

# Character Education and Sports

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As a player, coach, professor, and sports administrator I have been exposed to two generally conflicting views about the disciplines of sports, physical education, physical activity and kinesiology.

The critical view holds that sports add little of value to society and that athletics should not be part of the standard curriculum in schools and colleges. The positive view claims that, to the contrary, sports develop character, teach positive attitudes, help form values, build teamwork, and contribute to the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development of student-athletes and to society as a whole.

Many colleges and universities divide the kinesiology curriculum into distinct courses, for example, anatomical, physiological, mechanical, sociological, statistical and psychological. This article uses sociological and psychological categories.

## Introduction

The discipline of physical education has struggled historically with the question of how to develop attitudes and values via physical activity. Sports have had the same struggle. Many early practitioners of physical education saw *character education* as a major objective. But others thought that only psychomotor aspects be emphasized. A number of sports-related definitions are included in the Appendix. These may be helpful in gaining a better understanding of a somewhat specialized terminology.

The disciplines of physical education and sports are not the only ones concerned with character education. The founders of the public education system, for example, *assumed that moral education* would be a part of the curriculum. Progressive educator John Dewey in his “whole child” concept made the establishment of character a comprehensive aim of all schools. Early proponents of sports who were medical doctors established programs in Ivy League colleges to promote health through athletic activity. Contemporary educators often link character education to cognitive learning.

Character education is, however, difficult to evaluate. While cognitive learning and achievement are often measured via subject matter knowledge tests,

no parallel measurement device is available for character education. We have generally relied on the subjective evaluation of individual student-athlete behavior to discover attitudes and values that may have been learned through educational and sports programs.

Measurement is not the only problem. There is also no clear-cut definition of character education. To deal with this dilemma, I have created an assessment model based on psychologist Abraham Maslow's concept of "self-actualization,"<sup>1</sup> a quantifiable learning program that leads students and athletes through a process of self-discovery, expands the cognitive and psychomotor domains of learning, and incorporates the affective dimension. With this method the student-athlete examines his or her satisfaction with living, attitude toward life, and ability to achieve fulfillment through sports and physical activity.

The *Snyder Values Enhancement Series in the Affective Domain of Physical Activity, Physical Education, Kinesiology or Sport* (VES) is an attempt to assess character education in athletic programs.<sup>2</sup> Central to this model are Frank Goble's 25 definitional elements of Maslow's concept of self-actualization.<sup>3</sup> Goble's first point, for example, is that: "The self-actualization process means the development or discovery of the true self, and the development of existing or latent potential." Another Goble point: "Self-actualizing people are sufficiently philosophical to be patient and seek or accept slow, orderly change rather than sudden change." Students and athletes may be asked to work on any or all of the twenty-five traits to progress in the self-actualization process.

In the VES, students explore human values to realize potential as they consider personal beliefs and values. Accountability is measured via a Personal Orientation Inventory (POI) test that measures physical, mental, and spiritual development. The VES and POI assess teaching and coaching in three domains: cognitive, psychomotor, and affective. Most athletic teams and physical education classes focus on the psychomotor domain. In developing the whole person, however, all three dimensions of learning should be taught. My dream has always been that teachers and coaches would use the VES then share the results.

Everett L. Shostrom developed the POI. It was later endorsed by Sport Psychologist George Sage<sup>4</sup> of the University of Northern Colorado, who believed that the POI measured many of the attributes that he wanted student-athletes to internalize through participation in sports. The POI measures twelve traits

that expand on Maslow's self-actualization model: Time Incompetent vs. Time Competent, Other Directed vs. Inner Directed, Self-Actualizing Value, Existentiality, Feeling Reactivity, Spontaneity, Self-Regard, Self-Acceptance, Nature of Man Constructive, Synergy, Acceptance of Aggression, and Capacity for Intimate Contact.

The VES helps student-athletes examine these traits as they analyze their experiences in physical education, physical activity and sports. By realizing that they must understand personal learning in the affective domain, student-athletes delve into topics such as: placing value on physical activity, considering love and fear as alternatives to solving problems, determining individual responsibility for actions, valuing the mind in determining attitudes and actions, using the giving and receiving principle, and contributing to society.

The student or student-athlete works through the VES as a programmed learning text using self-motivation while taking a physical education class or participating on a sports team. At the beginning of the class or season, the POI is administered to establish a baseline. At the end of the class/season it is administered again to show participants what has changed; i.e. positive or negative growth. Results of the POI are shared with students by teachers or coaches. Educational and Industrial Testing Services (EDITS) scores the instrument and provides results.

### **The Problem**

The big question is whether sports and physical education classes have any effect on character development. The same question might of course be asked in all academic disciplines. Does the experience of taking classes and/or playing on teams change human beings and in what way? The answers to these questions are generally tied to an examination of what an ideal class or team might look like – a class or team that treats the individual as a “whole person,” emphasizing physical, mental, and perhaps spiritual aspects. Most classes and teams fall short in one or more of the three domains. But with appropriate planning, I believe that sports have a unique opportunity to teach transformative principles in all three domains.

Thomas Sheehan said it best: “If we can isolate the *specific* psychological or social learnings with which we are concerned and arrive at precise definitions of the characteristics of behavior involved, we will make strides in the profes-

sional practices of physical education in the schools.”<sup>5</sup> If the POI accurately indicates specific psychological or social “learnings,” we may then incorporate these characteristics into teaching and coaching so they can be measured.

The problem is to outline exactly what you want to teach or coach and design an appropriate delivery format and measurement technique. The VES is a self-discovery delivery format. The POI is a measuring instrument that determines if subject matter has been internalized.

### **Personal Experiences**

Perhaps we do not need courses and teams to develop character. Maybe lifetime experiences are enough to shape our being and who we are.

We are all shaped by personal experiences. Following are a few experiences that have helped me answer the general question, *Why Sports?* My first memories of sports are not good. I was born with a birth defect, one leg longer than the other, and had to do physical therapy, and take tap dancing and ballet lessons to rehabilitate this condition. So, during these years, I was usually the designated score keeper at recess, in physical education classes, and when athletic teams were performing. This was all a very negative experience for me.

Finally, in junior high school I tried out for the tackle football team, much to my parents’ dismay. At the first team meeting our coach asked, “Who can throw the ball the farthest?” Everyone yelled, “Emch!” He became our quarterback. He then asked, “Who can run the fastest?” Everyone yelled “Latell!” He played end. After many more calls for speed, agility, and strength, the coach asked, “Who is the slowest person on the team?” Everyone yelled “Snyder!” Since every football team needs linemen – you might say that they are the heart of the team – this is how I began my football experience. One coach’s selection process led me to play two years of junior high football, four years of high school football and four years of collegiate football. Chance and experience altered the course of my entire life. Coming from a small, steel-producing community and then going to a small private Christian liberal arts college was a life-changing experience. Through coaches, professors, and teammates I learned the value of hard work, cooperation, teamwork, and Mennonite Christian values. This was a positive experience. But through junior high, high school, and college, I am not certain that my coaches ever planned for affective domain learning.

If we learned something like sportsmanship, for example, it happened through experience.

There is of course value in all of our experiences. “What is your story?” is something we should all ask ourselves. Do we rely on general life experiences to develop as human beings or do we rely on educational and sport experiences to shape our lives?

I also had the opportunity to coach. My first position was in the small Mennonite community of Sugarcreek, Ohio. My task was to start an eleven-man football team, at a school that had previously only played seven-man football. My duties ranged from buying football equipment to supervising the construction of a practice field and a permanent stadium. While many football-related experiences shaped my view of sports, it was my time coaching junior high, freshman, reserve, and varsity basketball that had to most impact on the development of a well-thought through approach to coaching and sports. After coaching at the high school level, I moved to the collegiate level. There I tried to focus not only on the psychomotor but also affective domains. My primary teacher/mentor was the great UCLA coach John Wooden, through his book *They Call Me Coach*. This book contains Wooden’s *The Pyramid of Success*. His model consists of twenty-five traits a player must develop in order to achieve success. At the bottom of the pyramid are the traits and definitions of industriousness, friendship, loyalty, cooperation, and enthusiasm. At the top are the words “faith” and “patience.” Wooden notes: “Success is peace of mind which is direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.”<sup>6</sup>

With my teams, I pass out the pyramid model and go over one block or triangle daily until all of the pyramid material is covered. Are my players internalizing the philosophy? Are they achieving success? Only they can tell you. I became a student of Wooden and read everything he wrote, attended his coaching clinics, and well as his speeches whenever possible. I considered him a mentor. My professional relationship with him peaked when, as head basketball coach at Bluffton University, I was able to get him to come to campus and speak personally about the pyramid. Wooden autographed his book with these words: “For Coach Glenn Snyder, with best wishes and the hope that you will enjoy this story about another coach. It is a wonderful profession if you are able to keep winning and losing in proper perspective.”

Wooden had identified my coaching problem: keeping winning and losing in proper perspective; not taking mood swings out on my wife, children, players, or parents. Since this discovery, I have found coaching and teaching to be a more valuable experience, i.e. by identifying exactly what value I want to accomplish, and letting students and athletes know exactly what character trait we are working on.

My most rewarding experience has come recently while coaching my twin grandsons' fifth and sixth grade basketball teams at Reagan Elementary School in Kingsburg (California). My cognitive goal is to teach them the rules of the game. My psychomotor goal: to teach them physical skills. My affective goal is to teach them one affective domain value. In the lobby of the school hangs a large banner with the letters "HONOR." Each letter stands for a value for the students to focus on, "Hard work," "On task," "Never give up," "Outstanding" and "Respect." At the beginning and end of most practices I ask players to repeat the slogan "Respect Yourself and Respect Others." Did I develop character education? Did I teach values? Will the players internalize these concepts in their lives? No measurement device was used, but I hope that through experience and repetition they had a good learning and playing experience. It seems to me that as teachers and coaches we have to make a conscious decision about what values we want to teach, and then develop strategies to teach and measure them. My two grandsons' can still repeat the Respect Slogan, so I know they have some understanding of "Why Sports?"

### **Appendix: Definitions**

"Affective Domain": Deals with feelings, attitudes, and values; the major categories of learning in this area are receiving, responding, valuing, organizing, and characterizing.<sup>7</sup>

"Cognitive Domain": Includes six major areas: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation; the focus of this domain for physical education is knowing rules, health information, safety procedures, and being able to understand and apply such knowledge."

"Kinesiology": in physical education, orthopedics and physical medicine, it is known as the study of human movement from the point of view of the physical sciences.<sup>8</sup>

“Physical Activity”: Bodily movement that is produced by the contraction of skeletal muscle and that substantially increases energy expenditure; it is a process-oriented outcome related to behavior and lifestyles.<sup>9</sup>

“Physical Education”: Education through movement; it is an instructional program that gives attention to learning domains: psychomotor, cognitive, and affective.<sup>10</sup>

“Psychomotor Domain”: This domain is the primary focus of instruction for physical educators; the seven levels in the psychomotor taxonomy are movement vocabulary, movement of body parts, locomotor movements, moving implements and objects, patterns of movement, moving with others, and movement problem solving.

“Sports”: Institutionalized competition activities that involve vigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills by individuals whose participation is motivated by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.”<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Abraham H. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand), 1968.
- 2 Glenn C. Snyder, *The Effects of a Values Enhancement Series in the Affective Domain of Physical Activity on the Performance of Students on the Personal Orientation Inventory*, (Greeley, Colorado: University of Northern Colorado, doctoral dissertation), 1977.
- 3 Frank G. Goble, *The Third Force: The Psychology of Abraham Maslow*, (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1970) 24-35.
- 4 George Sage, *Humanistic Theory, The Counter-Culture and Sport: Implications for Action and Research*, (Greeley, Colorado: Department of Physical Education, University of Northern Colorado), 1974.
- 5 Thomas J. Sheehan, *An Introduction to the Evaluation of Measurement Data in Physical Education*, (Reading, Ma.: Addison Wesley, 1971), 235.
- 6 John Wooden, *They Call Me Coach* (Waco, Tx: Word Books, 1972).
- 7 Robert P. Pangrazi and Aaron Beighle, *Dynamic Physical Education for Elementary School Children*, (Boston: Pearson, 2016), 717, 718, 722.
- 8 Katharine F. Wells, *Kinesiology the Scientific Basis of Human Motion*, (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company, 1971), 1.
- 9 Robert P. Pangrazi and Aaron Beighle, *Dynamic Physical Education for Elementary School Children* (Boston: Pearson, 2016), 717, 718, 722.
- 10 Jay J. Coakley, *Sports in Society Issues and Controversies*, (St. Louis: Mosby, 1994), 21.
- 11 Ibid.