes of all ages. Because we have adopted a life skills perspective, our aims may differ from other sport psychology orientations. Our objective is to promote the development of athletes both during their athletic careers and when their athletic careers are over. Life skill-oriented sport psychologists work to help athletes develop the skills necessary to perform at their best in all areas of their lives. As illustrated in Table 18.1, we at the Life Skills Center seek to have athletes learn how to have competencies in the physical, technical, mental, emotional, and social domains. Athletes who adopt a life skills perspective strive to be physically fit, aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and confident. They have the ability to focus, set goals, use positive self-talk, have fun, choose their attitudes, relax, and manage and express emotions in healthy ways. These competencies are also needed to be a happy and well-balanced individual.

The Carnegie Corporation of New York (1995), in a report from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, identified a number of desired adolescent development outcomes that can be summarized as the ability to work well, play well, love well, think well, serve well, and be well (Bloom, 2000; Danish, 2000). Others who study positive development might refer to these concepts as the goals of character education, social-emotional learning, resilience, positive psychology, and/or emotional intelligence. We chose the term life skills because our focus is on teaching skills (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1995) and because of the connection between skills and sport. By describing life skills as skills, we are emphasizing that the process of learning life skills parallels the learning of any skill, whether it is throwing a ball, driving a car, or baking a cake. Just as individuals are taught skills to become successful athletes, they can also be taught to become successful individuals (Danish & Forneris, 2008). Many of the skills sport psychologists use to enhance athletic performance become life skills when applied to teaching athletes to achieve personal well-being.

Life skills can enhance competence and promote personal growth throughout the life span. Life skills can be behavioral, communicating effectively with peers and adults; cognitive, making effective decisions; interpersonal, being assertive; or intrapersonal, setting goals (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1995). Life skills are transferable across life domains; they are
skills that are applicable and necessary for achieving success in different environments in which individuals live (Danish, Forneris, & Wallace, 2005).

The context for teaching life skills

Individuals learn best when they are in the environments they choose (Danish, Taylor, & Fazio, 2005). We often find youth participating in sport and physical activities, and thus, these activities may provide ideal environments for promoting positive development, especially for youth (Hodge & Danish, 1999). Moreover, Kleiber and Kirshnit (1991) observed that the sport environment can be a forum for learning skills associated with values such as: responsibility, conformity, persistence, risk-taking, courage, and self-control.

Despite the clear potential for sport to enhance positive development, there is little empirical evidence that participation in sport itself is sufficient for healthy development (Danish et al., 1993). Positive, negative, and mixed effects of sport on youth development have been found (Shields & Bredemeier, 2001).

Strachan (2008, p. iii) asserted:

[If youth sport programs are delivered with an emphasis on skill development in conjunction with the growth of key assets and an appropriate contextual experience,]
young people have the potential to emerge as healthy, secure, and positive citizens who feel valued and invested within their homes and communities.

As Hodge (1989) so aptly put it – character is not caught; it must be taught. Sport psychologists should work to ensure that the sport environment is designed to facilitate the transfer of life skills from sport to other life areas.

The role of the coach is particularly important in promoting life skills through sport (Smith & Smoll, 1996). The coach and supporting staff must work to create a positive learning environment that is both enjoyable and conducive to encouraging positive growth. The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002) offered eight criteria needed to create an environment that promotes positive development. These criteria include: physical and psychological safety; clear and consistent structure and appropriate adult supervision; supportive relationships; opportunities to belong; positive social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunities for skill building; and the integration of family, school, and community efforts. Although such an environment is difficult to attain and rarely achieved, it is a goal that should serve as the ideal.

Examples of sport-based programs that teach life skills

Several programs have effectively taught life skills through sport. We will describe three of them here.

**Teaching responsibility through physical activity (Hellison, 2003)**

Hellison developed Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) as a framework for teachers and coaches to teach young athletes personal and social responsibility in Chicago, and the program has been implemented elsewhere (Hellison et al., 2000). Using this framework, five levels of responsibility are emphasized: (a) respecting the rights and feelings of others, (b) understanding the role of effort in improving oneself in physical activity and life, (c) being self-directed and responsible for one’s own well-being, (d) being sensitive and responsible for the well-being of others, and (e) applying what you have learned in different non-physical activity/sport settings. For a more detailed discussion of TPSR, readers are referred to Hellison et al. (2000).

**Play It Smart (Petitpas, Cornelius, & Van Raalte, 2008)**

Petitpas and colleagues designed the Play It Smart program to work with underserved high school student-athletes, using sport to promote the transfer of life skills from the athletic domain to the classroom and the community. Key to the program was the addition of an academic coach, trained to bridge the gap between sports and life. Academic coaches established relationships with each player through consistent interactions, facilitation of study hall, and community service activities. See Petitpas (2006) for information about the program’s implementation and effectiveness.

**Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation (SUPER; Danish, 2002)**

SUPER, a community-based intervention that uses sport to teach life skills and encourage positive youth development, has been implemented in a variety of settings in the United States.
States and abroad. SUPER uses sport as a “training ground for life” in fostering youth development both in the athletic domain and in life outside of sport (Danish, Fazio, Nellen, & Owens, 2002).

The SUPER program employs an “educational pyramid” approach (Seidman & Rappaport, 1974). Life Skills Center staff at Virginia Commonwealth University first train peers (high school or college student-athletes) for ten to 20 hours to become SUPER leaders. The SUPER leaders then deliver the interventions to younger peers. Following the model that teaching is the best form of learning, Hogan (2000) found that peer leaders reported improved perceptions of their own leadership skills when teaching a life skills program.

SUPER consists of a series of 18 sport-like clinics, taught by the peer leaders. Table 18.2 provides a brief description of the SUPER workshops. Ten of the 18 modules are the core of all the Life Skills Center programs; the remaining eight modules are designed as independent workshops that add to the sport psychology orientation. The participants are involved in three sets of activities: learning the physical skills related to a specific sport; learning life skills related to sports in general; and playing the sport (Danish, Forneris, Hodge & Heke, 2004).

Table 18.2 Summary of SUPER workshops.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workshop 1</td>
<td>Developing a Team – The program and the peer leaders are introduced. Participants engage in several team-building activities designed to enhance communication and understand each other’s strengths and weaknesses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop 2</td>
<td>Dare to Dream – Participants learn about and discuss the importance of having dreams for the future. They then identify career/school and sport dreams they have for ten years in the future. The peer leaders share some of their dreams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop 3</td>
<td>Setting Goals (Part 1) – Participants learn the difference between dreams and goals and how to turn a dream into a goal. They identify people who support them in achieving their goals (Goal Keepers) and people who may prevent them from achieving their goals (Goal Busters).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop 4</td>
<td>Setting Goals (Part 2) – Participants learn four characteristics of a reachable goal (positively stated, specific, important to the goal setter, and under the goal setter’s control). They practise creating goals that are positively stated and important to the goal setter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop 5</td>
<td>Setting Goals (Part 3) – Participants practise creating goals that are specific and goals that are under their control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop 6</td>
<td>Making Your Goal Reachable – Participants apply the four characteristics of a reachable goal to their own goals. They set two six-week goals: one for sport and a personal goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop 7</td>
<td>Making a Goal Ladder – Participants learn the importance of developing plans to reach goals (called a goal ladder) and make plans to reach the two goals they have set. Making a ladder involves placing the goal at the top of the ladder and identifying six steps to reach their goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop 8</td>
<td>Identifying and Overcoming Roadblocks to Reaching Goals – Participants learn how different roadblocks (e.g., using drugs, getting into fights, lack of confidence) can prevent them from reaching their goals. They identify possible roadblocks and learn and practise a problem-solving strategy called STAR to help them overcome the roadblocks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop 9</td>
<td>Seeking Help From Others – Participants learn the importance of seeking social support when working on goals. They identify people in their lives, a dream team, who can provide doing and/or caring help to assist them in achieving their goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop 10</td>
<td>Using Positive Self-Talk – Participants learn the importance of identifying their self-talk, how to distinguish positive from negative self-talk and how to identify key positive self-talk statements related to their goals. They then practise making positive self-talk statements.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
SUPER leaders also learn how to use the Sport Observation System (SOS; see Table 18.3). The SOS is used throughout the SUPER program enabling coaches, peer leaders, and teachers to provide feedback to participants on how youth participate, not just on how well they perform. Part of the feedback they receive specifically relates to helping them see how their participation in sport may transfer to other life areas (Danish et al., 2002, 2004).

The program has been adapted for use in a number of countries. Three studies have been done by Greek colleagues (Goudas, Dermitzaki, Leondari, & Danish, 2006; Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish, & Theodorakis, 2005; Papacharisis, Theofanidis, & Danish, 2007). Each study assessed skill performance (either on a physical fitness test or on a sport component), knowledge of life skills, self-beliefs about their performances, and their self-assessments of their abilities to use life skills. In each study significant differences were found on each measure in

### Table 18.3 The Sport Observation System.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How attentive are participants when given instructions or observing demonstrations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What happens when participants cannot perform an activity to their expectations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do participants initiate questions when they do not understand something, or do they wait for someone else to talk first?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Do participants initiate conversation with others, or do they wait for someone else to talk first?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How do participants respond when they have a good or a bad performance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How do participants respond when others have a good or a bad performance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How do participants respond when someone gives them praise or criticism?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Do participants give up when they don’t do well, or do they persist?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Do participants compete or cooperate with teammates?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
favor of the life skills group. In New Zealand, Heke (2001) worked with New Zealand Maori to design a sport-based intervention modeled from the SUPER program. The program used Maori language and culture both in program development, implementation, and evaluation. A description of the program and the results of the intervention can be found in Danish et al. (2004). For a more detailed discussion of the conceptual framework for SUPER, readers are referred to Danish, Nellen, and Owens (1996) and Danish et al. (1993).

The importance of transferable skills

If skills are truly going to be life skills, they must be transferable across settings; in other words, skills must transfer from sport to other life domains. Danish and his colleagues (1993) have identified considerations for skills to transfer successfully. First, individuals must believe that they have skills and qualities that are valued in settings other than sport. If they do not, the skills will not transfer. Second, individuals must know that they possess both physical and mental skills. There is a lot more to sport than being fast and strong. For example, successful athletes need to be able to plan, set goals, make quick decisions, follow instructions, and manage their stress as a routine part of their lives during competition. Without these mental skills it is unlikely athletes can compete successfully. Until athletes understand what these mental skills are, they cannot be transferred to another domain. Third, individuals may need to test a skill in a safe setting to see how it works. By testing their skills in a safe setting, individuals can further identify their areas of strength and improvement. Finally, individuals may focus so much on their identities as athletes that they ignore their accomplishments in other areas. Such a mind-set can rob them of their confidence to try something new. Table 18.4 contains a list of transferable skills one may possess. The identified skills can be transferred to a number of domains that extend beyond sport. Recently, Fiore and Salas (2008) edited a special issue of Military Psychology that focused on the transferable skills that exist between expertise in sport and performance in the military. Authors in the special issue emphasized the need for practitioners to recognize that skills learned in sport can be applied in other areas where skill acquisition, attentional control, and emotional regulation are required (i.e., the military, music, art, medicine).

The ability of an individual to respond well to challenges in different contexts can be partly explained by intra-individual similarity in reactions to events. Individuals who respond effectively to one particular challenge may recognize similarities between the current challenge and challenges they have encountered in the past. At a cognitive level, they know they can deal with the event. At a behavioral level, they employ a behavioral sequence that has been successful in the past. The psychological uniqueness of the event becomes de-emphasized, and properties common to both experiences are highlighted (Danish & D’Augelli, 1980). We need to emphasize the similarity between new challenges and past experiences. We can encourage athletes and others to identify the behaviors that have been successful in similar past situations and the areas in which they might have made improvements. This process increases the potential for achieving success when taking on new challenges.

Not all skills learned in sport, however, should be transferred to other domains. Sport teaches enhanced competitiveness that can be used in a counterproductive manner in non-sport situations. Sport can teach an athlete good sportspersonship or bad sportspersonship, confidence or overconfidence, and learning limitations or ignoring limitations. The experiences one has in sport are dependent on how the sport is organized and the values that are engendered. Sport psychologists can work with coaches and others to ensure that athletes develop the competencies that will help them to function well outside of sport.
Sport has the power to enhance positive development (Petitpas et al., 2008). Through sport, individuals can learn skills such as work ethic, responsibility, and persistence. It is important, however, that the sport environment is structured in a way that promotes positive development. Athletes must learn the core competencies necessary for success in sport and also learn that these same competencies, or skills, can be transferred to other life domains. In other words, we can encourage positive development by teaching life skills. Teaching life skills can enhance competence and promote personal growth throughout the life span. See Box 18.1 for the main points of this chapter.

**Box 18.1**

*Key points about life skills and sport*

- Sport is a context in which athletes can learn life skills that transfer to other life domains.
- Sport psychologists and coaches can work to promote skills that will enable athletes to function well outside of sport.
- Athletes need to identify the skills they possess and recognize that those skills transfer to other domains.
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