

Do We Need Sportsmanship Education in Secondary School Athletics?

Tomas Green and Carl Gabbard

Abstract

The concept that "sports builds character" is an acceptable slogan for many sports advocates. Nevertheless, some displays of poor sportsmanship seen often at sporting events, might lead others to believe that "sports builds characters". Whether or not today's athletes display fewer acts of sportsmanship in competition may be uncertain; however, poor sportsmanship is definitely more evident. Since one of the objectives of secondary school athletic programs is to instill social values such as sportsmanship in our students, it only makes sense that a formal sportsmanship education plan be implemented. Therefore, the following article examines the topic of sportsmanship education with the point of view that sportsmanship should be formally taught in order to be learned. To support this view the following was discussed: definitions of sportsmanship, perceptions of sportsmanship, effect of sport participation on sportsmanship development, and formal sportsmanship education.

Do We Need Sportsmanship Education in Secondary School Athletics?

Few would deny the importance of sportsmanship (sportspersonship) in youth and public school athletics. Presumably, one of the primary goals of physical education and athletic programs is the acquisition or betterment of social values by participants. Further, it is this primary goal that has promoted and endured the existence of youth sports and athletic programs. Sport education programs have gained support because of their inclination to provide opportunities to learn social values such as sportsmanship (Freeman, 1992).

The belief that sports build character has become common among most Americans. In fact sportsmanship has become a

stigma associated with sports. Nevertheless, it is quite evident that the quality of sportsmanship in athletics has decreased. From one perspective, the code of ethics which directs sportsmanship is being oppressed in athletics now more than ever (Hayford, 1987). Whether or not misbehavior or unsportsmanlike practices are occurring now more than ever is arguable, however it is certain that these inappropriate actions are more evident today.

As sport has evolved into competitive athletics the concepts of sportsmanship seem to have diminished (Chambers, 1984). Despite claims of being the best place to teach athletes social values, our school system tends to measure the success of sports programs in terms of winning (Massengale, 1984). As stated by Simon (1983), "When winning is everything the destination supersedes the journey, thus diminishing or negating the intrinsic rewards of sport participation" (p.25). Several studies support the inverse relationship between the length of participation and the development of sportsmanship values (Belier & Stoll, 1992; Stoll & Beller, 1994, Romance, 1984). Thus, it appears that, sportsmanship values are not being well communicated or practiced by young athletes. In its present form, the contribution that sports make to the development of sportsmanship values by young athletes is questionable. Consequently, unless something is done to improve the quality of sportsmanship education, the contribution that sport makes to the social development of athletes may be minimal in the area of sportsmanship.

In essence, although teaching social skills such as sportsmanship is generally regarded as a critical part of athletics, formal educa-

tion appears to be elusive; it is inconclusive as to whether sportsmanship education is implied or actually being formally taught. Are the characteristics of sportsmanship being taken for granted until the athlete or team disregards sportsmanship and is it something we need to teach just as we teach the rules of the game? Although the terms morality and sportsmanship can be perceived differently, Beller and Stoll (1995) use them in similar fashion stating the following:

Morality may be perceived by coaches to be taught on the field of play, but it appears, in reality, that if morality is taught, it is not learned. Although most coaches believe they teach moral character, as with all good teaching, the methodologies, content, and application need to be reexamined and re-evaluated. (p. 361)

Definitions of Sportsmanship

Although sportsmanship is a common term when describing the behavior an athlete should display while participating in sports, to define sportsmanship with one specific definition is difficult. Consequently, several definitions have been developed to symbolize sportsmanship. Shea (1978) stated, "Sportsmanship became the term which was used to express the moral ideals for sport" (p. 4). It included several components, such as play, the display of courtesy, citizenship, and the development of character.

According to Keating (1978), sportsmanship has generally been defined as the attitude and conduct which competitors display through their actions or words. From another perspective, sportsmanship can be defined as conduct in sports whose characteristics include honesty, integrity, fairness, generosity, courtesy and graceful acceptance of results of competition (Miscisco, 1976). Allison (1982) suggests that to be a good sport means playing by the rules and treating an opponent with respect. Feezell (1986) stated "Sportsmanship is a mean between excessive serious-

ness, which misunderstands the importance of the play-spirit, and an excessive amount of playfulness, which might be called frivolity and which misunderstands the importance of victory and achievement when play is competitive" (p. 10).

Consequently, in order for sportsmanship to exist both competition and cooperation are deemed a necessity. The quest to acquire the same results that can not be shared is termed competition and is necessary in order for sports to survive (Nelson & Cody, 1979). However, when winning becomes so important, competition goes beyond the rules of fairness and becomes conflict. On the other hand, cooperation is the result of individual or group members who agree to work together to achieve the common goals of the sport. Nevertheless, total cooperation in sports is generally acknowledged to result in mediocrity of performance because of the lack of challenge or opposition from opponents. Therefore, both competition and cooperation are necessary in sports to keep both conflict and complacency in check. This balance between the two is what may also be referred to as sportsmanship (Ulrich, 1968).

The idea of sportsmanship maintains that when athletes participate in sports they enter with an agreement to follow the laws set forth by that particular sport. These athletes realize that sport symbolizes tradition and its continuance is dependent upon the players who play the game. They accept responsibility for maintaining or enhancing sports and realize that any negative behaviors that deviates from the aspect of sport could be a tremendous detriment to the survival of sportsmanship (Arnold, 1984).

Perceptions of Sportsmanship

Stewart (1996) conducted a study to determine the expectations of parents in sport involvement for their children. Results indicated that parents believed that teaching athletes to play by the written rules alone was a sign of good coaching of sportsmanship.

Nevertheless, the behavior expectations for unwritten rules were disregarded as coaching attributes for good sportsmanship. As Feezell (1986) pointed out, there is much more to sportsmanship than abiding only to the written rules of the game.

Athletes have their own opinion on the concept of sportsmanship. When asked to define sportsmanship, 20 Division I football players mentioned helping teammates defeat their opponents, being verbal for their team as well as supporting the team. All of these athletes failed to mention being courteous and questioned why they should be courteous to the enemy (Stoll, 1992). Confronted with the question about being fair to their opponents, the players expressed their opinion that being fair was not their priority. They responded, “you do what you gotta do to win”; “you do to them before they do to you; fair has nothing to do with it”; “you ain’t trying if you ain’t cheating” (Stoll, 1992, p 75). In a study of more than 150 college athletes, Stoll and Beller (1992) found that although most athletes believed that they should be fair and courteous to their teammates, only about 10% felt they should give their opponents the same treatment. When questioned about gracefully accepting the results of competition, the players agreed to it only if they won. They claimed that if they lost it was because the opponent or referees had cheated.

In a prominent study, Beller and Stoll (1993) found that students, athletes, and coaches have different perceptions of what athletics contributes to athletes. Students felt that sports contributed to monetary gains not values. They mentioned that athletes were expected to win, not to be moral. Athletes also agreed with the latter statement in that winning superseded morals. As for coaches, some were of the opinion that they were not hired to teach morals; therefore, it was not their job. It is statements such as these that continue to challenge the assumption that sportsmanship is being taught or required on the playing fields (Walker, 1993).

Effect of Sport Participation on Sportsmanship Development

The effect of sport participation on young athletes has been highly opinionated in recent years (Potter & Wandzilak, 1981). As many critics see it, it is hypocritical to suggest that sport participation builds character. The reasoning behind this way of thinking is that the values supposedly gained from athletics such as sportsmanship have been distorted by the desperate need to win (Eng, 1995).

The relationship between athletic participation and moral development has long been investigated. Recent research seems to indicate a negative correlation between the development of moral values and participation in sports (Beller & Stoll, 1992). Several studies have investigated the correlation between the length of participation and sportsmanship behavior. Potter and Wandzilak (1981) found a negative relationship between the length of participation and sportsmanship behavior in studies examining elementary and junior high school athletes. These findings are further supported by Blair (1985), who also concluded that as the length of competitive participation increases emphasis on playing fairly decreases while emphasis on winning increases. Similar results were found in a study conducted by Silva (1983), which examined the level to which rule violating behavior was seen as proper behavior. College students consisting of both males and females were shown several action slides which depicted rule violating behavior and were asked to rate them on a scale from one to four (totally unacceptable—totally acceptable). Results indicated that rule violating behavior was seen as being more legitimate as experience in sports participation increased.

Along with the length of participation, the level of competition also seems to influence sport behavior. Evidence presented has shown that athletes who participate in higher levels of competitive sports tend to be linked with a decreased emphasis on sportsmanship values. A study conducted to examine the ap-

proval for rule violating behaviors or actions have clearly shown that those athletes involved at a higher level of competitive sports show more approval for these acts than athletes involved at lower levels (Allison, 1982; Silva, 1983). The same results were found when comparing intercollegiate athletes to non-athletes (Beller & Stoll, 1992). Promoli (1982) conducted a study in an attempt to determine whether or not collegiate athletes differed from recreation basketball players in their perceptions of cheating in sports. Results indicated that 70 percent of the recreation players were against cheating while 72 percent of the athletes were in favor of cheating. This study is consistent with other findings in which athletes were found to reason at a significantly lower moral level than their non-athlete counterparts (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986). However, it must be mentioned that while Bredemeier & Shields (1986) did see a significant difference between college basketball athletes and non-athletes, analyses revealed no differences between high school basketball athletes and non-athletes. Yet, finding no difference between athletes and non-athletes does not set well with those who believe that athletic participation should increase sportsmanship values. Incidentally, when comparing elite athletes against non-elite athletes, the negative trend of sportsmanship attitudes is greater for the elite athletes (Allison, 1982). In summary, there is no doubt that sports have an effect on sportsmanship development; however, to suggest that it is a positive effect is unlikely at this point. Relationships between athletic participation and sportsmanship development have long been investigated and shown to have negative relationships. Despite the perception that sports and sportsmanship have a cause and effect relationship, it is apparent that emphasis is placed on other attributes.

Formal Sportsmanship Education

It may be time to re-examine the coaching agenda for new strategies if athletics is

to address the development of sportsmanship. Sabock (1985) supported the idea of athletics being in a position to teach moral development. His reasoning was that children are not born with ethical behavior, rather they must be taught right from wrong. In athletics he expressed feelings that the coaching staff are obligated to this responsibility. However, this responsibility should consist of more than providing an environment for participation. According to Horrocks (1980), if sportsmanship is truly one of the goals of our athletic programs, administrators and coaches must reevaluate instructional techniques in order to determine how to most effectively teach these values to young athletes. Likewise, Hayford (1987) has indicated that if administrators and coaches are able to provide an athletic program which aims at achieving the overall educational goals of their schools, their responsibility to their athletes and eventually to society will be accomplished.

Numerous studies have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of teaching interventions on moral development. Giebink and McKenzie (1985) used instructions and praise, modeling, and a point system as teaching strategies to examine their effects on children's sportsmanship behavior. Intervention strategies were implemented into a physical education softball class and generalizations were made on recreational basketball games. Results of the study indicated that each of the interventions increased sportsmanship behavior and decreased unsportsmanlike behaviors. Nevertheless, there was not a transfer of improved sportsmanship behavior from softball to basketball. The results of this study suggest that a sportsmanship curriculum should include individual strategies for each sport.

Sharpe, Brown, and Crider (1995) directed a study to determine the effects of a sportsmanship curriculum intervention on positive social behavior of urban elementary school students. Their findings revealed that leadership behaviors as well as independent con-

flict resolution increased while off task behaviors decreased in two groups receiving an implemented social curriculum. On the other hand the opposite was seen in the control group supporting the idea that what does not get taught, does not get learned.

Romance, Weiss, and Bockoven. (1986) also conducted a study to investigate the effects of a sportsmanship intervention program on physical education students. The subjects consisted of two fifth grade classes containing 32 students each with one group serving as the experimental group and the other as the control group. While both participated in equivalent activities during an eight week physical education program, the experimental group received moral teaching strategies in an attempt to improve moral reasoning. Prior to the implementation of teaching strategies, a pre-test and test of homogeneity revealed that both groups were equal. Post-test revealed a significant difference in moral reasoning between the experimental group. A significant difference was also found between the pre-test and post test data in the experimental group with the post-test having greater moral reasoning. However, a significant difference between the pre-test and post test was not found in the control group. Consequently, through this study the researchers showed that interventions specifically designed to teach moral reasoning can improve moral development.

In a most prominent study, Gibbons, Ebbeck, and Weiss (1995) investigated the use of educational activities to promote moral growth in elementary school children. Using activities selected from the Fair Play for Kids (1990) manual, the researchers introduced experimental protocol to elementary school physical education classes and regular classroom subjects. A control group was used to validate treatment effects on the experimental groups. All of the groups were pre-tested at the beginning of the study. After a seven month curriculum program intervention, each group was assessed in a post-test for im-

proved moral development. Results obtained by the researchers indicated that both experimental groups were significantly higher in moral development than the control group on post test assessments.

Conclusion

As has been shown by the literature above, in order for sportsmanship development to occur in athletics, coaches must design and implement appropriate learning experiences within their athletic programs. Green and Gabbard (1998) mention that sportsmanship education could be the missing link between sportsmanship and sports participation. In the same study, 84% of the athletic directors surveyed agreed that sportsmanship education should be formally planned in athletics at the secondary level. According to Wandzilak (1985), there is a major challenge for coaches to develop a sound system which can serve as a guide to teaching sportsmanship values. Otherwise, the quality of sportsmanship will continue to decrease and negatively affect the future of athletics.

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Dr. Tomas Green is a member of the Department of Health and Physical Education at Tarleton State University, Stephenville, Texas and Dr. Carl Gabbard is a member of the Department of Health and Kinesiology and Director of the Motor Development Lab, Texas A & M University, College Station, Texas.