

## **SPORT, AND THE PROMOTION OF POSITIVE SOCIALISATION: FACT, FALLACY OR SIMPLY WISHFUL THINKING**

*Dr Barrie Gordon*

*Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand)*

### **RESUMEN**

El Deporte se ha considerado tradicionalmente como una fuerza positiva en la Sociedad, como un medio para integrar fracciones dispares, para generar paz y buena voluntad, así también como un medio para desarrollar y fomentar “buen carácter” e integridad.

La creencia en la “bondad” del deporte ha sido aceptada mayoritariamente sin problemas ni dudas y se han destinado al deporte grandes cantidades de recursos financieros, energía y tiempo.

El presente artículo examina la veracidad de afirmaciones en la bondad inherente del deporte, contempla el lado oscuro de la participación en el deporte y explora los ocultos costes de esta creencia tanto para el individuo como para la sociedad.

### **ABSTRACT**

Sport has traditionally been presented as a positive force in society, a means to integrate diverse fractions, to generate peace and goodwill and as a means of developing “good character” and integrity.

The belief in the “goodness” of sport has been accepted as unproblematic by many and has led to the outlaying of vast amounts of finance, energy and time.

This article looks at the veracity of claims of sports inherent goodness, contemplates the darker side of sport participation and considers the unexamined cost(s) of this belief for both the individual and society.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

People in every nation love sport. Its values –fitness, fair play, teamwork, and the pursuit of excellence– are universal. At its best, it brings people together, no matter what their origin, background, religious beliefs or economic status. And when young people participate in sports or have access to physical education, they can build up their health and self-esteem, use their talents to the fullest, learn the ideals of teamwork and tolerance and be drawn away from the dangers of drugs and crime. That is why the United Nations is turning more and more often to the world of sport for help in our work for peace and our efforts to achieve the Millennium goals. (“Report on the International year of sport and physical education,” 2005)

This quote, from United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, is a powerful illustration of the high levels of expectations that can be placed on sport. His description of sport is one that is easily accepted, and remains unchallenged, by many who consider the idea that sport is inherently positive as unproblematic and self-evident.

## **2. HISTORY OF SPORT AND “CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT”**

The belief that participation in sport will lead to positive outcomes for both the individual and society has a long and well established history. For centuries sport has been considered a means by which children can learn physical skills, develop moral character and attain leadership skills that can then be generalized into their lives (Wiggins, 2013). Wiggins’s use of the phrase moral character is interesting to note as character or good character has traditionally been used in the sporting context. Moral character is a fuller description more aligned with the intent of those who talk of sport developing character. In general, both terms, character and moral character can be equated with moral development or positive socialization

Modern sport, as we know it today, has been strongly influenced by sports historical development and in particular the muscular Christianity movement, a movement inspired by Charles Kingsley in the mid 1800s. For the muscular Christian, the body was an instrument of God and good health and physical conditioning was regarded as a means of allowing Christians to meet the demands of godly behavior (Coakley, 1998). Kingsley believed that there was a strong association between the body and the spirit, that sport and physical activity were moral duties and to neglect the body was a sin (Erdozain, 2012). Reclaiming the physical was central to the faith of the muscular Christians and sport was considered to be one way of doing so, with the added advantage of inspiring virtue, manliness and forming character.

The beliefs associated with muscular Christianity were readily accepted by the English public school system and games such as cricket and rugby football were introduced by headmasters, who saw the potential for them to modify the undisciplined behaviors of the boys (Estes, 2003; Laker, 2000). The value attributed to these games was illustrated by a Royal commission into public schools that concluded “the cricket and football fields are not merely places of exercise or amusement; they help to form some of the most valuable social qualities and manly virtues and they hold ... a distinct and important place in Public School education” (Shields and Bredemeier, 1995, p. 176). The belief that sport developed good character traits became unshakeable in Britain and is illustrated by the often repeated statement that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton (Meller, 1997; Sage, 1998). This vision for sport was subsequently exported throughout the world as an integral part of the expansion of the British Empire and became established in many countries (Redman, 1988).

The role of sport as a vehicle for positive socialization received further traction in the 1980’s and beyond with the emergence of the neo-liberal ideology that gained ascendancy in all spheres of western society. Neo-liberal ideology has a strong belief in the values of individual responsibility, competition and meritocracy. It stepped back from a belief in the collective responsibility of society, preferring to place responsibility on the family and individual. These beliefs aligned easily with sport and sport became a medium for encouraging their acceptance (Coakley, 2016; Harvey, 2005).

The limitations associated with an approach that placed responsibility on the individual were, however clear:

This approach frames[youth] development as an internal individual approach ... it connects developments to the attributes and potential of currently powerless young people, rather than seeing development as a messy, tension filled, conflict producing process involving power

relationships and efforts to change the distribution of opportunities at the community and societal level. (Coakley, 2016, p. 24)

### **3. WHOSE VALUES?**

One question that arises immediately when considering sport as a context for positive socialization is whose and what values should be taught and learnt through sport.

One person's positive socialization is another's brainwashing. Historically we have seen sport used to socialize participants into a variety of belief systems, many of which we would find abhorrent today. Ancient Sparta and more recently Nazi Germany both used sport to enculturate ideologies. The issue of what values should be socialized is of course a complex issue. Just as neoliberals would believe socialization to accept personal responsibility is positive, the Nazi leadership would have believed that socialization to accept the superiority of the white race was also a positive process.

There remains a strong belief in the goodness and value of participating in sport, a belief that is seemingly impervious to the never-ending counter examples that sport regularly presents. These include, among others, the use of drugs, wide spread corruption, the sexual abuse of young players by coaches in a variety of sports and the seemingly never ending list of athletes behaving badly.

### **4. DOES SPORT LEAD TO POSITIVE SOCIALIZATION?**

How true then are the claims that sport acts as a catalyst for moral development and has the ability to turn around people's lives? There is little doubt that sport has been successful in many occasions in guiding participants towards better futures, in helping young people to become "better people". There are many high-profile sportspeople who offer personal testimonies to the positive influence of sport and coaches. Equally there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence of "normal" athletes who feel that participation in sport has been a positive experience that has been helpful in their personal development. What also appears to be clear, however, is that participation in sport does not automatically lead to positive outcomes or that when positive experiences do occur in sport the impact is not necessarily transferred to other area of the participants lives.

A number of researchers have considered the outcomes from sporting participation in relation to the development of "character" or morality. In one well know study Shields and Bredemeier (1985) compared the moral reasoning of two groups, one of high school/college basketball players and one of non-athletic high school/college students matched for age and gender. Both groups were given two sets of moral dilemmas, one sport based and one non-sport based. The study found that the females had more mature reasoning than the males in all areas and that the non-athletes had significantly more mature moral reasoning than the athletes across both sporting and non-sporting domains. Of added interest was that the moral reasoning for the sport domain was significantly below the non-sport domain for both groups, athletes and non-athletes. The study was repeated with non-team based athletes, a group of competitive swimmers, and similar results were found although the swimmers moral reasoning sat between the basketball payers and the non-athletes for both domains.

This study offers two challenges for those who believe that participation in sport naturally leads to positive outcomes. The first is simply that the athletes who were long term participants in sport demonstrated less developed moral reasoning than the non-athletes. This suggests that for this group of athletes, participation in sport had not had a markedly positive effect and had potentially been a negative influence.

The second challenge is related to the context of sport itself. In all cases the participants, athletes and non-athletes, had a lower expectation of moral behavior in the sporting context than in the non-sporting one. This finding is aligned with the concept of bracketed morality (Kavussanu, Broadley, Sagar, & Ring, 2013). Bracketed morality describes the acceptance of actions and behaviors in the sporting context that would be unacceptable in non-sporting ones. The reality is that many actions seen as totally illegitimate in everyday life, such as inflicting pain on another human being, are accepted and even celebrated in some sports. If we believe that positive lessons learned in sport have the ability to be transferred into participants lives outside of sport we should conclude that the same will occur for negative experiences? Is it therefore possible that a player who has been regularly rewarded for their ability to succeed by working outside of the rules of the game (cheating) would subsequently take the same attitude into business or personal relationship with potentially dire consequences.

For many parents and caregivers sport is considered as a means towards inoculating their children from going “off the rails” a way to help keep their children out of trouble. The veracity of this belief was examined by Clarke (2012) who interviewed young men incarcerated in New Zealand prisons. This study was initiated by the author who despite having ensured her son was heavily involved with sport for its positive influence found herself in the heart breaking position of having her son incarcerated. As she asked at the start of her thesis:

If sport is all that it is supposed to be why is my son sitting in a prison cell? Had his fourteen years of sport been for nothing? Why hadn't sport honoured its promise to protect my son from such a reality? (p. v)

During the interviews Clarke discovered that not only has many of the incarcerated young men been heavily involved in sport but that this involvement may well have contributed to a mind-set that led to anti-social behaviours. She suggested that the experiences of rugby and rugby league, with the emphasis on hard hitting plays that dominate and damage the opposition players, had led to the boys being dehumanised and more willing to be involved in physical acts against others out in society. That sport participation was an active ingredient in the mix that led these young men into incarceration is sobering to contemplate. Her thesis titled “Stepping off the court and into court” directly challenges the narrative that participation in sport is a good thing and warns of the potential for negative socialisation occurring through sporting involvement

In an unsolicited email to the author, an experienced secondary school teacher and long-term rugby coach offered a similar view. He opened up on his experiences of male sport in New Zealand schools, illustrating the potential negative impact of sport participation:

There is a real dark side to sport ignored by many coaches, headmasters and administrators...sport can cultivate homophobia, alcoholism and misogyny. I have seen this many times, more importantly perhaps, it can have an adverse effect on academic achievement. I've seen this many, many times. What is it about sport in NZ, that many schools are prepared to let boys underachieve academically, provide they overachieve in sport? (Unsolicited email 2016)

Erdozain, (2012) was also less than flattering of the influence of sport when he considered the impact of participation on the development of male public schoolboys. He considered that sport and games:

Instead of making men out of boys, the games cult [in public schools] made perpetual adolescents of men- the sort of people who never get over dropped catches in House Matches or are incapable of reading newspapers from the front pages (p.43).

These researchers would all appear to support the claim that sport of itself is not a context that leads necessarily to positive outcomes for its participants. Shields and Bredemeier (2001) concluded, after many years of research that while sport had the potential to encourage positive socialization whether this occurs depends on the degree to which the sporting experience is specifically designed to achieve such outcomes. They concluded that, while:

Sport builds character is the cultural adage... we believe that sport does no such thing. At least not automatically. If sport is to be of any positive benefit, from a moral standpoint, then deliberate effort and planning needs to occur. (p. 5)

How then does sport maximize its ability for positive socialization and minimize the potential for negative outcomes? One framework that could be considered comes from the field of positive youth development. The SAFE [Sequential, Active learning Focused and Explicit] approach identifies four key elements that when present have been found to facilitate positive socialization or the learning of life skills. (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). For a programme to be successful it needs to use a connected and coordinated set of activities [sequential] around the identified values the programme is promoting. The programme should use [active] forms of learning and there should be elements of the programme [focused] addressing these values. The final element is that the programme identifies [specific] values rather than addressing them in a general or generic sense.

The value based programmes envisioned by the SAFE framework contrasts with the more traditional practice of relying on values being learnt as a natural byproduct of participation and are seldom seen in the realities of sporting practice. Is this a concern and does it really matter that many programmes are not maximizing their potential for positive socialization? Is criticism of sport justified, is it unfair to criticize a trusted and valued cultural icon that has survived the test of time and is loved and appreciated by many? Should we simply accept that in most cases sport is good for participants and move on?

## **5. POTENTIAL NEGATIVE OUTCOMES FOR SOCIETY**

There are a range of potentially negative outcomes resulting from the implicit trust held by many in the goodness of sport and its role as an agent of positive socialization. The first is simply that if there is an expectation that positive socialization will simply occur through participation, there will be a failure to maximize the opportunities for it to happen. This will result in lost opportunities for participants who will leave their sporting experiences less well developed than they may have been. The second relates to the potential of sport to generate negative outcomes for participants. If we are uncritical of the sporting experience, we run the risk of participants becoming negatively socialized and worse off for the experience. On a broader scale the trust in sports ultimate goodness excuses many actions that would be not accepted in a non-sporting context. A simple example is the acceptance of environmental damage caused by sport. This includes the well-publicized environmental impact of golf courses and the carbon footprint of athletes and their supporters. How many extra miles of travel occur worldwide through the transfer of children to games and practices, teams travelling locally, or increasingly internationally, to play sport? For many the unchallenged acceptance that sport is good for children alleviates any consideration of the impact on the environment, if indeed such a consideration was to occur.

In many case sporting initiatives are implemented specifically to address perceived problems. Examples include the First Tee programme, midnight basketball, various sport for peace initiatives and innumerable out of school programmes. A problem that occurs through these types of sporting initiatives is the deficit thinking that underpin many of the programmes. Youth development programmes are generally based on the understanding that it is more

effective to build on participants' strengths than it is to consider them as having deficits that need to be "fixed". Many sport based programmes based in underserved communities are, however, strongly based on this deficit approach. Coakley (2016) described the situation as one whereby decision makers in "Governments, NGOs and corporate social responsibility departments have favored programs with underlying evaluation and corrective agenda built into selection, delivery and implementation processes (p. 26). Focusing on the alleviation of the problems of the participants allows these in positions of power to ignore the need to address the underpinning issues of poverty and inequality that are in many cases generating the problems in the first place. It is far easier, for example, for a government to allocate funds towards sports programmes than to address urgent housing needs. When everyone loves sport, and believes that participating in sport will result in positive outcomes it is an easy sell for politicians to show they care and are doing something positive by running even more sports programmes.

In a similar manner corporations can quickly distract from criticisms around their practices by being seen to be good corporate citizens through funding sporting programmes to help youth. This is particularly problematic in cases where corporation's actions in other countries, for example around the conditions in their factories, causes societal harm but generates profits that allow them to act as good citizens in their own countries. Investment in sports programmes is used as a means towards societal acceptance whereby corporations appear to be good corporate citizens while systematically being involved in practices that receive a great deal of justifiable criticism.

Sports position as a cultural icon, a force for good does allow it to achieve many positive outcomes. When high profile athletes take the opportunity to lead fund raising for good causes, such as child cancer research, they offer a visible reinforcement for the positive role of sport. The Australian Rugby Leagues ongoing support for breast cancer research and the USA National Football League's white ribbon programme helping to prevent violence against women are further examples. In these cases, the esteem that sport is held in increases its potential for influence and helps it achieve a great deal of good.

While the profile and power of sport give it the potential to generate positive outcomes, its powerful position also means that there is greater impact when it fails to show moral leadership. Sport can be disappointing in its refusal to act confidently around social issues through financial or political influences. The unedifying sight of the USGA refusing to answer what would appear to be a simple question of whether they had a position on sexual assault is a prime example of this situation. As Christine Brennan reported in the USA Today:

In what was a truly remarkable moment in sports news conference lore, three supposed leaders of the USGA sat dumbfounded, unable to utter even one word against sexual assault, while the fourth, a spokeswoman, said the foursome was there to talk about "the golf competition," but would be happy to discuss the "important question ...afterwards. (Brennan, 2017)

This response can only be attributed to the reality that the U.S. Women's Open golf tournament was about to commence at the Trump links and Trump, infamous for bragging about his ability to sexually assault women without consequences, was likely to attend. And so, by publically refusing to condemn sexual assault, when given the opportunity to do so, this powerful sporting body reinforced the message that sexual assault is at best not important and at worst OK.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

There is little doubt that the perceived importance of sport, when combined with the inherent emotion generated by participation means that it is powerful context in which to learn values and develop “moral character”. The degree to which sport achieves this positive socialization is, however, impossible to identify. What outcomes result from participation in sport is largely dependent on what previous experiences, both in and out of sport, participants bring to the activity and their experiences of the process as it occurs. One concern is that a lack of critique can lead to sport being implemented in ways that lead to negative outcomes and a great deal of unintended harm can result from participation. The assumption that simply participating in sport will lead to positive outcomes can also act as a barrier to the very outcomes that are assumed will be generated. It is therefore important that those running programmes critically consider the ramifications of what and how their programmes are implemented. It is only through the process of critique and challenge that sport will be able to move to a point whereby it can legitimately claim to be an agent of positive socialization.

## 7. REFERENCES

- Bredemeier, B. & Shields, D. (1985): Moral growth among athletes and nonathletes: A comparative analysis. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 147(1), 7-18.
- Brennan, C. (2017, July, 17): *USA Today*.
- Clarke, G. (2012): *Why do youth step out of sport and into court*. Master of Sport and recreation, University of Waikato.
- Coakley, J. (1998): *Sport in Society*. Singapore: McGraw-Hill.
- Coakley, J. (2016): Positive youth development through sport. Myths, beliefs, and realities. In N. Holt (Ed.), *Positive youth development through sport*. New York: Routledge.
- Durlak, J. A.; Weissberg, R. P. & Pachan, M. (2010): A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45(3-4), 294-309.
- Erdozain, D. (2012): Does sport build character? A progress report on a Victorian idea. *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 25(1), 35-48.
- Estes, S. (2003): Physical Education and Educational Sport. In A. Laker (Ed.), *The Future of Physical Education: building a new pedagogy*. London: Routledge.
- Harvey, D. (2005): *A brief history of Neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kavussanu, M.; Broadley, I.; Sagar, S. & Ring, C. (2013): Bracketed morality revisited: How do athletes behave in two contexts? *Journal of Sport Exercise Psychology*, 35(5), 449-463.
- Laker, A. (2000): *Beyond the Boundaries of Physical Education*. London: New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Meller, M. (1997): *Leisure and the changing city. 1870-1914*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Redman, G. (1988): *Historical aspects of fitness in the modern world*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Report on the International year of sport and physical education (2005): USA: United Nations.
- Sage, G. (1998): Does sport affect character development in athletes. *Journal of Physical Education Recreation and Dance*, 69(1), 15-18.
- Wiggins, D. (2013): A worthwhile effort? History of organized youth sport in the United States. *Kinesiology Review*, 2, 65-75.