# FURTHER READINGS
# CHAPTER 4

This file contains additional readings from earlier editions of *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies,* and some extra materials provided by Jay Coakley. These have not been included within the book as much of the content is explicitly focused on the USA, but users of the book may find these readings useful and interesting. Please feel free to send your feedback and/or suggest additional readings to us at jcoakley@uccs.edu or e.pike@chi.ac.uk.

**Topic 1. Socialization and sports**
**Topic 2. Making decisions about sport participation**
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**Topic 5. The belief that "sport builds character"**
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**Topic 11. Coaches: How do they fit into the sport experience?**

## Topic 1. Socialization and sports

Adapted from:
Coakley, Jay. Socialization and sport. In Ritzer, George (ed). The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology (pp. 4576-4580). Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Blackwell Reference Online.
http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405124331_chunk_g978140512433124_ss1-198

There's a long history of research on socialization and sport. The roots of this research are grounded in three factors:

1. Theories that explain the role of play in child development
2. Progressive-era notions that team sports constituted an environment in which valuable lessons could be learned
3. Popular twentieth-century assumptions that playing sports was an inherently character-building experience.

Empirical studies of socialization and sport were first done during the 1950s as the initial cohort of baby boomers in North America inspired parents, educators, and developmental experts to seek optimal conditions for teaching children, especially boys, the skills needed to succeed as adults in rapidly expanding, competitive, national and global economies. The structured experiences in competitive sports were seen by many people in Western Europe and North America—especially suburban parents in the United States—to be ideal contexts for adult-controlled socialization of children. It was widely assumed that sports taught young people about teamwork, competition, achievement, productivity, conformity to rules, and obedience to authority. Consequently, organized youth sports and interscholastic sports grew dramatically, although the pace of this growth varied by nation and regions within nations.

The growth of organized sports for young people inspired questions about the benefits of sport participation and ways to attract and retain participation. The people who asked these questions were often associated with organized sport programs, and they usually had vested interests in recruiting participants and promoting their programs by linking sport participation to positive developmental outcomes. Scholars in physical education also used these questions as a basis for research, and their studies were usually designed to examine sport participation as an experience that shaped social and personal development in positive ways. Most of these studies found correlations between sport participation and positive character traits, although research designs were generally flawed and provided little information about the dynamics of specific socialization experiences in sports compared to other activities (Stevenson 1975).

Studies of socialization and sport have also been done in psychology and anthropology. Psychological studies have focused on the socialization effects of sport participation on personality characteristics, moral development, achievement motivation, sense of competence, self-esteem, and body image. Anthropological studies have focused on the role of play, games, and sports in the formation of value orientations in particular cultural contexts, especially those in pre-industrial societies. Sociological studies, published mostly by scholars in North America, have focused on three main topics: (1) socialization into sport, dealing with the initiation and continuation of sport participation; (2) socialization out of sport, dealing with termination and changes in sport participation; and (3) socialization through sport, dealing with participation and multiple facets of social development.

Through the mid-1980s most sociological research on socialization and sport was grounded in structural functionalism or forms of Marxism, neo-Marxism, and conflict theory. This research was based on the assumption that socialization was a process of role learning through which people internalized values and orientations enabling them to participate in established social systems. It was also based on the assumption that sport was a social institution organized in connection with the social system of which it was a part.

Since the mid-1980s most research has been grounded in various combinations of interactionist and critical theories. The approach used in these studies assumes that: (a) human beings are active, self-reflective decision-makers who define situations and act on the basis of those decisions; (b) socialization is a lifelong process characterized by reciprocity and the interplay of the self-conceptions, goals, and resources of all those involved in social interaction; (c) identities, roles, and patterns of social organization are socially constructed through social relations that are influenced by the distribution of power and resources in particular cultural settings; and (d) sports are cultural practices with variable forms and meanings (Coakley 2004).

This shift in the theoretical approaches and the assumptions used to guide research on socialization and sport is represented in the ways that scholars have studied socialization into sports, out of sports, and through sports.

Studies based on an internalization-social systems approach clarified that socialization into sport is related to three factors: (1) a person's abilities and characteristics, (2) the influence of significant others, including parents, siblings, teachers, and peers, and (3) the availability of opportunities to play and experience success in sports. Most of these studies utilized quantitative methods and presented correlational analyses, but they provided little information about the social processes and contexts in which people make participation decisions and in which participation is maintained on a day-to-day basis at various points in the life course.

Studies based on an interactionist-social process approach have focused on the processes through which people make decisions to participate in sports; the ways that gender, class, race, and ethnic relations influence those decisions; the connections between participation decisions and identity dynamics; the social meanings that are given to sport participation in particular relationships and contexts; and the dynamics of sport participation as a "career" that changes over time. These studies, often utilizing qualitative methods and interpretive analyses, indicates that sport participation is grounded in decision-making processes involving self-reflection, social support, social acceptance, and culturally based ideas about sports. Decisions about sport participation are made continually as people assess opportunities and consider how participation fits with their sense of self, their development, and how they are connected to the world around them. These decisions are mediated by changing relationships, the material conditions of everyday life, and cultural factors, including the sport-related social meanings associated with gender, class, race, age, and physical (dis)abilities.

Studies of altering or ending sport participation are difficult to characterize in terms of the theoretical and methodological approaches they've used. Even the terminology describing "socialization out of sport" has been confusing. The vocabulary in these studies refer to attrition, disengagement, desocialization, withdrawal from sport roles, dropping out, nonparticipation, burnout, transitions, alienation, "social death," exits, retirement, and involuntary retirement (i.e., being "cut" or denied access to participation opportunities). Collectively, these studies have focused on many issues, including the relationship between participation turnover rates and the structures of sport programs, the attributes and experiences of those who terminate or change their sport participation, the dynamics of transitions out of sport roles, the termination of

participation in highly competitive sport contexts as a form of retirement or even as a form of "social death," and the connection between declining rates of participation and the process of aging.

Before the mid-1970s, socialization out of sports was seldom studied. Altering or ending sport participation was treated more as a fact than a problem. It became a problem only when baby-boom cohorts younger than 13 years old declined in size and growth trends in organized programs slowed relative to the rapid increases that characterized the 1960s. Additionally, many parents during the 1970s had defined participation in organized sports as crucial for the development and social status of their children. A growing emphasis on physical fitness in most post-industrial nations also heightened general awareness that physical activities, especially the strenuous activities common in sports, were important to health, fitness, and overall well-being. Additionally, there was a growing emphasis on elite sport development, and it led to an expansion of youth sports and interscholastic teams that served as a feeder system for increasing the pool of highly skilled young athletes. As multiple vested interests in participation grew, so did research on the processes related to terminating and changing participation in sports.

This research indicates that terminating or changing sport participation occurs in connection with the same interactive and decision-making processes that underlie becoming and staying involved in sports. When people end their active participation in one sport context, they often initiate participation in another context—one that is more or less competitive, for example. Terminating active participation due to victimization or exploitation is rare, although burnout, injuries, and negative experiences can and do influence decisions to change or end participation. Changes in patterns of sport participation often are associated with transitions in the rest of a person's life, such as moving from one school to another, graduating, initiating a career, marriage, and becoming a parent. And for people who end long careers in sports, adjustment problems are most common among those who have weakly defined identities apart from sports and lack the social and material resources required for making transitions into other careers, relationships, and social worlds.

The belief that sport builds character has its origins in the class and gender relations of mid-nineteenth century England. Although the history of beliefs about the consequences of sport participation varies by society, the notion that sport produces positive socialization effects has been widely accepted in most western industrial and post-industrial societies, especially England, Canada, and the United States. For nearly a century the validity of these beliefs were taken for granted and promoted by those associated with organized competitive sports in these countries. It was not until the 1950s that people began to use research to test the validity of these beliefs.

Most studies between the 1950s and the late 1980s consisted of atheoretical, correlational analyses presenting statistical comparisons of the attributes of "athletes" and "nonathletes," usually consisting of students in US high schools. The dependent variables in these studies included academic achievement, occupational mobility, prestige and status in school cultures, political orientations, rates of delinquency and deviance, and various character traits such as moral development. Because few of the studies used longitudinal, pre-test/post-test designs, research findings were usually qualified in light of questions about "socialization effects" (i.e., the attributes that were actually "caused" by sport participation) versus "selection effects" (i.e., the attributes that were initially possessed by those who chose to play organized sports or were selected to play by coaches and program directors). Additionally, most of these correlational studies simply divided all respondents into so-called "athletes" and "nonathletes," thereby ignoring their participation histories and the confounding effects of participation in a wide range

of activities offering experiences closely resembling those offered by playing on school-sponsored varsity teams.

McCormack and Chalip published an important article in 1988 in which they critiqued the methodological premises of research on socialization through sports. They noted that most researchers mistakenly assumed that (a) all sports offered participants the same unique experiences, (b) all sport experiences were strong enough to have a measurable impact on participants' characters and orientations, (c) all sport participants passively internalized the "moral lessons" inherently contained in the sport experience, and (d) that sport participation provided socialization experiences that were unavailable through other activities. These assumptions led researchers to overlook that (a) sports are social constructions and offer diverse socialization experiences, (b) participants give meanings to sport experiences and those meanings vary with the social and cultural contexts in which participation occurs, (c) the personal implications of sport participation are integrated into people's lives in connection with other experiences and relationships, and (d) sport participation involves agency in the form of making choices about and altering the conditions of participation. Focusing strictly on socialization outcomes led researchers to overlook the processes that constituted the core of socialization itself. Therefore, their studies missed the tension, negotiation, misunderstanding, and resistance that characterize lived sport experiences.

These assumptions and oversights led to a vast array of studies containing contradictory and confusing findings often leading to the conclusion that little could be said about socialization through sports. However, studies done during the 1980s and 1990s, often using interactionist and critical theories, began to focus less on socialization outcomes and more on the social processes associated with sport participation and the social and cultural contexts in which sport experiences were given meaning and integrated into people's lives. The findings in these studies indicated the following:

- Sports are organized in many different ways across programs, teams, and situations offering many different socialization experiences, both positive and negative, to participants.
- People who choose to play sports, those who are selected to participate by coaches, and those who remain on teams generally differ from others in terms of their characteristics and relationships.
- The meanings that people give to their sport experiences vary by context, by gender, race/ethnicity, social class, age, and (dis)ability, and they change through the life course as people redefine themselves and their connections with others.
- Socialization occurs through the social relationships and interaction that accompanies sport participation, and patterns of social interaction in sports are influenced by many factors, including those external to sport environments.
- Socialization through sports is tied to issues of identity and identity development.

These findings indicate that sports are most accurately viewed as sites for socialization experiences rather than causes of specific socialization outcomes. This distinction acknowledges that sports and sport participation may involve powerful and memorable experiences, but that those experiences take on meaning only through social relationships that occur in particular social and cultural contexts.

Since the early-1990s a growing number of studies focused on sports and sport culture have viewed socialization as a community and cultural process. Using combinations of critical theories, cultural studies, and poststructuralism, researchers have done textual and semiotic

analyses in which they focus on sports as sites where people construct and tell stories that can be used to make sense of their lives and the worlds in which they live. In the process, culture is produced, reproduced, reformed, or transformed. Much of this research analyzes media-based discourses by deconstructing the images and narratives used in connection with sports and the personas of sport figures, especially high-profile athletes.

This research acknowledges that the discourses that constitute sports, sport experiences, and sport events have become influential narratives in twenty-first century culture. They are implicated in struggles over meanings, processes of ideological hegemony, and the expansion of global capitalism and neoliberal consumer culture. One of the goals of this research is to understand sports in ways that contribute to informed and progressive explanations of the political, economic, and social issues that influence people's lives.

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## Topic 2. Making decisions about sport participation

Adapted from:
Coakley, Jay, and Anita White. 1992. Making decisions: Gender and sport participation among British adolescents. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 9, 1: 20–35.

**Abstract**
This study was designed to explore the dynamics of how young people make decisions about their sport participation. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 34 young men and 26 young women, aged 13–23 (only three were older than 18), from predominantly working class families residing in an industrial area southeast of London. Interviews focused on descriptions of sport experiences, how young people defined and interpreted those experiences, how their definitions and interpretations influenced decisions about participation, and how participation was integrated into the rest of their lives. We found that young women and men shared concerns about their transition into adulthood and had common desires to develop and display personal competence and autonomy. However, these common concerns were significantly mediated by gender. Furthermore, gender differences were found in the ways sport experiences were defined and interpreted, in the ways constraints related to money, parents, and how opposite-sex friends operated, and in the ways past experiences in physical education and school sports were incorporated into current decision-making about sport participation. Conclusions emphasize that decisions about sport participation among young people are grounded in the relationship between participation and the context in which decisions are made.

**Introduction**
In 1985 the British Sports Council initiated a media-marketing campaign designed to “sell” sport participation to young people, especially 14–18 year old working class youth who had quit or never participated in organized sport programs. The campaign, promoted under the slogan “Ever Thought of Sport?”, involved three waves of poster blitzes (on buses, in underground stations, etc.), a series of radio commercials featuring a popular comedian promoting organized sports, six promotional half-hour television programs accompanied by leaflets, and a special phone-in service to provide information on available programs. The poster blitzes were scheduled to coincide with school vacations. In addition to the national campaign, regional and local sports council offices and departments promoted specific programs in their own areas. The general goal was to get young people “switched on” to organized sport activities, which were defined by many adults in positions of power within the Sports Council as constructive and healthy leisure pursuits.

The overall success of the campaign was mixed. Although some sport programs did attract “new” participants, it was generally felt that young people had not been favorably influenced by the media-marketing materials. Many people thought the images used in the campaign were derogatory and patronizing. For example, posters portrayed those who did not participate in organized sport programs as dull, apathetic, and “switched off” to life, while participants in formally organized programs were portrayed as clean-cut, energetic, interesting, and “switched on” to life (illustrated by a bright, “switched on” light bulb above their heads).

This paper is based on a qualitative “evaluation study” carried out in conjunction with the campaign; the study was funded by one of the regional Sports Council offices (Greater London

and South East Region). The director and staff in this office were interested in more than the planned statistical summary of national pre/post campaign participation data. Instead of focusing on the campaign itself, we collected data on the sport participation choices made by young people in the targeted age groups, the social and relational contexts in which choices were made, and the connection between choices and the ways in which the young people perceived themselves and their lives.

The study was grounded in an interactionist approach. It was not assumed that young people somehow "get socialized into sport" in response to external influences, nor was it assumed that socialization into sport conforms to an "instantaneous conversion" model, although that was the model on which the "Ever Thought of Sport?" campaign was based. Instead, it was assumed that young people become involved in sport through a series of shifting, back-and-forth decisions made within the structural, ideological, and cultural context of their social worlds. Therefore, the study was designed to explore the following:

1. The problematic nature of both participation and nonparticipation in sport,
2. The decision-making processes underlying sport involvement, and
3. The ways in which sport participation decisions are related to the situations and events in young people's lives, and to the ways young people see themselves and their connections to the rest of the social world.

Stevenson (1990a, b) used a similar approach in his study of the process of identity development among young people as they became involved in and committed to the pursuit of goals in specialized, elite amateur sports. Donnelly and Young (1988) also used an interactionist approach in their study of the process of identity construction and confirmation among serous rock climbers and rugby players. Unlike the research of Stevenson or Donnelly and Young, this study did not focus on elite athletes or on those whose identities as athletes were exceptionally salient and grounded in a long term association with a specific group of fellow sport participants. Instead, our sample consisted of young people who did not have exceptional physical skills or strong desires to take sport seriously; these were young people for whom sport involvement was not a central life concern or a central source of self-identification. Nevertheless, we were concerned with how these young people went about making choices to participate or not participate in formally organized sports and in informally organized physical activities.

In line with more recent critiques of the "socialization into sport" literature (Fishwick and Greendorfer, 1987; Greendorfer, 1987; Greendorfer and Bruce, 1989; Hasbrook, 1989; McPherson, 1980, 1986; Nixon, 1990; and Theberge, 1984), we were interested in the ways in which young people act as agents creating their own sport lives within the constraints of the social situations in which they make choices about what they will do and who they will be. Although this study was not designed to highlight the effects of gender in this decision-making process, we found that gender impacted the lives of the young people we interviewed in a pervasive and powerful way. This paper demonstrates the importance of gender, by itself and in conjunction with class, in understanding the decisions young people make about sport involvement.

## Methods

### A. The Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-six young women and thirty-four young men aged 13–23 (only 3 of whom were older than 18). Half of the interviewees were chosen because they were actively involved in a series of sports programs promoted in

conjunction with the *"Ever Thought of Sport?"* campaign, while the other half were identified by teachers or program organizers as "drop-outs" or "non-participants."[1] In selecting the sample we attempted to talk with equal numbers of males and females from as many racial and ethnic backgrounds as possible. About 85% of the young people were white, native Britons, 15% had other racial or ethnic backgrounds (blacks with either African or West Indian heritage, Indians, and other Asians). About 75% were from working class families, and 25% were from moderately successful middle-class families. All interviews, lasting an average of about 45 minutes each, were tape recorded. Conversations elicited information about personal background including school attended and employment status, living situation, family, and the occupations of the adults in their households.

The order in which topics were covered during the interviews varied for each respondent depending on the circumstances under which the interview was conducted and what was disclosed in response to questions about personal backgrounds. Our intention was to make the interviews as much like informal conversations as possible. We did not want the young people to be intimidated nor did we want them to think that we had some "hidden agenda" underlying our interviews.

Despite variations, each interview usually began with questions about the respondents' sport backgrounds and the activities they engaged in during their leisure time. After obtaining general descriptions of the nature and frequency of their leisure activities we asked specific questions about what happened when they first decided to become involved in certain activities, their initial experiences in those activities, the dynamics of staying involved, and how they perceived their involvement patterns in the future. Furthermore, we asked about relationships between specific leisure activities and friends (same-sex and opposite-sex), family members, school, work (where appropriate), and any other people and activities. The overall goal of the interviews was to elicit descriptions of the events and situations associated with decisions to participate or not participate in targeted programs as well as sport and leisure activities in general.

In our discussions about participation decisions we avoided asking *"why?"* questions. Such questions usually encourage answers in the form of clichés because people often find it difficult to articulate their motives and, when they try, they often construct answers to justify their behaviors in ways they think will be accepted as legitimate by the interviewers. Instead, we focused on what, when, and how things happened in the young people's lives. This made it much easier to interject probes asking for clarifications in an unthreatening manner. We never wanted the young people to think we were challenging their decisions or demanding explanations for "why" they did certain things, or "why" they chose some activities over others. We were looking for descriptions for what happened in their lives rather than justifications for why they did what they did.

We were pleased with the dynamics of the interviews. The respondents generally enjoyed talking about themselves and even the shy or defiant ones seemed to warm up after conversations got going. In only one case did we seriously doubt the honesty of the information being disclosed by a respondent.

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[1]The Greater London and South East Regional Sports Council commissioned this study as a part of a larger evaluation of a campaign designed to attract more young people into sport. A full report including background information about the respondents, the area in which the research was conducted, and recommendations to the Sports Council is available (White and Coakley, 1986).

**B. Qualitative Analysis**
It is not easy to use interview data as a basis for making conclusions. Such data cannot be used to generate statistics that can be compared and analyzed apart from the lives of those being studied. However, they do provide information going beyond the sometimes superficial responses elicited by survey questionnaires sent to a large sample of respondents. The challenge in analyzing interview data is identifying patterns in the responses of different individuals and highlighting important content in a wide range of information given by each individual respondent.

After completing each interview, we made notes about any aspects of the interview or interview situation that might be helpful during the analysis phase. As soon as possible we listened to the tapes together, noted emerging patterns in the data, and transcribed key statements made by the young people. Throughout the analysis process we raised critical questions about our interpretations of interview statements. When making sense out of these statements it was necessary to interpret them in the light of how behavior is influenced by the social settings in which choices about behavior are made; therefore, factors such as age, gender, social class, race/ethnicity, and the nature of important relationships in the person's life were taken into account during the interpretation process.

**Findings**
The interview data indicated that the decisions young people made about sport participation reflected the following:

1. A consideration of the future, especially the transition to adulthood
2. A desire to display and extend personal competence and autonomy
3. Constraints related to money, parents, and opposite sex friends
4. Support and encouragement from parents, relatives, and/or peers
5. Past experiences in school sports and physical education

Each of these factors is discussed in the following sections with reference to the ways in which young women and young men define themselves, their lives, and the place of sport in their lives.

**A. Decisions about sport participation were based on concerns about becoming adults**
Decisions about participation in sport activities were often grounded in concerns about how those activities were connected to the young person's transition into adulthood. This was especially the case for those over 15 years old. Most of these young people were extremely sensitive to the issue of growing up, and they often chose leisure activities they thought would either prepare them for adult roles or give them opportunities to do adult things (i.e., to be independent and autonomous). They seemed to recognize that the transition from adolescence to adulthood was a significant turning point in their lives, and they spent considerable time and energy trying to move through that transition in a successful fashion. Decisions to participate in certain sport activities were most likely when the activities were seen as related to this transition to adulthood. When the activities were seen as interfering with this transition, or if the activities were associated with childhood, the young people almost always decided not to participate.

Some young people clearly indicated that involvement in highly structured adult-organized sport programs was subjectively associated with being a child or being a student, and these were two roles they often wanted to leave behind them. For example, a 15-year old told us that she and her friends dropped out of school netball in their 3rd year because they thought it was "babyish". One of the things making it "babyish" was that they had to play with younger girls. A further problem was that boys were often around to observe them, and they did not want boys defining

them as immature. When young people linked a sport activity to childhood, they defined participation as either irrelevant to the way they saw themselves as adolescents or as "babyish". The result was that they did not seek opportunities to become involved in organized sport activities.

This orientation was also noted in our interviews with a young people who had just made the transition from primary school to secondary school, especially in the case of young women. Some respondents thought that when they entered secondary school they were supposed to be "grown up", and that being "grown up" did not involve playing "kids games" or learning to do physical activities and sports normally learned as a child in primary school or in children's programs. They thought that if you did not already know how to do certain physical activities or play certain sports, it was not appropriate, in light of their concerns about becoming adults, to go back and learn what they had not learned during childhood. This conclusion was most likely among young people who perceived sport programs as commonly being organized and supervised by adults who would treat them as children instead of as young people concerned with taking control of their own lives. To our respondents, being an adult meant having a job and being independent, or being married and starting a family, but it did not mean playing sports in settings that could not in some way be linked to adulthood. For those with this orientation, making the decision to participate in an organized sport program and learning to play sports that others learned to play as children was perceived as a step backwards in their development.

Young women were more likely than young men to conclude that sport had little or nothing to do with adulthood for them. They did not define sport in ways that made it easy to connect with the process of becoming a woman. In fact, the opposite tended to be the case. Becoming a woman, according to the norms they had learned while growing up, usually meant that sport participation was given a low priority in their lives. More relevant to "womanhood" were activities and relationships through which "femininity" in a traditional sense could be reaffirmed. The young women generally used traditional gender stereotypes to define what should happen during their transition to adulthood. Among young men, sport participation was much more likely to be seen as compatible with becoming a man, even when it had no direct connection with jobs or future careers. Involvement in sports was seen by some as a reaffirmation of their manhood. However, the young women did not see their womanhood similarly reaffirmed through sport participation.

The only exceptions to this pattern were three young women who clearly saw sports and physical activities as avenues through which they could prove to themselves and to males that they deserved respect as competent human beings. For example, a 17-year old who did weight training explained her interest in the following way:

> *"I think mainly I want to be able to be equal with the blokes because I think too many girls get pushed around by blokes. They get called names and things. I think that's wrong. They say 'a girl can't do this, a girl can't do that', and I don't like it at all. I'd rather be, you know, equal."*

A second young woman, 15-years old, indicated that sport was just as important for girls as it was for boys because *"if you sort of excel at sport as a girl at least you get the respect of the boys rather than hearing 'oh, she's a sissy little girl'."* Another young woman, an 18-year old who had taken a sport leadership training course and who was very sensitive to the chauvinism of many males, took great pride in showing males that their gender stereotypes did not apply to her in sport settings. She explained her orientation in a description of what happened in a volleyball game in which she was the only female participant:

*"There was a few chauvinistic men there but I proved myself in the end. We all had a game of volleyball and I was the only girl playing. First they said 'don't pass it to her.' Little did they know I was one of the best players at our school. I started doing these smashes over their heads and won their respect in the end. But you really have to prove yourself to them, but they're alright now."*

**B. Decisions about sport participation were based on concerns about personal competence.**
In our interviews it was apparent that young people were most likely to decide to participate in a sport activity when the activity was seen as an avenue for displaying or extending their competence. Research has shown that perceived competence is a primary motivational factor underlying voluntary participation in any sport activity (Burton and Martens, 1986; Evans and Roberts, 1987; Feltz and Petlichkoff, 1983; Klint and Weiss, 1987; Nichols, 1984; Roberts, Kleiber, and Duda, 1981), so this was not a surprising finding. For example, a 13-year old dancer explained that she liked dancing "because I know myself I can do it." A thoughtful, unemployed young man who had just turned 20 said that without certain skills a person could not experience the challenges provided by sports and leisure activities. He played chess and board games because he was good enough at them to experience the challenges they offered. But the challenges offered by football (soccer) escaped him because he didn't have the physical skills needed to play the game at a certain level. He explained that *"I'm not very interested in football...if I was a better player, then yes, I'd play more."* A 16-year old member of a cycling touring club told us he would not join a racing club until he knew he was *"good enough."* A 14-year old who enjoyed basketball at her school said she would not join a basketball club because *"I'm not very good...If you're not good, you get shown up, don't you? You feel stupid---if you do something wrong you feel stupid."* A 17-year old explained that *"if I did something that I didn't feel so useless at, I'd keep at it...But when you're useless at something, you're not so enthusiastic."*

Perceptions of competence also had an impact on the decisions of young people with high level skills. One of the recurring themes in our interviews with a few of the young people who had been regularly and seriously involved in a particular sport was that a "participation turning point" usually came when they decided their skills had realistically "reached their peak." "Reaching their peak" occurred when they realized that skills would not continue to improve or that improvement would demand more time and energy than they were willing to commit given their expanding interests and changing priorities. When this happened, continued participation became problematic. Those who decided to continue usually saw participation as compatible with their transition into adulthood or as an opportunity to develop skills having occupational relevance. For example, two dancer/gymnasts, one 15 years old and the other 18, who decided to take a sport leadership training course (similar to a coaching education certification program) had both realized that they could go no further in developing their own performance skills, and that continued involvement with dance and gymnastics depended on moving into teaching and/or coaching roles.

Gender had a powerful effect on the way in which young women and young men defined themselves as "sportspersons." Decisions to participate in sport were generally based on a conclusion that involvement was consistent with their self-definitions. In our interviews with young women it was noted that self-definitions occasionally interfered with making decisions to include sport participation as a part of their lives. The young women in our sample were not as likely as young men to define themselves as "sportspersons," even when they were physically

active. For example, a number of young women did not consider themselves to be "sportspersons" even though they were regularly involved in physical activities like swimming or skating. They had learned to define sport and sport participation in a very restricted manner. Their restricted definition led them to conclude that if the activity was not competitive, if there were no winners and losers, if there were no formal commitments to achievement and improvement, and if there were no organized teams or matches, then it was not sport. In their statements about sport participation they indicated that sport was something they had occasionally participated in when they were in school, but it was not what they did on their own for recreational purposes. They had "concluded" that sport was much more compatible with being a man than with being a woman, and that being a "sportsperson" usually entailed involvement in an organized, competitive, physical activity. Therefore, when someone mentioned sports they simply tuned them out and heard little about what was being said, even if it was encouraging.

Among a few of the young women this orientation had been intensified through their experiences at school. For example, a 15-year-old secondary school student astutely observed that if girls were supposed to play sports at her school, they should not have been assigned a gym so small that they couldn't play any active games. She was keenly aware that the boys in the school had access to a larger gym for their physical education classes and sport activities, and she had concluded the physical education teacher had not taken the young women seriously enough as sports people to give them an equal share of the sports facilities and sports resources at the school. She informed us that she had picked up a very clear message in this situation: girls were not meant to take sports seriously. Throughout the interview, it was clear that she didn't take sport seriously in any way.

The young men on the other hand, were much more likely to define themselves as "sportspersons" even when they were not regularly involved in a physical activity. Very few young men had not had at least some experience with football, and it seemed that even minimal experience with football or cricket provided a basis for identifying themselves as "sportspersons." The fact that sport and sport participation was positively associated with manhood and masculinity in their minds served to encourage and reaffirm this conclusion for most of the males. However, there were some exceptions to this. Some young men who lacked skills in popular sports, especially football, had received such negative feedback that they had taken great care to avoid any participation in organized sports. They had become physically inactive or had restricted involvement to informal physical activities done on their own or in the company of a close friend or family member.

**C. Decisions about sport participation reflected constraints related to money, parents, and opposite-sex friends.**

**1. Financial constraints**

Financial constraints had a significant impact on the sport participation patterns of both young women and young men in our sample. The availability of material resources affected access to transportation, to the equipment used in certain sports, and to facilities and programs in which there were entry fees, users fees, or membership dues. For example, an 18-year old who had participated in dance and gymnastics for nearly nine years indicated that money had long been an issue in her mind even though her parents had supported her involvement. She explained in the following way:

*"I felt very bad, my mother wanted me to carry on but I felt guilty. When I started, the other girls, their dads were solicitors and bank managers and doctors and we were really the lowest of the low; my dad's a carpenter, you know...It didn't bother me until I started realizing that prices kept going up and I needed new changes of leotards and tracksuits."*

The lack of money would have caused her to drop out of the program, but she became an assistant instructor so her participation fees were waived. A 15- year old high school student from a working class family also noted that her sport participation was limited because "Whenever you want to go somewhere (money) is always a problem...First problem is how to get there, second problem is money." Others, males and females, told us they lacked the necessary equipment to participate in available programs.

**2. Parental Constraints**

Despite recent changes in the definitions of gender roles for women, parental constraints were mentioned almost exclusively by the young women in our sample. The young women encountered more constraints than their male counterparts when it came to making decisions about sport and leisure activities. Interview data suggested that parents were more "protective" of their daughters than of their sons. Girls' schedules were more closely monitored, and parental expectations were more clearly stated when it came to where their daughters could go to participate in any leisure activities, who they could go with, and when they had to return. These expectations seemed to lead many of the female respondents to be more careful in selecting and becoming committed to leisure activities, including sports. For example, joining a school team sometimes presented problems because practices or matches often did not end until dusk or later, and the trip home would have to be made after dark (which came very early between late October and early February in England).

Many of the girls were required to make special arrangements with parents or friends if they expected to be out after dark. When we probed this issue, most of the young women seemed to accept these expectations as "normal" in the sense that they voiced no objections to having to conform to them. But it was clear that their awareness of and response to these expectations had an impact on their decisions about sport participation. For example, cooperation between participants' families facilitated the attendance of four 14-year old girls at a basketball course. The course ran on Tuesday evenings between 5:30pm and 7:30pm at a sport center a few miles away from the girls' homes. Arrangements were made between families for the girls to go directly from school to one of their homes where they would have tea and do homework before being transported by one of the parents to the sport center. Another parent would collect the girls at the end of the session and deliver them back to their homes. Without this support and facilitation by their parents it is unlikely that these girls, though very keen and highly motivated, would have participated in the basketball course. We spoke to two other girls who dropped out of the course and discovered that despite enjoying the first sessions and wanting to stay involved they were unable to do so because the father who had been providing rides was moved to a later shift at work and was no longer able to take them to the sport center; other private transportation was not available.

Many of the young women in our sample were also expected to give their parents a relatively accurate accounting of their leisure activities. From their comments about what they said to their parents, it seemed that the legitimacy of their accounts could be increased if they pointed out they were with a close friend. Therefore, while young men often hung around with a group of nameless "mates," girls were more likely to say they spent time with a known "best friend." This

tendency to emphasize a single "best friend" known by parents seemed to be partially linked to parental constraints and the "conditional permission" girls received from their parents to participate in leisure activities. "Conditional permission" was tied to subtle expectations related to leisure activities. For example, a few young women noted that their parents did encourage them to do things after school and on weekends as long as they met other conditions that were built right into and accepted as a part of the parent-child relationship. So they did not do things that would keep them out past dark or keep them from getting home to help with the family meal or clean up around the house. In discussing this issue a 16-year old told us the following: *"I think my parents encouraged me. Well, if it was dark they weren't too keen on me staying behind (after school). If there was someone to walk with I'd play; if not, I wouldn't stay."* Fairness did not seem to be an issue when parental protectiveness constrained the sport participation of girls and young women; the basis of the constraints were either accepted or associated with parental concerns for their safety and well-being.

The young men and boys in our sample seldom mentioned anything indicating that they were aware of such clearly understood conditions related to their choice of activities. As a result they freely used public transportation, even after dark, and they made decisions about leisure activities without feeling constrained by anticipated "conditional permissions" from parents. Although none of the boys or young men discussed this issue, it was clear that they would have had difficulty associating parental constraints with concerns for their safety and well-being; they seemed to take their independence for granted, and they saw their safety and well-being as things to be handled on their own.

### 3. Constraints connected with opposite-sex relationships

Because of the structure of most male/female relationships, the sport and leisure activities of young women were often altered when they had boyfriends. Young men were more likely to be the dominant persons in the relationships mentioned by the young people in our sample. Young men with girlfriends initiated most of the activities done as a couple, they usually had the final say about activities, and they more often chose to do things on their own than was the case for the young women who had boyfriends.

A few of the young men interviewed were explicit in saying that they would not allow girlfriends to interfere with their leisure activities. This did not mean they were unconcerned about their girlfriends, but they usually based their decisions about leisure on their own interests and preferences. The young men also tended to assume that if they wanted to do something, their girlfriends would be supportive of their decisions. For example, when asked about how his girlfriend might influence his decisions about sport participation, an 18-year old told us that *"I do what I want,"* and once he made up his mind to do something it would be okay if his girlfriend followed him, but if she didn't want to, he'd do it without her. Similarly, a 16-year old member of a roller hockey club indicated that his girlfriend was important in his life, but that she knew better than to interfere with his hockey participation. Another hockey player, a 19-year old, said that his girlfriend usually attended his weekly games, but that she couldn't go to the last game because the car was too full of male players and their male friends.

In our interviews with young women we heard a clearly different story. They were much more sensitive to the sport and leisure preferences and patterns of their boyfriends, and they usually tried to anticipate those preferences and patterns before they made decisions about their own activities. They often gave their own interests a low priority for the sake of maintaining their relationships with boyfriends. Their relationships took priority in their lives, and their sport

and leisure activities were often chosen because they fit with the interests of their boyfriends. For example, a 17-year old who ice skated 3-times a week before she met her new boyfriend explained that she had *"cut skating down to once in a blue moon... I started `going with' my boyfriend and I just lost interest in skating really...He skates very badly... We tried skating together, but he's not really keen on it...If it weren't for him, I think I'd go every night...I don't' have the money to do much; I rely on my boyfriend really."*

**D. Decisions about sport participation reflect support and encouragement from "significant others"**

The interview data clearly indicated that decisions to begin participation in a sport, as well as decisions to continue participation, were tied to encouragement and support from others who were important in their lives. The patterns of influence coming from these "significant others" varied according to age, gender, and class. For 13-16 year olds encouragement and support from parents were particularly important. Several of the young people (aged 13 and 14) in an organized tennis program told us that their parents had seen the program advertised locally and had specifically encouraged them to enroll. Moreover, parents often provided the money and transportation needed to begin and continue participation. This was especially crucial for young women because they were much more likely than their male counterparts to have less flexible expectations about away-from-home activities. Parents were also important in encouraging continued participation among the younger respondents. A 13-year old girl told us *"last year I wanted to give up dancing but my Mum and Dad just kept on pushing me saying, 'you can do it'...and now I know I can."*

For young people over age 16, the `significant others' were more likely to be adults who served as advocates or models for them. Two young women who participated in a sport leadership training course had enrolled because their gymnastic teacher, whom they respected and looked up to, had suggested they should. They knew very little about the course before they went, but the strong recommendation and encouragement from their teacher was a sufficient basis for making the decision to attend. Similarly, two of the young men who took the same course attended on the recommendation of their supervisors at work. Again the significance of the person who made the recommendation was more important that what they knew about the course itself. In another case, a 23-year old mentally challenged woman was given much needed support by an older woman staff member described to us as "my best mate." The respondent, who attended an organized program for adolescents, also told us that it was the staff member who had given her sufficient confidence to try activities like bowls, badminton and table tennis, and had provided further assistance by accompanying and playing with her.

Friends of the same sex also provided social support for young people in the process of getting involved and staying involved in sport. Young women were more likely than young men to mention the influence of same-sex friends. A number of the young women indicated they would not have made the decisions to participate in an activity or scheme unless a friend had accompanied them. For example, the 5 basketball players we interviewed all provided strong social support for one another in addition to the support provided by their parents. This support had been especially necessary during their first sessions because most of the other participants were males who were a potential source of intimidation for the young women. The young men were not as apt to say they needed a friend to accompany them when they initiated participation in a sport activity or program. A few of the young men had initiated participation in activities or programs knowing that someone they knew would be there, but instead of looking for personal

support related to their participation, they indicated they were simply interested in finding a familiar face.

**E. Decisions about sport participation reflect past experiences in school sports and physical education classes**

The finding that decisions about sport participation reflected past experiences was not surprising. However, what stood out on this topic was that many young people, especially young women, made specific references to school-related experiences when discussing their current attitudes toward sport. What had happened on school teams or in physical education classes served as the basis for what they expected in future sport experiences. Sometimes these memories were positive but, more often, they were negative and they affected current motivation and interest in a negative fashion. The major themes in these negative memories revolved around boredom and lack of choice, feeling stupid and incompetent, and receiving negative evaluation from peers.

For young women, physical education was often associated with feelings of discomfort and embarrassment. Usually it was not the activity itself which turned them off physical education and sport, but the rules and arrangements pertaining to gym wear and the changing/showering routine which typically accompanied physical education in schools. For example, in response to a question about physical education, a 14-year old secondary school student answered: *"I didn't like gym...because I was bigger than everyone else, and if we had to do things like going over benches and if we had to crawl through, I hated that cos' me and my friend were big."* She had enjoyed ice skating when it was offered as an option, but it only lasted for a short time. She had played netball with the school team but had dropped out after playing goalkeeper during a 14-0 loss by her team. She explained that after the game *"Everyone was going 'oh, it's your fault,' and I felt a bit bad. And it was cold and I just had to stand there."*

In other comments about physical education experiences, a 13-year old young woman said the following:

> *"I don't like it. I don't like going in the gym when you have to have bare feet, there's always a risk of passing verrucas (plantar warts) and athlete's foot...that makes me shiver. I don't like that. And I don't like showers either. I think we should have separate showers. We've got them but they're not in use. There's a lack of privacy. It's totally open. You're not allowed to take your towel in with you. You've got to hang it up on the rail and walk through...Most of us in our year forge notes to get out, you know, headache, heavy cold, whatever. Mostly it's because they don't like cold weather and having to wear shorts...And the gym for girls is too small to do anything."*

Similarly, a 14-year old who said she never liked physical education classes because you were made to *"go running round the streets in these horrible short skirts."* Privacy and appearance issues were important for young women. Unless sport participation allowed the young women opportunities to control their presentation of self in a way that fit with their definition of who they were, they were not likely to participate.

The young men we interviewed were less likely to voice dissatisfactions with past experiences in physical education and school sports. It seemed that the physical education and sport activities were organized in ways that fit more closely with their interests and skills than was the case for young women. But we also suspected that young men were less likely to admit they did not like the sports activities they played during physical education classes and after school. None of the young men complained about the cold weather or about having to wear shorts, or about the showers. The only negative memories discussed by the males were those

related to being teased or called names by their peers during activities or games, especially football games. Apparently, braving the cold weather and handling interaction in a locker/shower room were seen as compatible with the way these young men saw themselves and their connections to peers.

There were also some favorable comments about school sports and physical education. A few of the young men we interviewed indicated that their current interests in sport were grounded in earlier experiences at school. Although they had not been regular participants in a certain sport when they were introduced to it, they felt familiar enough with it to take it up at a later date. Some young women spoke positively of opportunities they were given to participate in non-traditional activities like skating. They also enjoyed sex-integrated activities like badminton and basketball which were offered during their senior years.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The interview data collected in this study of adolescents clearly showed that sport participation was not a separate experience in young people's lives; the decision to participate in sports was integrally tied to the way young people viewed themselves and their connection to the social world in which they lived their lives. They saw sport activities in terms of how they were related to self-conceptions and what they wanted to do with their lives. Identity was a major factor in the decision-making process, but simply being an athlete was not an identity that the young people in our sample saw as satisfactory or satisfying in light of their self-conceptions and overall life goals. In other words, these young people did not see sport as central to their lives; sport participation and sport skills were peripheral to other issues and concerns. Involvement and commitment to involvement in sport and leisure shifted over time depending on new opportunities and changes in the lives and self-conceptions of the young men and women.

The young men and women we interviewed seemed to be especially sensitive to making the transition into adulthood, and they shared concerns about the futures they could create for themselves, and the people they would become. They also shared a desire to develop and display personal competence be it in sport or in activities having occupational relevance. These concerns and desires were worked out within the constraints of the social worlds in which they lived. Access to material resources as well as the dynamics of class relations influenced the range of choices and the decisions these young people made when it came to sport participation. For example, working class youths not only lacked resources to participate in certain sports, but they were not eager to participate in sports identified with the middle class because their participation might evoke ridicule or rejection from those whose support was valued and needed as they made the transition into adulthood. Although economic factors were important in our data, constraints related to gender and gender relations emerged as especially influential in decision-making processes. As part of the everyday reality of social life, traditional cultural practices related to gender seem to have been taken for granted by most young men and women in our sample. Resistance to traditional cultural practices was minimal. None of the young men and only a few of the young women we interviewed demonstrated awareness of issues or inequities related to gender, even though their decisions about sport participation clearly reflected the ways in which traditional gender definitions had been incorporated into their identities.

Gender distinctions relative to sport have traditionally been made explicit in British schools through sex-segregated physical education curricula in which females and males are usually taught different activities in single sex groups, by same-sex teachers (Leaman, 1984; Scraton, 1986, 1987). Within the social organization of the schools, sporting prowess has generally

brought high status to young men, but not to young women. In our data this seemed to be reflected in the fact that young men were more likely than young women to be ridiculed if they were physically inept and clumsy, while young women were more likely see sport as irrelevant in their lives. Co-ed physical education classes in the later secondary years were welcomed by some of the young people we spoke to, but there were others, mostly young women, who were not keen on such an idea because they perceived their competence in sport and physical activities to be especially low.

Many of the young women in our sample had been “switched off” sport long before they left school. But even for those whose school experiences had been positive, continued participation in sport was unlikely unless they were directly involved with other individuals who could sponsor and protect them. For example, if a family member or close friend known to the family was involved in sport, then it was considered appropriate and safe for a young woman to participate in a program or an activity. If this was not the case, young women, even if they wanted to participate, would not be likely to receive the necessary support and encouragement from others who generally sanctioned their activities. For young men there was usually no problem in being out and away from home after dark. Interview data indicated that groups of young men were free to decide, on the spur of the moment, to engage in whatever activities appealed to them such as an informal game of football, or a visit to a snooker hall. As they explained this it was clear that they did not feel that they had to make arrangements in advance that would then be “submitted” for approval from parents, girlfriends, or anyone else.

Parents were not the only people who restricted the freedom of young women in our sample. Brothers and boyfriends also took a “protective” (and controlling) stance in their relationships with their sisters and girlfriends. In their eyes, venues such as snooker halls were considered unsuitable places for “girls” to go--particularly if they went alone. It was permissible for the young women to go to such places with their boyfriends or brothers, but when they went with men, they would generally end up as spectators and supporters rather than participants in games or activities. Most young women accepted this form of “protection” that ultimately limited their active participation in games and sports, and destined them to be passive spectators. However, there were a handful of exceptions. For example, an unemployed young woman took pleasure in weight training because it gave her a forum in which she could demonstrate toughness and strength to men who might want to “push her around.” Two other young women felt an enhanced sense of pride and self-esteem when their physical abilities enabled them to compete effectively with men in sport contexts. This suggests that sport participation can be a means for individual women to extend and display competence in ways that give them more personal control over their lives relative to men, or at least a feeling of more control. However, few of the young women in our study saw or used sport in this way.

Our findings about the ways in which gender is related to decisions about participation in sport and leisure activities are not new (see Frith, 1984, pp. 52–56). However, they do extend what is known about the ways in which socialization is related to sport participation. Young people do not “get socialized into sport” in the sense that they simply internalize or respond to external influences; nor do young people “get socialized out of sport” in the sense that they drop out in response to external influences. Instead, sport participation (and nonparticipation) is the result of decisions negotiated within the context of a young person’s social environment and mediated by the young person’s view of self and personal goals. Neither participation nor nonparticipation is a “once and for all time” phenomenon explainable in terms of a quantitative, cause-effect methodological approach. This means that instead of focusing on the statistical

correlates of sport participation, nonparticipation, or dropping out of sport, those in the sociology of sport might spend their time more fruitfully studying decision-making processes in the lives of young people. When the focus is on decision-making rather than sport participation/nonparticipation, it is clear that there must be a concern with process, context, and human agency. The literature in the sociology of sport probably has enough studies reporting lists of sport participation patterns with accompanying lists of variables associated with those patterns for particular people at particular points in time. There seems to be a need for more accounts of ongoing actual experiences and the decisions related to those experiences.

With respect to applied issues, the ultimate goal of this study was to provide British Sports Council administrators and staff, as well as coaches and recreation workers, information about how leisure and sport were integrated into the lives of young people. The implications of this study for organizations such as the Sports Council, which is on record as committed to increasing the participation of women in sport, are clear. An appreciation of the ways in which gender relations operate to restrict women's sport and leisure choices should help teachers, coaches, organizers, and leisure providers to design opportunities for girls and young women, and become increasingly sensitive to the need for overall changes in gender relations. Furthermore, an awareness of how activities preferences among young people are influenced by socially imposed gender and class cultures provides a basis for insights about how to introduce new participation opportunities into the lives of young women and men. If the goal of leisure provision is to provide only what young people have had opportunities to experience in the past, the constraints built into gender and class relations are reproduced again and again. Care and sensitivity are needed to provide young people opportunities to raise questions and move beyond what has traditionally been available and accepted. Only then will leisure and sport become avenues for eliminating socially imposed constraints grounded in gender and class cultures. For adolescents looking toward becoming adults, this would make sport participation a more attractive alternative in their lives than it is now.

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## Topic 3. Burnout among adolescent athletes

Adapted from:

Coakley, Jay. 1992. Burnout among adolescent athletes: A personal failure or social problem? *Sociology of Sport Journal* 9, 3: 271–285.

**Abstract**

Most explanations of burnout among young athletes identify chronic, excessive stress as the cause. Strategies to prevent burnout emphasize techniques that help athletes control stress and adjust to the conditions of their sport participation. However, informal interviews with 15 adolescent athletes identified as cases of burnout suggest that the roots of burnout are grounded in the social organization of high performance sport. These roots are grounded in identity and control issues. The model developed in this paper conceptualizes burnout as a social problem originating in forms of social organization that constrain identity development during adolescence and prevent young athletes from exerting meaningful control over their lives. This model serves as an alternative to more widely used stress-based models of burnout. Recommendations for preventing burnout call for changes in the social organization of high performance sport, changes in the way sport experiences are integrated into the lives of young athletes, and changes in the structure and dynamics of relationships between athletes and their significant others.

**Introduction**

This research is partially based on my experiences with undergraduates and people working with sport organizations. Their analyses of action, events, and issues are firmly framed in psychological terms; and their recommendations for change are based almost exclusively on a "personal problem" approach. In other words, their analyses of action focus on the character of individuals, and change is seen as the outcome of altering individual character and the immediate social relationships believed to shape it.

This approach often leads to the conclusion that there is a need for more control over the lives of people who experience problems. This control, it is believed, will create new forms of adjustment as well as character changes that will enable individuals to avoid troubles in the future; almost without fail, the family is the recommended context for this control.

I've thought about the implications of this analytical approach as I've developed coaching education programs and identified social issues faced by coaches who work with young people. My paper builds on these thoughts and some of my own work that raises questions about the literature on burnout among elite adolescent athletes-literature in which burnout is often framed as a personal failure to cope with the stress associated with high performance sport participation.

**Background on Athlete Burnout**

The concept of burnout became widely known around 1980. In the mid-1980s a few scholars in the psychology of sport described highly talented young athletes who left high performance sport programs in a state of extreme emotional duress as "cases of burnout." Since then, most people who work with athletes have viewed burnout as a personal problem calling for interventions that focus on the character and coping skills of individual athletes facing intense, stress-filled lives of training and competition. Traditional theoretical frameworks in psychology

have been used by sport scientists to explain burnout (Gould, 1987; Schmidt and Stein, 1991; Smith, 1986).

Overall, burnout among young athletes has been and continues to be viewed as aproblematic characteristic of individuals. It is described in terms of a "vocabulary of stress" that is regularly used by coaches, parents, and athletes. This vocabulary leads to interventions that emphasize individual treatment through which young athletes are assisted in managing or adjusting to the conditions of their sport lives. Occasionally, intervention strategies encourage parents, coaches, and other adults who control the conditions of young athletes' sport lives to modify those conditions to control the intensity of stress faced by young athletes.

In most cases, people using this "stress based model" of burnout call for new and more effective controls to be exerted over the lives of young athletes. Intervention is based on the ideological assumption that the social contexts in which young athletes live are fundamentally fair, and if young people experience problems, they have somehow failed to effectively deal with the conditions of their sport participation. Therefore, preventive strategies assist young athletes in dealing with stress and adjusting effectively to the conditions of high performance sport participation. Intervention based on this approach seldom involves strategies for changing sport organizations or the social organization of high performance sport itself. Nor does it call for changes in who controls the conditions of sport participation or the amount of power athletes have over their lives, in and out of sport.

This paper presents information that has led me to reframe burnout as a social problem rather than a personal failure. This means that burnout is a social phenomenon grounded in a set of social relations through which young athletes become so disempowered that they perceive sport participation as a developmental dead-end and as an activity over which they have no meaningful control. I provide evidence suggesting that burnout is best described through a "vocabulary of empowerment" and that effective intervention strategies involve changing the following:

1. The social relations associated with elite sport participation;
2. The amount of control that young athletes have over their own lives in and out of sport;
3. The ability of young athletes to critically assess why they play sports and how sport participation is integrated into their lives;
4. The social organization and the conditions of training and competition in high performance sport programs.

This approach to intervention is based on the notion that high performance sport programs are organized for the purpose of producing performance outcomes rather than opportunities for overall social development and critical self-assessment on the part of young athletes. The approach to intervention based on this "empowerment model" is radically different from the approach based on a "stress based model" of burnout.

According to the stress based model, athlete burnout is conceptualized as an outcome marking the end of a competitive sport career. Research in sport science has involved a search for the correlates of burnout, and this search has repeatedly identified chronic stress as the primary correlate. Much of this literature fits with Smith's (1986) analysis of athlete burnout in which he states the following:

*burnout results from an increase in stress-induced costs. . . . [It] involves a psychological, emotional, and sometimes a physical withdrawal from an activity in response to excessive stress.*

*. . . When burnout occurs, a previously enjoyable activity becomes an aversive source of stress. . . . Burnout is a complex phenomenon. . . . One element common to all definitions, however, is an emphasis on burnout as a response to chronic stress. (Smith, 1986, p. 39)*

In other words, excessive, chronic stress leads to burnout, and burnout in turn leads to chronic stress. Excessive stress is created when environmental demands exceed personal or environmental resources, and when personal or environmental resources exceed environmental demands.

Although Smith and others (cf. Feigley, 1984) identify situational factors that contribute to burnout, interventions to prevent and cope with burnout emphasize stress management and personal adjustment. For example, commonly recommended intervention strategies focus on the following:

1. Increase demands to provide new challenges, or decrease demands to eliminate pressures for the athlete.
2. Help the athlete accurately assess demands and resources, set goals, assess progress toward goals, and think positively about the achievement of goals.
3. Teach the athlete to effectively manage stress, relax, meditate, concentrate, and visualize.
4. Teach the athlete new physical and/or social skills, and use other methods to control the athlete’s antisocial and self-destructive behaviors.

These strategies treat young people in terms of their assumed adjustment problems and their lack of personal coping skills. In extreme cases, the young people are assumed to be “sick.” The prescriptions and cures of this sickness most often consist of goal-setting exercises, self-talk, mental imagery practice, stress management and relaxation exercises, biofeedback, personal growth exercises, and behavior modification programs. Some discussions of preventive strategies have referred to the need for changes in coach-athlete relationships, more autonomy for athletes, and more systematic social support for athletes (Feigley, 1984; Smith, 1986). However, the primary strategies and the ones most frequently used by sport scientists are those that involve increased control over the lives of athletes—by parents, coaches, administrators, and sport scientists.

**Fifteen Conversations with Young Athletes**

When I was doing a project on young people who dropped out of sports, I was able to have long conversation-interviews with 15 young people identified by themselves and others as cases of burnout. The conversations were designed so that young people would describe their lives in as much detail as possible. I specifically wanted to learn about their sport related experiences, but I was generally interested in learning about them as human beings and seeing how sport participation was tied to other dimensions of their lives, including their sense of who they were and how they saw their connections to the social worlds in which they lived.

My sample was strictly a sample of convenience. These were young people I contacted because I knew about them through my own children, friends, and associates in the local sport community, including high school varsity sports and national amateur sport organizations. The structure of my conversations was informal; in fact, I had not intended to write a formal report using the information gathered. The content of my conversations varied from person to person depending on his or her experiences and on what I learned in each successive conversation about

the careers of young athletes and their relationships with coaches, parents, family members, and friends. Conversations lasted from 45 minutes to over 2 hours. Fourteen of these conversations were with athletes in individual sports including skiing, figure skating, gymnastics, swimming, and tennis; only one was with an athlete from a team sport (baseball). Six of the conversations were with young women, nine were with young men; their ages ranged from 15-19-years old.

During these conversations I noticed that as the young people described their past, they talked of little other than their sport experiences. Even when they were involved in nonsport activities, their involvement was somehow tied to or mediated by their lives as athletes. They frequently mentioned pressures and stress related to sport participation, but the pressures and stress that seemed to be the worst were those tied to the lack of control they had over their lives in general. For example, they frequently referred to the sacrifices they had to make to stay involved in sport and achieve their goals—goals that had sometimes been set when they were only 10 or 11-years old. Although they often referred to stress, it was clear that stress was related to issues of control—specifically, to the fact that they seldom could do things that their peers did, try new things, or grow in ways unrelated to their sport participation.

The young people often were ambivalent when they talked about the ways that their sport was tied to the rest of their lives. On the one hand, most emphasized how lucky they were to have had the opportunity to develop physical skills and have experiences that none of their age peers had. But on the other hand they talked about missing out on the experiences that their age peers had. Ten of the 15 talked about how great their parents were and how their sport participation allowed them to become close to one or both parents in special ways, but 7 of those 10 expressed concerns about the future of their relationship with parents now that they were no longer involved in elite sport.

All 15 described emotional high points associated with their sport participation, but they also described devastating low points. Even among the seven cases in which I detected anger or resentment toward parents and/or coaches, there were statements about the fact that their experiences were not all bad. Generally, all the young people seemed appreciative of their success in sport and the rewards associated with that success. But at the same time, they didn't see their highly specialized athletic competence as relevant to their future unless it could be combined with other things.

As they talked specifically about their experiences immediately prior to burning out, they used terms such as "stifled," "trapped," "going nowhere," or "wasting time." This is illustrated in a statement from a 17-yearold former figure skater:

*I told everybody, "I skate for fun; I love the travel, the competition, the attention, the crowds." I always said, "To reach my goals I have to make sacrifices." But as I got older I saw I was missing out on alot too. Other kids were doing things I never had time to do. I felt stifled.*

**An Alternative Conception of Burnout**

There is no doubt that stress is associated with burnout, and that stress management strategies sometimes delay burnout. However, my conclusion is that the roots of burnout among young athletes go beyond chronic stress, beyond individual stress management abilities, beyond the emotional demands and consequences of sport competition, and beyond individual psychological resources. In other words, burnout is best explained and dealt with as a social problem rather than a personal failure; it is grounded in social organization rather than the character of individuals. This means that preventive strategies are best aimed at altering (a) the structure and

organization of sport programs, (b) the social relations associated with the training and competition in high performance sport, and (c) the range of life experiences available to young athletes.

According to the information in my conversations, burnout among young elite athletes is a social phenomenon in which young people leave competitive sport because of two factors: (a) a constrained set of life experiences leading to the development of a unidimensional self-concept, and (b) power relationships in and around sport that seriously restrict young athletes' control over their lives.

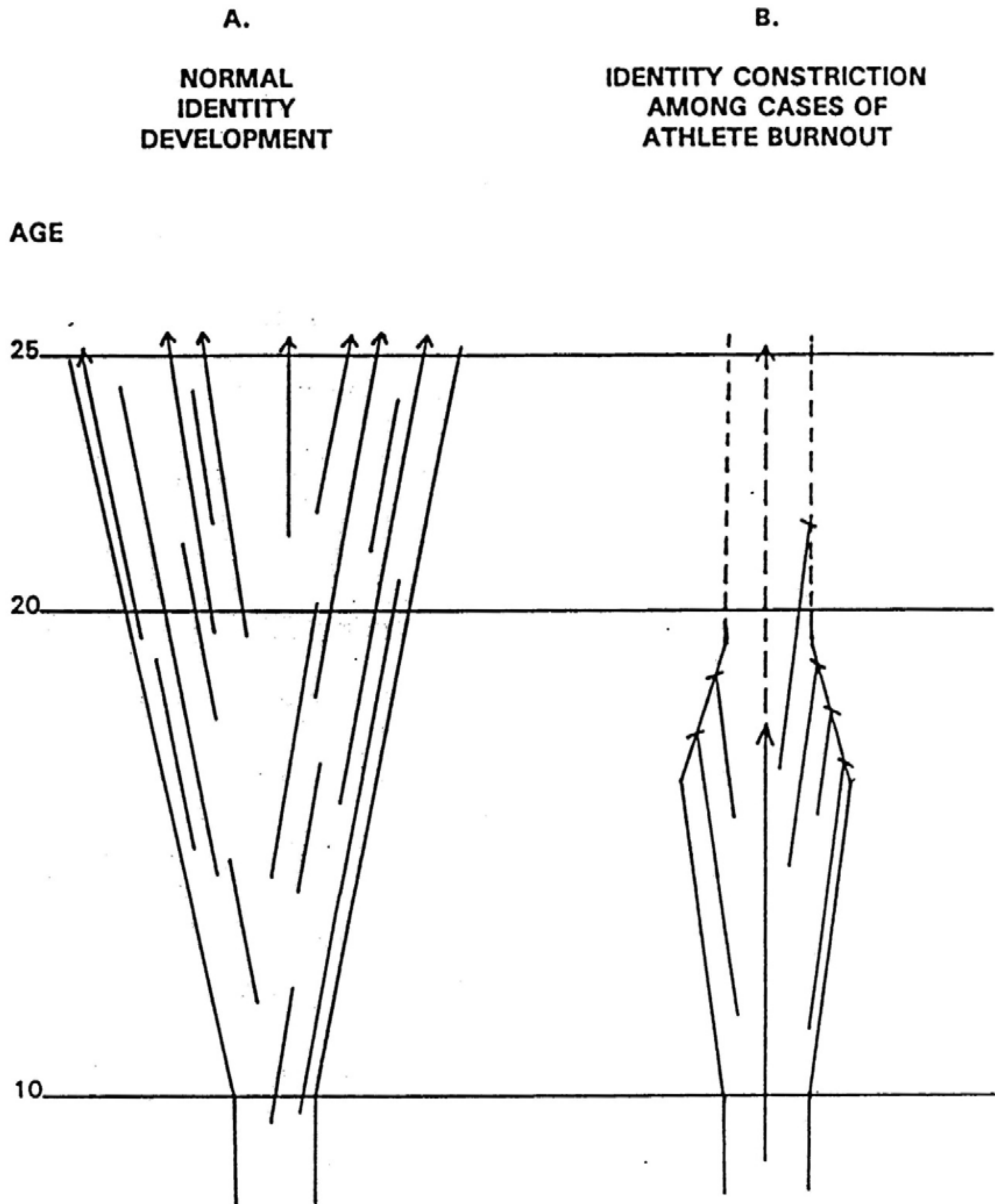
My information suggests that the young people most likely to experience both conditions are highly accomplished athletes who specialize and train intensely in a single sport for relatively long periods of time. They had social experiences that fostered the development of a single identity exclusively related to sport participation and perpetuated a limited set of social relationships that were directly tied to sport. The people in their lives continuously responded to them in terms of their specialized sport roles, their time was almost exclusively devoted to the development of specialized skills, and their goals were well defined and tied to previously unquestioned, long term commitment to specialized sport training.

Identities are claimed and constructed through social relationships (Stryker and Serpe, 1982; Thoits, 1983), and these young people found themselves in situations in which it was nearly impossible to make commitments to other activities, roles, and identities. They lacked the opportunities and power to claim and socially construct identities unrelated to sport—as long as they remained committed to their roles and identities as athletes. They were in the equivalent of a "developmental tunnel," as illustrated in Diagram 1 [next page].

At about 15 to 16-years old, most of the young people I talked with began to realize that being competent in a highly specialized sport activity did not prove they were competent people. Here is the picture of burnout I saw in my conversations: *First*, the young people wondered if they were giving up too many activities and experiences that seemed very important in the lives of their age peers. *Second*, as they looked forward to late adolescence and adulthood, they saw that being a great swimmer, gymnast, skier, skater, or tennis player would not help them complete their quest for maturity, which they defined in terms of independence and autonomy. *Third*, even though everyone kept telling them how great they were, they began to doubt themselves. And their doubts were valid in light of what is known about the self and social development during adolescence (Linville, 1985; Thoits, 1983).

For the young people who burned out, sport involvement became analogous to being on a tightrope: it was exciting, they were good, they were the center of attention, but they knew they couldn't shift their focus to anything else without losing their balance—and if they lost their balance, they felt that there was be no net to catch them.

In the face of this situation they began to feel insecure. Their insecurity affected their performance, and their inability to meet performance standards led them to withdraw socially and emotionally from those around them—all of which are the standard clinical symptoms of burnout. But, more important, because their exclusive commitment to sport had begun so early in life, they had little to fall back on, no other way to view themselves outside the narrow experiences associated with sport involvement, and no viable alternative identities for interacting with other people in meaningful ways. Furthermore, the threat of failure was always immediate since improvement in skill levels was inevitably accompanied by increased expectations and new evaluative standards, both self-imposed and imposed by others. They knew they were never going to be good enough, and this further eroded their confidence and sense of competence.




Research on self-complexity (Linville, 1985) and multiple identities (Thoits, 1983) helps explain what happened to these young elite athletes whose "self and identity eggs" were all placed in one basket. For example it has been found that low self-complexity and a unidimensional identity are positively associated with (a) greater swings in affect and self-appraisal immediately following success or failure, and (b) greater mood swings over the long

run. On the other hand, high self-complexity and multiple identities have been found to mediate or buffer the negative effects of stressful events.

These research findings are instructive in light of the symptoms commonly reported in cases of burnout among adolescent athletes. They strongly suggest that the development of self-complexity or multiple identities among adolescent athletes provides a cushion for the stress inherent in their sport lives, mediates the impact of their successes and failures, and helps sustain a more even affective profile. A unidimensional self-identity, on the other hand, sets young athletes up for extreme emotional swings, an inability to handle the consequences of their sport performances, and frequent depression. This application of research findings fits with the work of others (Gergen, 1972; Marsh and Peart, 1988; Marsh, Richards, and Barnes, 1986; Marsh, Smith, Marsh, and Owens, 1988; Thoits, 1983), and it explains the symptoms of burnout described in my conversations.

Of course, the issue of self-complexity needs to be studied further to determine the conditions under which overall social development may be impaired by intense dedication to any highly specialized activity, whether it be sport, dance, music, an academic subject, or even certain types of jobs.

**Power, Autonomy, and Burnout**

In my conversations it was also clear that when a unidimensional self-concept was combined with a set of relationships through which the lives of young people were tightly controlled by others, the young people who burned out chose to resist the support coming from those others in order to seek autonomy. This lack of control was most often experienced by young people whose parents and coaches made considerable commitments of time and resources, and by those whose performance potential encouraged others to take it upon themselves to make sure the young athletes did not have to make any decisions about their own lives—decisions that might distract them from performance goals.

For the young people, lack of control over their own lives was grounded in a combination of factors, including the actions of parents, coaches, and themselves. For example, all but three of the young people indicated that they had made the choice to commit themselves to their highly specialized athlete roles and their ambitious performance goals. They made these decisions because they liked the idea of being accomplished athletes and experiencing everything that goes along with that status. Furthermore, they enjoyed the opportunity to excel in their sports. Being an elite athlete was so rewarding that that they allowed their participation to become the only thing of importance in their lives. This fits closely with research findings indicating that subjective commitment to a role or identity increases when role enactment involves expressive enjoyment, loyalty to role partners, and the anticipation of rewards (Marks, 1977).

Ironically, these were the dynamics that led the young people themselves to play a major role in creating the conditions that eventually subverted control over their own lives. They made the decision to become elite athletes, but after that point, decisions were made by parents, coaches, and other adults who guided their careers. In this way, the athletes themselves were complicit in the construction of their own powerlessness.

This point about athlete complicity needs to be qualified. When young people make decisions to commit themselves to highly specialized roles or identities, parents and other adults often accept those decisions without thinking of their implications for overall development. For example, when discussing his tennis academy in Bradenton, Florida (now owned by IMG), Nick Bollettieri once said that he wanted young people to make the decision to come to his school, but

he also said that once they made that decision, all future decisions would be made by him until the young people left his program. When young athletes are in such a tightly controlled situation, it is difficult to say they are contributing to their own powerlessness, except to say that they have not chosen to run away (as some actually do). Ironically, parents and coaches often maintain such situations because they believe them to be in the best interests of the young people involved.

In my conversations it was difficult to identify whether parents and coaches had subtly coerced young people to maintain their commitment to sport or whether they had simply responded to what they thought the young people wanted for their own lives. But even if they were well intentioned as they helped young people achieve performance goals, these adults unwittingly participated in creating and perpetuating social isolation and dependency among those young people. Once goals were set, environments were created in which the young people could focus nearly all their attention and energy on becoming elite athletes. As this happened, parents also restricted the range of experiences available to their children as they "guided" them into a pattern of practice and competitions that allowed for little autonomy despite progress toward the achievement of performance goals. In fact, the closer these young athletes came to achieving their goals, the less control they had over their lives.

Information in my conversations indicated that the young people were aware of the time, resources, money, and effort that their parents expended to maintain their sport careers. Although none of them said they were living their lives for parents, most did talk about how their successes made parents happy and that they didn't want to let parents down by failing to meet performances goals. In six cases it appeared that parents tried to motivate their children by evoking their guilt over family expenditures, but in the other nine cases the children themselves made the connection between parental support and the need to express gratitude through personal achievement. When this happened, the young athletes were especially likely to feel stifled and cut off from opportunities to do other things. Although there was guilt about not meeting coaches' expectations, it did not have the same impact as guilt over failing to meet parental expectations. Of course the young people clearly knew that, in most cases, parents had paid the coaches for their time and expertise.

One of the ironies in the lives of these young people was that when they became aware of the potential negative implications of their single-minded, exclusive dedication to sport, five of the 15 began to resent their parents. When this happened, they felt that their autonomy and growth required a rejection of their parents' support for their athletic involvement. And when they resisted support, conflict occurred. Conflicts with parents also occurred in the lives of seven of the other 10 young people, but it was not grounded in resentment as much as in emotionally charged renegotiations of parent/child relationships and expectations.

In summary, information from my conversations strongly supports the notion that burnout is related to powerlessness rather than the personal failures of young people. This is consistent with Lerner's (1991) finding that stress among workers is grounded in the lack of control over the conditions of work and the social organization of the workplace. Lerner emphasizes that people experience stress as a result of "the way things are organized" (p. 20), and that chronic stress is a manifestation of an internalization of this lack of control to the point that workers identify their personal inability to cope as the source of their problems. This self-blaming intensifies powerlessness, perpetuates stress, and preserves the forms of social organization in which problems are rooted.

**Who Does Not Burn Out? Three Hypotheses**

Most young people in elite sport programs do not burn out, even when participation constrains identity development and autonomy. This raises the question of who would not see the constraints associated with certain forms of sport participation as problematic where identity and autonomy are concerned. My guess is that burnout would be least likely among the following:

1. Athletes from backgrounds in which life chances are so limited that there are no attractive identities and roles apart from being an athlete;

2. Athletes who have ready access to non-sport or other sport opportunities that can be chosen and pursued in connection with their elite sport participation;

3. Athletes who have been heavily rewarded for success in a sport and are so tightly controlled that they do not know about nonsport opportunities that might be available to them.

Exploring this issue would require research involving a comparison of in-depth interview data from young athletes who have not burned out with data from athletes who have burned out or have altered their priorities as a result of critical self-assessment of their sport participation.

**Summary and Conclusions**

Although the young people with whom I talked experienced stress in connection with their sport participation—some to the point of extended emotional exhaustion—they didn't appear to suffer any permanent developmental damage, even though their exits from sport were usually traumatic. All but two continued to be physically active in some form of recreational sport or expressive dance, and seven were involved in some form of competitive sports, although at a much less serious level than in the past.

The stress experienced during their exit from competitive sport was a symptom of burnout, but not the cause. Burnout appeared to be connected with a combination of developmental processes, the relationships associated with sport participation, and the rigid social organization of high performance sports. It occurred when young people saw no possibility for claiming and socially constructing desired identities apart from the identity of athlete. Therefore, burnout was grounded in social processes and social relations that interfered with identity formation processes and the achievement of autonomy and independence that are important developmental tasks during adolescence and early adulthood. In summary, athlete burnout occurs in connection with two conditions:

1. When participation in an activity or role constrains or forecloses the development of desired alternative identities;
2. When the sport careers of young people are organized in ways that leave them powerless to control events and make decisions about the nature of their experiences and the directions of their own development.

When burnout is conceptualized as a social problem rather than a personal failure, it suggests a need for changes going far beyond stress management. A fictitious example helps make this point: If a young athlete we knew threatened to drop out of sport because she experienced chronic headaches every time her coach instructed her to run into a wall head first, we would certainly say the headaches are a serious problem. But we would not say that she should take ibuprofen or learn biofeedback strategies to manage the pain. Nor would we say that the coach should teach her how to hit the wall head first without getting headaches.

In fact, we would demand that the wall be removed from the practice area and, more important, we would fire the coach and raise serious questions about coach-athlete relationship and recommend that all young athletes be given more control over the conditions of their sport participation along with the knowledge they need to make informed choices about what they should and should not do in their sport lives. Finally, we would also raise serious questions about sport programs that are organized in ways that would lead coaches and athletes to engage in such headache producing actions.

Unfortunately, many high performance sport programs in North America are organized in ways that make young athletes completely dependent on coaches and parent-sponsors. This dependency creates many problems—among them the stress that is associated with burnout. The major solution to the majority of these problems, including burnout, is to empower athletes and eliminate dependency by transforming the organization of elite youth sport programs.

My general recommendation for coaches, parents, and athletes is to abandon the stress-based model of burnout in favor of an empowerment model that focuses on changing the social and organizational context in which young people develop elite sport skills. They should also avoid hiring sport scientists to assist young athletes in coping with the social isolation and dependency that accompany certain forms of sport participation. To use strategies focused on individual adjustment and stress management without dealing with the social conditions in which identity development is foreclosed and young athletes lack meaningful control over their lives, is more like "psychodoping" than a real solution to serious problems.

"Psychodoping," a term first used by John Hoberman (1992), consists of employing psychological techniques to help athletes adjust to conditions of dependency and powerlessness, and to avoid asking critical questions about their sport participation in connection with the rest of their lives. Using such techniques to treat burnout is counterproductive because burnout often signals a young person's need to critically assess their sport participation and gain control over their lives. If burnout occurs when young people are placed in situations where healthy identity development is constrained and there are few opportunities to make informed choices about how they should live their lives, psychodoping merely distracts attention from the social and organizational changes that must be made to enable young people to successfully complete the developmental tasks faced during adolescence and early adulthood.

Of course, most clinicians and counselors who work with athletes are not guilty of psychodoping; they are concerned with issues of autonomy, control, and critical self-assessment. However, it is important to regularly critique any form of sport science grounded primarily in discourses of performance. At the present time, sport science is rarely being used to challenge systems of dependency and overcontrol in sport, or to promote liberation and empowerment among athletes. Unless the knowledge produced by sport science critically informs decisions about organizing sports and enables athletes to be critically self-reflective, sport scientists will be nothing more than technicians pandering to the interests of those wealthy enough to hire them.

The rapidly expanding discourses of performance in sport science need to be strongly challenged with questions about social, political, and ethical issues related to sport. This is an old charge offered to the sociology of sport, but it is one in need of regular renewal (Ingham, 1985; Lawson, 1985; McKay, Gore, and Kirk, 1990; Sparks, 1985; Whitson and Macintosh, 1988, 1990).

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# Topic 4. Retirement among elite athletes

Adapted from:
Coakley, Jay. 1983. Leaving competitive sport: Retirement or rebirth? *Quest* 35, 1: 1–11.

**THE TRANSITION OUT OF COMPETITIVE SPORTS:**
**WHAT HAPPENS TO FORMER ATHLETES?**


**ABSTRACT**
*This paper reviews existing information on retirement from sport and offers an interpretation of the retirement process that will both challenge widespread assumptions held by sport sociologists and provide hypotheses for future research. The dynamics of the retirement process are discussed for athletes in top-level interscholastic and amateur sports as well as in professional sports. Existing data suggest that retirement for athletes in each of these contexts is not an inevitable source of stress, identity crises, or adjustment problems. It is argued that the dynamics of the sport retirement process are grounded in the social structural context in which retirement takes place. Factors such as gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, and social and emotional support networks shape the manner in which one makes the transition out of sport. Therefore, retirement from sport sometimes may be the scene of stress and trauma but, by itself, it often is not the major cause of those problems.*


What happens to athletes when, for one reason or another, their active involvement in top-level competition ends? In recent years, concern about the fates of so-called ex-athletes has grown, and has usually focused on athletes' retirement from sport and the possibility that that retirement may be a source of problems. In some cases, leaving sport has been conceptualized as a form of "social death," and the ex-athlete described as being prone to critical social and psychological conditions. This paper will review the research on retirement from sport and offer a framework for exploring what happens when athletes end their active involvement in top-level competition.

Before going any further, the major terms used in this discussion must be defined. First, competitive sport refers to any organized sport activity in which training and participation are time-consuming and in which the level of performance meets relatively high standards of expectations. Specifically, highly competitive interscholastic and amateur sports as well as professional sports of all types will be discussed. Second, retirement refers to the process of transition from participation in competitive sport to another activity or set of activities. This is somewhat different from popular connotations of the term where retirement is often used to refer to an event which simply marks a withdrawal from, or an end to, an involvement. Popular synonyms for retirement are "to go away," "enter seclusion," "withdraw," "retreat," "give ground," "move back," or in baseball, "to make an out." These terms make retirement sound final and negative when, in many cases, it involves new opportunities and the potential for growth and development. In fact, retirement often involves a type of graduation rather than a withdrawal, and graduations are celebrated with commencement exercises marking a beginning rather than an end. In any case, retirement is most accurately conceptualized as a role transition through with a person disengages from one set of activities and relationships to develop or expand other activities and relationships.

**Paradoxes in the Study of Retirement**
In describing competitive sport, the literature tends to emphasize the rigidity of sport organization, the existence of exploitation, and threats to athletes' autonomy and personal well-being. The literature describes athletes who complain about the aversive nature of their training schedules, the length of their seasons, and the lack of control over their own lives. This type of analysis should lead to the conclusion that most athletes would welcome retirement from competitive sport because it would allow them to pursue alternative activities more conducive to personal growth and development. However, discussions about ex-athletes

usually emphasize retirement as a negative event (Ball, 1976; Harris and Eitzen, 1978; Hill and Lowe, 1974; McPherson, 1980; Rosenberg, 1980a, 1980b, 1981). Retired athletes are described as unwilling victims of circumstances causing them trauma, identity crises, loss of economic status, and the loss of meaningful social support from friends and fans.

The literature in social gerontology published prior to 1970 reveals a similar paradox in discussions of occupational retirement. On the one hand, retirement was often described as something to look forward to and to work for; it was seen as a transition through which a person left the constraining context of work and entered the liberating context of leisure. On the other hand, retirement was also described as a problem, a source of personal trauma for the retiree, and a sentence to isolation and powerlessness. Although the merits of these descriptions are still debated, recent research in the field has shown that "for the most part, retirement appears to have little significant impact on broad levels of social adjustment and identity" (George, 1980, p. 73). Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. Retirement for some people is stressful. But the typical pattern involves no major changes in a person's level of adjustment. This does not mean that retired people have no problems, but only that their problems are not characteristically caused by their retirements. Furthermore, research shows that most people prepare for retirement by using information they receive through informal sources. Personal coping styles for moving from a work career to other activities and relationships vary widely among retirees. Most coping styles are successful and none stand out as ideal (Atchley, 1980; George, 1980).

Unlike the gerontologist, sport sociologists are still in the initial stages of clearing up the contradictions in their study of retirement. Is retirement from competitive sport a problem, or does it provide new opportunities? Do athletes experience trauma during retirement, or do they experience relief? Is the transition out of the role of active player experienced as a withdrawal, a move back, a retreat, a failure? Or is it experienced as a period of growth and development? At present, the answer to these questions is "sometimes yes and sometimes no." Of course, some ex-athletes have made a successful transition from active involvement in competitive sport to other satisfying activities, but others cling to their trophies, sport identities, and memories in ways that seem to impede their development. We do not know how often retiring athletes fall into either of these patterns, nor do we know why these patterns vary from one individual to the next. However, if some studies are reviewed through a conceptual framework that focuses attention on role transitions during late adolescence, young adulthood, and middle age, it is possible to develop hypotheses and make suggestions for future research.

**Leaving Interscholastic and Amateur Sport**

Although research is scarce, the studies completed on former interscholastic and amateur athletes suggest that their "retirement" from sport is simply seen as a part of other normal developments such as leaving high school, entering college or the labor force, and settling down into new relationships associated with family and career. The studies do not support the idea that retirement from competitive sport is a characteristically traumatic and identity-shaking process. For example, in a study of 153 former outstanding male high school football and basketball players, Sands (1978) found that although sport was a crucial activity in their lives while they were in school, it declined in importance after graduation. The athletes in his sample generally defined their sport involvement as passing phases in their lives. According to Sands, the end of their involvement in competitive interscholastic sport was not accompanied by trauma or identity crises, and their loss of social recognition was handled quite realistically.

If this is the case for outstanding male athletes, we could expect similar realism and successful adjustment among others whose athletic status is less important and less visible in the social environment of the high school. Young men in minor sports and young women in most varsity sports would be less likely to have their status and their relationships directly linked to their sport involvement. The transition out of competitive sport would probably not create trauma or adjustment problems for them. They might miss the camaraderie of teammates and the excitement of top-level athletic competition, but their memories of past sport participation are not likely to interfere with their future growth and development.

Other research on interscholastic athletes suggests that males who participate in varsity high school sports experience more success after graduation than do nonathletes. Compared to nonathletes, they are more

likely to attend college, receive degrees, go on the graduate school, reach higher levels of occupational status, and earn higher incomes (Otto and Alwin, 1977; Phillips and Schafer, 1971; Bend, Note 1). This is not to say that their success comes from participation in sport. But these data hardly support the idea that ex-athletes have unique adjustment problems which interfere with their growth and development.

Research also suggests that when high school athletes increase their academic aspirations and achievements, the increases are primarily due to support they received through the important relationships in their lives. The sport experience takes on meaning through those relationships, especially those with parents and close friends. It is likely that the parents and close friends of most athletes, like the athletes themselves, would see sport participation as a passing phase in the normal process of growth and development.

It should be remembered that retirement from competitive interscholastic sport does not necessarily entail an end to sport involvement. Many former high school athletes participate in community-based programs at a variety of competitive levels. They may also continue their attachment to sport by majoring in physical education or recreation, by coaching or refereeing youth teams, or by becoming involved in any of a number of lifetime sport activities.

At the college level we could expect transition patterns similar to those at the high school level. For example, Snyder and Baber (1979) found no evidence among 233 former intercollegiate male athletes in a midwestern sample to suggest that retirement from sport was associated with problems. The former athletes were compared to nonathletes who had graduated during the same time period (1965–1975); there were no differences in levels of satisfaction with friends, marriage, work career, financial situation, or general life style. The data also showed that the former athletes shifted their interests and activities quite successfully after leaving school. Like nonathletes, they seemed to adjust to the normal challenges encountered after college. Unlike the nonathletes, they made sport and sport-related activities a major part of their leisure time. They attended more sport events, watched mare sports on television, and actively participated in sports more often than did nonathletes. In other words, they did not usually terminate their involvement in sport when their intercollegiate careers ended. They simply tended to maintain their involvement by making it a high priority leisure activity while continuing to grow and develop in other dimensions of their lives during early adulthood.

Research on mobility and occupational achievement among former intercollegiate male athletes supports the work done by Snyder and Baber (1979). Studies by Dubois (1980) and Sack and Thiel (1979) indicate that ex-athletes do not significantly differ from former classmates in their current socioeconomic status. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that the athletes had no problems in adjusting to the transition from college to occupation, but it at least suggests that the problems, if they did exist, were not serious enough to cause their occupational patterns to differ from those of their college cohorts.

Although more research is needed, the majority of former intercollegiate male athletes appear able to handle the transition out of top-level sport competition constructively. The transition out of intercollegiate sport seems to go hand-in-hand with the transition from college to work careers, new friendships, marriage, parenthood, and other roles normally associated with early adulthood.

Research is also scarce on retirement from amateur sports where participation occurs outside of an interscholastic setting. Mihovilovic (1968) studied 44 former elite Yugoslavian male soccer players and reported that for them retirement was a painful event. He observed that older athletes tended to cling to team membership as long as possible and then had a difficult time adjusting to retirement. He concluded that the retired soccer player characteristically "hides, escapes, looks for compensation in alcohol, blames others, weaves dreams,... deceives himself as regards his possibilities, [and] grows indifferent to events around him" (p. 81).

However, a closer examination of Mihovilovic's data reveals that the adjustment problems among the retired soccer players were not as pervasive as he suggested. For example, over 60% of them remained nonsmokers or smoked no more than they did before retirement; 84% remained nondrinkers or drank no more than before retirement; 82% stayed in good physical shape; 60% kept in constant touch with their past teammates; 70% did not report any constriction in their circle of friends; 80% still participated in sport tournaments; and nearly 90% maintained their connections with sport by coaching, refereeing, serving in some other support capacity, or working in sport organizations. Contrary to Mihovilovic's conclusion, then,

this seems to be an impressive adjustment record for athletes whose sport experiences had monopolized their attention for many years and had prevented most of them from completing their education or receiving job training. It is especially impressive when one considers that over half of the former players had retired suddenly and involuntarily. This does not mean that retirement required no personal adjustments, but it does suggest that it was handled quite well in spite of being unwelcome.

Mihovilovic's study answers few questions about retirement among amateur athletes. Although his data did not suggest that many of the former soccer players experienced measurable failure in coping with life after retirement, his conclusion referred to considerable pain, stress, and maladjustment. It may be that his confusing interpretation reflected the range of transition patterns associated with retirement-coupled with his own concern and ambivalence about retirement issues. More research is needed to identify the conditions and characteristics associated with these patterns.

There is similar confusion when discussing the retirement of other amateur athletes. Swimmers, gymnasts, tennis players, and figure skaters, since the age of 5, have spent considerable time in training and competition; the conclusion is that retirement will probably cause them numerous problems. Yet many former amateur athletes seemingly have been able to use their sport careers as stepping stones to other involvement, or have developed other interests and skills while participating in sport. But there is no systematic, empirical basis for a discussion of these possibilities.

In a Sports Illustrated article, journalist, Janice Kaplan (1977) briefly described the retirement of three former amateur athletes. Her descriptions portrayed a range of patterns. For example, former gold-medalist swimmer Debbie Meyer retired at age 19. Shortly thereafter she became depressed and gained 50 pounds. Then she entered and dropped out of two colleges, went on a crash diet, and suffered from anorexia nervosa. She recovered, started coaching at a swim club, became a successful assistant coach at Stanford University, and then accepted a good marketing position with a swimsuit manufacturer. Fritz Hobbs, part of the silver medal-winning rowing team in the 1972 Olympic Games, combined athletics with his pursuit of B.A. and M.B.A. degrees at Harvard and, after dropping out of top-level competition, made a smooth transition into a Wall Street job. Now Hobbs uses his past sport experience as a conversation topic with clients, is involved with an amateur rowing association, and plays squash several times a week. John Williams, a 1972 Olympic gold medal archer, dropped out of top-level competition at 19. He obtained a low-paid consulting job with an archery equipment manufacturer, entered and dropped out of one school, entered another and volunteered as an archery coach. Williams encountered political problems in amateur archery, joined the Professional Archery Association and won its annual competition. He was ejected from the PAA for reasons stemming from his earlier problems in amateur archery, was later reinstated, went back to school, and continued working for the equipment manufacturer while competing professionally and doing private coaching.

These three examples are summarized not because they are representative, but because they show some of the variations to be expected in a study of retirement among amateur athletes. In fact, the variation would probably be greater than that found among former interscholastic athletes because amateur athletes are a more diversified group. Retirement from amateur sport occurs at many ages for a variety of reasons, while retirement from interscholastic sport is usually associated with other transitions in a young person's life. Leaving amateur sport does not necessarily correspond with these other transitions.

**Leaving Professional Sports**

There is more information about former athletes from professional sports than there is at other levels of participation, but confusion still exists about the dynamics of the retirement process. For example, sociologist Marvin Sussman (1972) once wrote that retirement from professional sport was never a problem because athletes were aware of the brevity of their careers and prepared accordingly; furthermore, professional athletes were guaranteed second careers when their sport careers ended. However, recent information has indicated that Sussman's statements were based on popular misconceptions and did not accurately describe the retirement process.

It is now known that many professional athletes have until recently ignored the prospect of early retirement and that second careers are sometimes difficult to initiate and maintain. but it is also naive to use

just this negative information and conclude that former professional athletes in general are overwhelmed by retirement-induced stress and are unable to cope constructively with the adjustments required by moving out of active sport involvement. Too often, images of retirement are shaped by visions of a successful Fran Tarkenton selling insurance on television, or a disillusioned Mercury Morris sitting in jail after a drug conviction. The few systematic studies that have been done indicate that neither Tarkenton nor Morris is typical. The fates of former athletes cannot be collectively characterized as either glorious or disastrous. A brief review of these studies illustrates this point.

In a 1958 survey of former major league baseball players, Haerle (1975) concluded that retirement created strain but that the overall transition out of sport involved successful patterns of coping with these strains. He found that many of the former players missed the daily camaraderie of teammates, but this did not interfere with their search to find new jobs and to make the other adjustments required in their lives outside of sport. The respondents made these adjustments in spite of the fact that about 75% of them had never seriously thought about retirement until the last quarter of their active playing careers.

Two other studies of former baseball players, one by Arviko (Note 2) and the other by Lerch (1979), report findings similar to those of Haerle. The levels of adjustment among respondents in each of these studies were relatively high. Only 15% scored low on a measure of life satisfaction. Although neither study could explain more than 15% of the variance in life satisfaction scores, factors such as good health, a high income, a high level of education, a positive pre-retirement attitude, and a job connected with sport all related positively to feelings of satisfaction. Had these researchers used comparison groups, they probably would have found the retired players to be a relatively well-adjusted group of older adults.

Recent data from a sample of retired NFL players (Reynolds, 1981) also showed that most respondents scored high in self-esteem, and that satisfaction with their present jobs was most strongly linked with the amount of social support coming from close friends and relatives. This was especially true for players working in low-status jobs unrelated to their personal occupational interests.

Unfortunately, there are questions about the representativeness of each sample in these latter three studies. The data were collected through mailed questionnaires and the response rates were low (38%, 45%, and 22%, respectively). Therefore one should be cautious about using them to characterize the retirement process. In addition, each study focuses on one of the two major male team sports in the United States.

The only available systematic information on former athletes of individual sports has been reported in two studies of boxers, one by Weinberg and Arond (1952) and the other by Hare (1971). Weinberg and Arond traced the post-retirement careers of 95 ex-champions and leading contenders. They found that retirement was accompanied by a dramatic decline in prestige and income, and by emotional problems stemming from trying to find jobs outside of boxing. However, most of the problems seemed to be directly linked to injuries, a heavy past dependence on managers, and carefree spending habits begun during their active boxing careers. The possibility that the boxers' minority status, or the low socioeconomic status of their families, could be related to adjustment problems was not discussed by Weinberg and Arond. But Hare dealt with it in a 1971 study. He concluded that family socioeconomic background and minority status were both significant variables in the retirement process for the former boxers he studies. Since most of them came from low income families lacking the resources to provide material support during retirement, and since they encountered discrimination in the job market, the adjustments to retirement were difficult to make.

**Discussion and Implications**

For most interscholastic athletes, leaving competitive sport is tied to general changes in their educational careers. It is usually associated with normal role transitions involving moves into other educational settings or the labor force. Because leaving sport occurs simultaneously with these other transitions, it is difficult to separate the effects of retirement from the effects of other significant events such as dropping out of school, graduating, continuing one's education in a new setting, trying to find a job, starting a career, and coping with the other developmental tasks faced during early adulthood.

Of course, some former high school athletes, like Harry Angstrom in Updike's Rabbit, Run, will have problems in their lives, but it would be naive to conclude that those problems are inevitably linked to prior sport participation or retirement from it. In order to discover factors unique to the transition out of sport,

researchers need to use comparison groups. This will prevent them from mistakenly inferring that the oral adjustment problems of late adolescence and early adulthood are causally linked to retirement from sport.

In addition to the need for comparison groups, there is a need to explore the manner in which sport retirement patterns vary with the socioeconomic status and gender of former interscholastic athletes. If the transition out of competitive sport is eased by continuing sport involvement in other settings, patterns may vary by status and gender because opportunities for involvement vary along these dimensions. For example, a young woman who no longer has access to school-sponsored sports may run into problems when she tries to continue her involvement in sport. Community programs are scarce for women with highly developed skills. And young women who live with their parents or spouses may have more difficulties than do their male counterparts in negotiating the free time and resources to take advantage of opportunities that do exist. These access problems would probably be intensified for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, former athletes from lower status backgrounds may lack the material supports and social contacts that their higher status counterparts find useful in initiating careers and adjusting to life after leaving school. The transition out of sport goes more smoothly when the transition into important nonsport roles, activities, and relationships also goes smoothly.

The transition out of amateur and professional sports would be influenced by similar factors. Some sports naturally draw athletes form upper status backgrounds. They provide the athletes with numerous opportunities to develop social contacts with nonathletes who are able to assist them in making the transition into careers and extending nonsport activities and relationships. For example, golfers and tennis players are often able to become teaching pros or administrators at private clubs or to use their social contacts to enter relatively satisfying nonsport careers. These types of career shifts are similar to the changes experienced by many individuals in their late 20s and their 30s, changes that are usually perceived as normal aspects of a person's work history. However, women and on some occasions blacks would not have as many of these opportunities as white males. But the problems they encounter would be similar to the problems faced by their nonathletic counterparts. In other words, their adjustment problems would be grounded in general social structural conditions rather than in their past sport careers and their retirement from sport. former athletes can most easily redefine their identities when they are able to become involved in roles, activities, and relationships which nurture and extend new dimensions of their self-concepts.

In similar fashion, when a sport draws athletes from lower status backgrounds researchers must assess the transition out of sport and into other activities relative to the characteristics and adjustment problems of comparable nonathletes. For example, to say that the problems experienced by former boxers are related to their retirement from sport would not be justified unless they were greater than or different from the problems experienced by similar nonathletes. It may be that retired black boxers have no more problems than those experienced by other 30-year-old black males who grew up on the streets of large inner cities, received little education, and had few resources to assist them in career development or job training. Again, retirement from competitive sport may be the scene of problems but it does not necessarily cause those problems.

After reviewing the implications of the data on retirement from competitive sport, it seems reasonable to conclude that leaving sport is not inevitably stressful or identity-shaking, nor is it the source of serious adjustment problems. Adjustments are necessary - just as they are in any role transition-but it seems that majority of former top athletes from all levels of competition make them in a relatively constructive manner. Of course, this does not mean that retirement from sport is never the source of serious problems. There are enough examples of apparent failures to show the need to further explore the patterns of success and failure.

In the search for these patterns it could be hypothesized that when adjustment problems do exist they are most likely among former athletes whose:

1. sport careers have seriously restricted the development of credentials and attributes that others like them were able to form in coping with normal developmental tasks through life.
2. relationships have been restricted to other athletes, involving interaction based primarily on sport-related issues and activities;

3. families have provided little social and emotional support for any involvement outside the physical dimensions of sport activity;
4. backgrounds have provided little access to activity alternatives and role models outside of sport;
5. lack of material resources and social contacts have restricted their transitions into careers, expressive nonsport relationships, and satisfying leisure activities.

These hypotheses emphasize the social structural factors related to successful role transitions. They are based on the notion that serious adjustment problems are ultimately grounded in the availability of resources for moving into roles, activities, and relationships unrelated to active sport participation. This differs from traditional approaches where retirement is conceptualized in terms of adjustment problems relate to a social psychological detachment from the role of athlete and from the activities and relationships associated with that role.

The hypotheses also acknowledge that even elite athletes have attributes, identities, interests, and relationships that are not strictly based on their active participation in sport. Research in the sociology of sport has promoted the idea that there are two types of people in the world, athletes and nonathletes. Also promoted is the idea that athletes are not only different from nonathletes but that they are quite similar to one another, similar to the point of being unidimensional people. Therefore, retirement from sport is discussed with the tendency to emphasize how these people can cope with the loss of their roles and identities. However, when athletes are seen as complex individuals coming from diverse backgrounds and having diverse interest, relationships, and expectations, retirement from sport is more likely viewed as a transition into alternative roles, relationships, and activities. And this transition is seen as being influenced by the same social structural factors that affect all young adults. Therefore, former athletes probably do not have as much in common with one another as they do with nonathletes of the same gender, race, age, educational level, and socioeconomic background.

**Conclusion**

This discussion of retirement from competitive sport suggests that the nature of the retirement process is primarily grounded in the social structural context in which it occurs. In the future, the transition out of sport should be analyzed in terms of such factors as the age, race, gender, education, and socioeconomic status of the retiring athlete. Other factors such as the existence of social, emotional, and material support systems, and the existence of racism and sexism, should also be considered. One should not assume that retirement from competitive sport automatically creates problems until the experiences of former athletes are compared with the experiences of similar nonathletes.

When former athletes enter careers with lower salaries and less prestige than they were accorded during their active playing days they should not be defined as victims of retirement. Managing a bar or restaurant in the old hometown, returning to school, or teaching and coaching in a small high school should not be considered failings simply because they do not enable the former athletes to drive new cars every year, travel to exciting places, or read their names in newspapers every week. Just because ex-athletes become similar to those they resembled when their sport careers began does not necessarily signal trauma, identity crises, or serious adjustment problems. Although some former athletes may experience problems with their financial affairs, their relationships, or their personal identities, the origins of these problems may not be related to their past involvement in sport. Just as those who study socialization through sport must separate the effects of sport involvement form other sources of growth and development, those who study retirement must separate the consequences of leaving sport from the challenges and adjustments normally associated with late adolescence, young adulthood, and middle ages.

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## Topic 5. The belief that "sport builds character"

Although research has not supported the belief that sports competition builds character, many people continue to accept this belief in some form. I think that their acceptance is related to one or more of the following five factors.

- Their perception is influenced by a "halo effect" that leads them to assume that if athletes do great things on the playing field, they must be great people. It is much easier for people to see skilled athletes as heroes when they think this way, and they tend to ignore information that would tarnish or defame their heroes, even though much of what they hear about athletes strongly suggests that sport has not built character.
- They are unaware of the selection processes in sports that lead people with certain character traits to become athletes and to remain on teams. Highly competitive sports are organized to attract and select people with high levels of self-confidence and other attributes valued by those who select athletes. Those with low self-confidence usually do not try out for teams, and those with traits not valued by coaches are cut from teams. We can illustrate the effect of this selection process in sport by discussing physical traits rather than character traits. For example, if high school basketball players are taller than other students, is this so because basketball builds height? Obviously, this is not the case. Coaches select tall people. However, we should recognize that tall people often improve their ability to use their height as they play basketball. The same is true with character traits: sports give people settings in which to use them in new ways.
- They focus their attention on successful top-level athletes and then generalize about what happens in sports as a whole. Of course, using such a limited and biased "sample" of sport participants leads to faulty conclusions. This is like studying people with doctoral degrees and making conclusions about education, or studying millionaires and making conclusions about capitalism: it guarantees positive findings and excludes information from the 99 percent who played sports but didn't make it to the top.
- They overlook the possibility that athletes may be perceived as different from others only because sports provide them with a stage on which to display the traits they have developed in the course of normal maturation. This often occurs when parents and other adults see young people publicly display their abilities in sports. Without opportunities to see their children perform in non-sport situations, they often conclude that the "character" the children display in sports is the product of sport participation itself. However, what usually happens is that sports provide people public opportunities to display traits that they have developed over a number of years and across a variety of different experiences.
- They focus their attention on limited media portrayals of athletes in which athletes tend to look and sound knowledgeable and self-confident. Without any supporting evidence they may conclude that this knowledge and self-confidence exhibited by athletes extend to all areas of life outside the sport arena.

The tendency to believe that sports build character may be grounded in deeper political and cultural issues as well. For example, this belief leads people to expect athletes to be role models, to condemn athletes when they fail to exhibit model behavior, and to ignore problems related to the structure and organization of sports. This diverts attention away from the need to assess sports critically. In the process, it enables those who benefit from sports to maintain their

privileged positions, and it prevents sports from being changed in ways that might change the socialization experiences of sport participants.

Dominant forms of sports have been shaped and organized in connection with the values and experiences of men in society. In fact, for many men, playing sports has been used as a proof of masculinity. Coaches even urge their male athletes to "go out and prove who the better men are." This means that according to the cultural logic of sports, especially power and performance sports, women must be aggressive, unemotional, willing to play in pain, and willing to sacrifice their bodies for the sake of a victory, to be seen as having "character." In other words, to show character they must be "male-like" in terms of traditional definitions of masculinity. However, if they do not strive to dominate opponents, are sensitive to others, show emotion, are sensitive to the risk of injury, and prize health over competitive success, they are seen as lacking character as it has been defined in the power and performance sports that are dominant today.

The meaning of character in many sports is tied to a long history of male participation and female exclusion. This way of thinking has created serious problems both in and out of sports. Women are told that to get ahead in the occupational world, they must demonstrate they are qualified, but men have defined qualifications to fit the way they have done things for years. This means that a woman is qualified only to the extent that she does her job like a man. The problems this has caused for women outside of sports should alert us to the negative implications of saying that sports build character when sports have reflected special interests throughout history, interests connected with the power and status of men with resources.

Jay Coakley

## Topic 6. What happens to young people who play sports?

Adapted from Coakley and Donnelly, 1999.

**Hasbrook, Cynthia. 1999. Young children's social constructions of physicality and gender. Pp. 7–16 in J. Coakley and P. Donnelly, eds., *Inside sports*. London: Routledge.**
In this study, Cindy Hasbrook describes how children in elementary school develop ideas about physicality and give meaning to their own physical abilities and skills. As a physical educator, Cindy knows that our bodies are central to our sense of who we are, and that we learn about ourselves and the world around us as we participate in physical activities, including sports. Her study of boys and girls from different racial and ethnic backgrounds shows that physical activities are always socially and culturally "situated." This means that we cannot understand the personal and social significance of physical activities or sports unless we know about the social and cultural context in which the experiences occur.

Hasbrook's data indicate that children give meaning to their physical abilities and skills at the same time that they learn about what it means to be male or female. Ideas about gender are learned through social relationships and through representations of masculinity and femininity in the media and the social world in which children live. Hasbrook notes that the children in her study learn about their own bodies and what their bodies can do in terms that highlight differences rather than similarities between boys and girls. This learned notion of difference accounts for why some little girls do not play sports even though their physical skills are equal to the skills of boys. Similarly, it accounts for why most boys participate freely in many of the physical activities and sports that occur in elementary school. This "difference-based" approach to gender creates a social context in which some boys feel that they have "social permission" to put down the physicality of girls, and in which boys are more likely than girls to express themselves in physically assertive performances for their classmates.

Hasbrook observes that children's ideas about masculinity and femininity are socially constructed and reproduced as they present and move their bodies while they are at school. For example, young boys learn that their status depends on showing others that they are physically strong and willing to be physically aggressive. At the same time, many girls learn that being physically strong and aggressive has few social benefits for them. Some girls, especially girls bigger and stronger than their classmates, challenge these ideas by expressing their strength and being aggressive in their relationships with boys. This sometimes leads boys to fear them and girls to hide behind them, but these girls also experience forms of teasing and social rejection. Over time, strong girls are marginalized. At the same time, certain physical activities, including many sports, come to be defined by the children as "boys' activities."

Finally, Hasbrook emphasizes that the meanings given to physicality and expressions of physical abilities and skills vary with the social class and racial/ethnic backgrounds of the children. In other words, physicality is constructed through relationships that are influenced by gender, social class, and race and ethnicity. This is why ideas about physicality vary from one group to another in a society and from one society to another.

**Ingham, Alan, and Alison Dewar. 1999. Through the eyes of youth: "Deep play" in Peewee ice hockey. Pp. 17–27 in J. Coakley and P. Donnelly, eds., *Inside sports*. London: Routledge.**

The connection between playing sports and learning about masculinity and femininity is the central theme in a study by Alan Ingham and Alison Dewar. As Ingham watched his son play ice hockey and interact with his teammates on an organized competitive hockey team for 13 to 14 year old boys, he became concerned with what these boys were learning about what it meant to be a man in sports and in society at large. Alan teamed up with Alison Dewar, then one of his colleagues in the Department of Physical Education, Health, and Sport Studies at Miami University. Together they brought the boys from this team together to have them talk about their experiences. Alison facilitated these discussions because she was trained in the use of interviewing and because the boys did not know her on a personal level like they knew Alan.

Many issues were explored during Alison's conversations with the boys. When the conversational data were analyzed, both Ingham and Dewar noted patterns of comments and inferences that revolved around playing sports and being a man. They concluded that as these boys played competitive hockey they were exposed to a narrow set of ideas about masculinity. The boys, however, did not see this as a problem. In fact, they eagerly used these ideas as a basis for how hockey should be played and for how they should assess themselves and their peers as they made their own transitions into manhood on and off the ice.

Ingham and Dewar make the case that contact sports in North America serve as a setting in which honor and shame are used to reproduce a form of masculinity in which power over others and the ability to dominate others are primary bases for status and prestige. To the extent that boys apply this narrow definition of masculinity in their own lives, they idealize toughness and come to view anyone who is vulnerable or weak as unworthy of their respect. When this occurs, the locker rooms of men's contact sport teams become places for the expression of homophobia and negative attitudes toward girls, women, and anyone defined as weak or effeminate. At the same time, playing fields become sites for expressions of violence by those men who use this narrow definition of masculinity as a basis for their own identities. In this way, these men and their fellow athletes become potential victims of their own ideas about masculinity. Ingham and Dewar are depressed by their findings. They conclude their article by asking all of us to think about how sports might be constructed to prevent this waste of human potential.

**Source: Chafetz, Janet, and Joseph Kotarba. 1999. Little League mothers and the reproduction of gender. Pp. 46–54 in J. Coakley and P. Donnelly, eds., *Inside sports*. London: Routledge.**

This study is unique because it focuses on the experiences of those who support the sport participation of others in their families. Chafetz and Kotarba did a case study in which they analyzed the social and cultural implications of the role of upper-middle-class little league mothers who supported the involvement of their 11 and 12 year old sons during a prestigious post-season baseball tournament.

Janet's son played on the team, so she had immediate access to all of what parents, especially the mothers, did to support their sons' early sport participation. She recorded information about what the mothers did, what the fathers did, and how much time, energy, and money were devoted to young boys who came to believe that they did in fact, as boys playing sports, deserve these expenditures of resources.

As she and Joe analyzed the data from the case study they found that the mothers of the players worked long hours on highly organized committees and subcommittees. Through these committees the mothers were responsible for maintaining "team spirit" and designing the consumption experiences of team members and team families. The mothers bought food, fixed

meals, drove to restaurants, provided pre- and post-game meals, bought snacks and treats, bought and made other rewards and mementos associated with playing in the tournament, and made sure that the boys could go to movies and play video games in their “off-time” away from baseball. Some mothers organized some of the “baseball sisters” into a cheerleader squad, and others made sure all the boys on the team has special door decorations for their homes, pins for their shirts, and scrapbooks commemorating their experience. Fathers occasionally helped at practices, but mostly enjoyed attending games, eating food prepared by their wives, and commenting on the sport performances of their sons.

Chafetz and Kotarba concluded that the nearly month-long tournament was the site of a set of experiences that reproduced clearly the notions that women are good wives and mothers to the extent that they facilitate enjoyable family consumption revolving around the leisure and sport experiences of their husbands and sons. And it was assumed that these mothers, if they were really good mothers, would expect nothing in return. Through this experience the unspoken message to the boys on the team was that they were “son gods” whose sport participation would be supported by their families, but primarily by their mothers. In this way, the little league experience became a social site for “doing gender” and “doing social class” in a particular way. It maintained what the men and women and boys and girls in the town of “Texasville” came to believe, day after day, was normal and good.

See also:

Donnelly, Peter (with Simon Darnell, Sandy Wells, and Jay Coakley). 2007. *The use of sport to foster child and youth development and education.* In Sport for Development and Peace, International Working Group (SDP/IWG), *Literature Reviews on Sport for Development and Peace* (pp. 7-47). Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto, Faculty of Physical Education and health; online, http://iwg.sportanddev.org/data/htmleditor/file/Lit.%20Reviews/literature%20review%20SDP.pdf (retrieved 1/24/08).

Zakus, David, Donald Njelesani, and Simon Darnell. 2007. *The use of sport and physical activity to achieve health objectives.* In Sport for Development and Peace, International Working Group (SDP/IWG), *Literature Reviews on Sport for Development and Peace* (pp. 48-88). Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto, Faculty of Physical Education and health; online, http://iwg.sportanddev.org/data/htmleditor/file/Lit.%20Reviews/literature%20review%20SDP.pdf (retrieved 1/24/08).

Jay Coakley

## Topic 7. Competition as a value in U.S. culture

Although some people say that humans are innately competitive, the facts clearly indicate that competitive orientations and competitive behavior patterns are learned. This means some people may not feel comfortable when faced with competitive reward structures. When this happens, competition by itself will not increase motivation.

Studies done by anthropologists clearly show that competitive reward structures do not even exist in some cultures. The games in these cultures often emphasize cooperation; winning in the form of outperforming another participant is irrelevant to game outcomes. Some games end only when there is a tie between players--the object is to establish harmony rather than superiority. It is clear that in this type of cultural setting, competitive reward structures would not create motivation. Research on people who have learned traditional Navajo culture shows that when competitive games are introduced to a cultural setting where cooperation and personal development are emphasized instead of competitive success, the games are redefined so that they fit the cultural setting and the orientations of the people involved.

The extent to which competition increases motivation varies from group to group within specific societies. For example, in the United States, studies show that competitive behavior is less characteristic among people who live in rural areas and among people in low-income groups. This is because life in rural areas, especially where poverty is widespread, is likely to depend on cooperative relationships rather than being competitive. People who must depend on others in their lives usually learn cooperative orientations rather than competitive ones.

Gender differences have also been found in studies of behavior in competitive situations. However, these differences are tied to patterns of social experiences rather than any innate characteristics of men or women. People who have been raised in ways that produce self-doubts, and people who have had experiences leading them to have low expectations for their own success, are not likely to be motivated by competition. On the other hand, those who are self-confident and who expect to succeed in a particular task will be highly motivated when faced with competition. If females have learned that they are not expected to excel in particular tasks, especially those demanding experience in sports, they will be less motivated by competition involving physical skills. However, this does not mean that sex is the determining factor. Sex differences exist only when patterns of experiences related to the competitive situation vary for women and men. It is clear that when men measure low on self-confidence and when their expectations for success are low, they too have low levels of motivation when faced with competition. In other words, social structure, in addition to culture, has an impact on the relationship between competition and motivation.

Jay Coakley

## Topic 8. Journalists also study what happens in sports

Sociologists are not the only ones concerned with the impact of sport experiences in people's lives. Journalists and biographers also provide useful information for understanding what happens in sports. This information may not be guided by social theories, and it may not be presented or analyzed in critical terms, but it can be useful if we read it critically. For example, Rick Telander, a long-time *Sports Illustrated* writer who now writes for the Chicago Sun-Times, wrote a book called Heaven is a Playground (1988), in which he describes the sport experiences of young black males living in a low-income Brooklyn neighborhood.

Telander has a sociology degree, and he was sensitive to the need to view and report on the lives of these young men in the social context in which they lived. His descriptions emphasize that what young people learn in sports depends on who they are, where they come from, why they are playing, whom they play with, whom they meet while they play, and what happens in and around the place where they play.

Similar things are highlighted in both the documentary film *Hoop Dreams* and the book of the same name (Joravsky, 1995); both focus on four years in the lives of two young men from a Chicago neighborhood. Their experiences were clearly related to the time and place in which they lived and played basketball. When viewed with a sociological eye, these sources give us vivid stories that help us understand sports and socialization.

## Topic 9. Competition as a concept and differences between competition and cooperation

### The concept of competition

The term competition is popularly used to refer to many different situations. We say that we compete against others, against ourselves, against the clock or the record book, against objects or the elements (as in mountain climbing or in white water kayaking), and even against animals (as in hunting). Although it would be worthwhile to look at the consequences of each of these types of competition, we will limit our discussion to situations in which people compete against other people in formally organized physical activities. For our purposes, **competition** will be defined as *a process through which success is measured by directly comparing the achievements of those who are performing the same physical activity under standardized conditions and rules.*

According to this definition, competition is a process through which winners and losers are identified on the basis of who does better than whom. Although individual participants may bring different personal goals to competitive events, the competitive process itself is focused on defeating opponents.

In addition to being a process, competition may also be described as a type of **reward structure.** As a reward structure, competition sets the rules for distributing rewards and influences relationships between people. The crucial thing to remember about competition is that not everyone can be a winner. The success of one participant or team automatically ``causes" the failure of others. Rewards are distributed on the basis of how each competitor does compared with the others. Competition always involves a direct comparison of participants.

A classic nonsport example of a competitive reward structure is a classroom in which the traditional grading curve is used. Within this classroom situation, the teacher assumes that a predetermined quantity of As, Bs, Cs, Ds, and Fs will be given to the students. Usually, it is also assumed that the statistical distribution of these grades should conform to the normal bell-shaped curve. Thus for each of the relatively few students receiving an A, there would also be a student receiving an F; the frequency of Bs and Ds would be greater, but for every B there would be an accompanying D; the most frequently given grade would be a C. This method of grading guarantees both ``success" and ``failure," regardless of how any student performs in terms of absolute standards. Everyone could do poorly and there would still be a certain number of As. Conversely, everyone could do very well and there would still be a certain number of Fs. This means the students are in a situation in which the success of one person is inevitably accompanied by the failure of another. Within a competitive reward structure like this, the goals of the students are mutually exclusive. The relationships among the students are organized so that they are in competition with one another.

Of course, this is not the only way to award grades in a classroom. It is just one of the reward structures teachers can use, and most avoid using it because it often undermines the learning that could occur through student relationships with one another. Students who live with curves in their schooling are conditioned to thrive on the failure of their classmates; in fact, the worse your classmates do on a test, the better your grade will be when a competitive reward structure is used. Most teachers realize that this orientation subverts students' interests in helping each other learn and that it undermines the process of education. Other teachers still use it for reasons having nothing to do with learning; it is an easy way to award grades.

***Noncompetitive reward structures***

Competition is not the only type of process through which success can be measured and performances be rewarded. The achievement of success and the earning of rewards may also be based on *cooperation* or the use of *individualized standards*. **Cooperation** is a process through which success is measured by the collective achievements of a group of people working together to reach a particular goal. Rewards are shared equally by everyone in the group and depend on the collective achievement of all the participants. An example of this type of reward structure is a classroom in which students participate together in a group project. The same grade would be given to all students depending on the achievement of the group as a whole.

When *individualized standards* are used to measure success and to earn rewards, there is no direct dependence on other people. Achievement does not depend on outperforming others, nor does it depend on working with others. Rewards are earned by reaching a prearranged goal or level of excellence. Individualistic reward structures are found in classrooms where grades are given on the basis of how each student meets a predetermined set of expectations. Those who do an excellent job of meeting the expectations receive As; those who fail to meet minimum expectations receive Fs. In an individualistic reward structure students can help each other learn without worrying about whether the people they help may ``raise the curve'' in the class; success does not depend on everyone else doing poorly.

***Competition as an individual trait***

In addition to being conceptualized as a process or a reward structure, competition can be thought of as a personal motive or orientation. Again, it is necessary to distinguish a competitive orientation from cooperative and individualistic orientations. A *competitive orientation* is characterized by the tendency to evaluate achievement in terms of how one person compares with others. Competitive people view goal achievement in terms of outperforming others; they seek to demonstrate superiority over others rather than working with others or judging themselves apart from others.

A *cooperative orientation* is characterized by a tendency to define the rewards in an activity in a way that makes them available to everyone. Goal achievement is seen in terms of maximizing the rewards for all participants through coordinated action. A person with a cooperative orientation tries to get others involved in an activity so the group's potential will be maximized.

An *individualistic orientation* is characterized by a tendency to see rewards as being unrelated to the behavior of other participants. People with this orientation assess their behavior in terms of how it measures up to standards based on personal rather than relativistic criteria. These personal standards are based on their past experiences or future goals rather than any direct comparison with other people.

When these three orientations are discussed, confusion is often created by the tendency to equate a competitive orientation with a strong achievement orientation. It is mistakenly assumed that anyone who sets goals and works hard must be a ``competitive'' person. Hard workers may be competitive, but people with cooperative and individualistic orientations may also be achievement-oriented. It's just that they use different strategies to achieve their goals, and they evaluate their accomplishments in different terms than the ones used by people with competitive orientations.

Successful, hard-working people are not necessarily competitive. They may be people who combine strong achievement orientations with cooperative or individualistic orientations.

Success (*as used in this chapter, ``success'' refers to relatively high levels of achievement in activities where performance is the basis for receiving prestige, wealth, or power. <u>Career</u> success is the primary focus of attention*), even in capitalistic societies, can be based on any one of these three orientations. People who are cooperative or who judge themselves without making comparisons with others are just as likely to be successful as those who always try to outdo and establish superiority over others. They are usually happier people, and they are more pleasant to work with and, especially, to play with (Kohn, 1986).

***Reward structures and personal orientations in sport***

Competition is a part of sport. This means that in formal terms, only one individual or team can be the winner in a sport event and, whether we like it or not, there is always a loser. However, sport also offers opportunities for combining competition with cooperative and individualistic reward structures. For example, a sport activity could be played in a setting in which competitive outcomes were not the only basis for defining success and failure. Formal recognition or rewards could be given to participants who initiate or maintain cooperative relationships or who show some type of personal development.

It is also possible for the participants in a contest or game to change their personal orientations so the competition in their activity is controlled. For example, if participants are primarily interested in creating an enjoyable group experience or in developing personal skills, less emphasis can be placed on comparisons with others and establishing superiority over others. This does not mean that competition is eliminated from the activity. It only means that the competitive aspects of the sport experience are redefined through the use of cooperative and individualistic orientations.

Because reward structures and personal orientations can vary from one situation to another, it is possible for sport and the sport experience to change when there are differences in circumstances or participants. Studies in anthropology provide many examples of how competition is defined and used in different ways in different cultures; in fact, competitive reward structures do not even exist in some cultures (Kohn, 1986). Research in social psychology shows that competitive orientations not only vary from one person to another, but they also vary from situation to situation for specific individuals.

***Reward structures and competition in sport***

The process of competition and the use of competitive reward structures vary from one society to another. For example, being a ``winner'' or ``loser'' is not nearly as important to people in most countries as it is in the United States. People who visit the United States from other countries are often amazed at the extent to which competition is used to distribute rewards and evaluate the worth of human beings. Most people raised in the United States do not realize this until they leave the country and see how things are done in other parts of the world. This point was recently made by Dean Smith, the respected basketball coach at the University of North Carolina. After returning from an extended trip outside the United States, he observed that ``Our American culture is far more competitive than any other culture I have observed.'' He goes on to say that ``We tend to toast `winners'--whether it is in business or athletics--regardless of the methods used to become a winner'' (in Pritchard, 1984).

Statements by other athletes and coaches clearly support Smith's observations. For example, world-famous middle-distance runner Mary Decker Slaney (quoted in Didinger, 1984) described her orientation toward sport in the following way:

*From the time I started running, I won. . . . To me, that was the only place to finish. I wasn't like some kids who would finish second and say, `I ran a good time.' Good time, heck. I want to win. I'll do anything I have to win.*

George Allen, a respected former coach in professional football, emphatically stated that ``One of the greatest things in life is winning. If you can live with yourself and lose, I don't know how you can be happy" (in Dufresne, 1984).

Another coach explained, ``Defeat is worse than death because you have to live with defeat." When Pat Riley, the popular coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, told reporters what was important in the National Basketball League, he said, ``There are only two things in this league, winning and misery. And the Lakers don't want to be miserable" (Rocky Mountain News, 11/16/88: 68).

These statements all point to the same conclusion: competition is heavily emphasized in U.S. sport. The formal and valued rewards are given to the victors, and victory depends solely on overcoming opponents. Cooperative behavior and individual development may be mentioned in speeches, but the real focus is on being ``Number One." This emphasis is so strong that even silver medals and second place trophies are sometimes defined as reminders that someone else was better.

To suggest that other methods of evaluation be given priority over competition would be considered by many Americans as a distortion of the character of sport. Of course, there are exceptions, but at most levels of competition there is a strong emphasis on win-loss records, league standings, play-offs, and championships.

In many settings, sport is even organized to take coaches and athletes beyond the philosophy that ``winning is the only thing." One successful basketball coach in a Pennsylvania high school explains how this happened to him:

*Through the years I've developed my own philosophy about high school basketball. Winning isn't all that matters. I don't care how many games you win, it's how many championships you win that counts* (Quoted in Michener, 1976).

Such an approach to sport is a reflection of a structure in which winning is important only when the first-place tournament trophy is brought to your sponsor's display case.

In some settings, there may be rewards for individual accomplishments or for special displays of cooperative behavior, but these are often viewed as consolation prizes. Many athletes would even say that victory is preferred to a good individual performance. In fact, if members of a losing team take visible pleasure in their own accomplishments, they may be subject to the criticism of fans, coaches, and other players. Athletes are quick to learn that a personal accomplishment is meaningless unless it contributes to victory, and they are quick to point this out in their interviews with media people. If cooperative behavior is emphasized, the coach or players may be praised by others, but if cooperation is not accompanied by some degree of competitive success, praise is quickly withheld. They may even be described by the statement popularized by baseball's Leo Durocher: ``Nice guys finish last."

In U.S. sport, there are many references to sportsmanship, but it is generally understood that sportsmanship refers to a commitment to the rules and a lack of animosity toward opponents. If sportsmanship goes beyond this commitment so that cooperative behavior occurs at the expense of competitive success, athletes might be accused of not taking the game seriously or lacking the ``killer instinct." Not everyone endorses the locker room slogan ``Show me a good loser and I'll show you a loser," but the slogan certainly serves as a warning to those who might carry a cooperative orientation in sport too far.

In the United States, there is also much lip service given to the idea that winning means doing your best. However, most sports are not organized to emphasize individual development over competitive success. Many coaches have taken the idea that winning means doing the best we can and turned it into the statement, ``We can beat this team if we only do our best." This quickly changes the method of evaluation so performance is viewed in terms of competitive success rather than individual development.

These comments on U.S. sport should not be taken to mean that only competitive behavior exists. They only mean that the formal rewards available to participants are primarily given to those who are successful within sport's competitive reward structure. From Little Leaguers to professionals, the emphasis on being ``Number One" permeates U.S. sport. Individuals, teams, and coaches are evaluated and remembered by their win-loss records. Other qualities may be mentioned and described in books, but books are written only about winners. If players and coaches are not winners, their personal qualities will gain them friends and good memories but no sport trophies. This shows that little has been done to control the heavy emphasis on winning. Competitive behavior is taken for granted, and competitive success is seen as a means to fame and fortune by many. Cooperation and the use of individualistic standards rarely receive the emphasis put on competition, nor do the people who use them to achieve success receive the publicity received by those with outspoken competitive orientations.

***A qualification and analysis.***

This discussion of sport competition in the United States is subject to qualification. It is based on generalizations and does not consider that rewards come in many forms and may not be based on the same factors in every situation. In the United States, the types of valued rewards vary in different sports and at different levels of competition. For example, the account of a Special Olympics event at the end of this chapter illustrates a case in which competition is balanced with cooperation and the use of individualistic standards.

An emphasis on competitive success varies from one cultural setting to another. Not all reward structures in sport emphasize competition in the same way it is often emphasized in the United States. ``Going for the gold" and striving to be ``Number One" decrease in importance when there is a real emphasis on cooperating with others and individual development. But when the rewards for competitive success increase, it is likely that competitive behavior will be given a higher priority by both participants and spectators.

From a sociological perspective, there are additional important factors to consider in understanding the use of competitive reward structures in sport. The countries in which the competitive dimension of sport is heavily emphasized are the same ones in which individual merit is widely believed to be the basis for wealth and power. It is in the political and economic interests of powerful people in these countries to promote the belief that rewards always go to those who deserve them. If this belief is widespread, it leads people to conclude that inequality is a natural part of life in society and that rewards are distributed in the way they were ``meant" to be distributed. This, of course, also leads to the conclusion that those who are well off possess personal qualities making them deserving of the rewards they have received, and that those who are not well off must lack the character to improve their condition. In other words, everyone deserves what they have or do not have. This way of thinking enables those who are well off to command respect and admiration in ways that help them maintain and increase their power and resources.

Since sport can be used to emphasize competition in a way that promotes the idea that rewards always go to those who deserve them, there is a tendency for powerful groups within many societies to support highly competitive sport programs and emphasize competitive reward structures and orientations. This is especially the case in capitalist societies because they are built on the belief that rewards always go to those who achieve more than others and have earned what they possess. When a significant proportion of the people in a capitalist society no longer believe they live in a meritocracy (that is, a system in which opportunities are available to all and rewards go to those who earn them), those with wealth and power lose the legitimacy of their position, and their status in society is threatened.

Those in positions of power in socialist countries do not emphasize the competitive dimension of sport to the same degree or in the same way it is emphasized in capitalist countries. In China, for example, there is a heavy emphasis on cooperation and ``collective spirit'' in sport. Chinese leaders talk about using sport to gain strength for the cause of socialism. Even though sport is heavily tied to militarism, and even though there has been a recent emphasis on achievements in international sport events, cooperative reward structures remain widely used in sport programs. In fact, sport itself is seen as a part of the larger sphere of ``physical culture'' in socialist society. Success is defined in terms of contributions to the larger community. Sport is seen as a tool for physically strengthening people and developing in them the kind of group or collectivist spirit needed to make socialism a success.

People in positions of power in socialist societies must be careful to balance their support for elite sport and their support for physical culture as a whole. The general population must believe that its participation in physical culture is valued or else questions will be raised about socialist ideology. The preservation of collectivist spirit requires a popular belief in the state's commitment to social progress and responsiveness to social needs despite the existence of differences between people within society. Individual achievements can be highlighted, but they must be highlighted in terms of their contributions to the group rather than the advantages they bring to individuals.

The purpose of this discussion is to show that there are important differences in the way competitive reward structures are incorporated into sport in socialist and capitalist societies. As a country leans more toward socialism, competitive reward structures will be used and emphasized less often; as a country leans more toward capitalism, competitive reward structures will be used and emphasized more often. According to most definitions, competition will always be a part of sport and the sport experience. However, success in sport may also be defined in terms of cooperation and friendships and individual growth and development. When rewards are given for these other dimensions of the sport experience, competitive success becomes less important.

## Topic 10. Competition in sport: Does it prepare people for life?

Outside of a national character and an educated society, there are few things more important to a society's growth and well-being than competitive athletics. If it is a cliché to say athletics builds character as well as muscle, then I subscribe to the cliché.

Former President Gerald Ford (1974)

We have elevated our faith in competition to fanatical . . . levels. But . . . the evidence [shows] that it is not the mainspring of achievement . . . as we have been brought up to believe. [E]xcessive competitiveness is overwhelming us with destructive tensions all the way from family relationships to the suicidal arms race.

Dr. Benjamin Spock (1986)

The athlete doesn't have to grow up because the coach lives his life for him. . . . The sad thing is [that] it actually benefits the team to keep the player naive and dependent.

Merlin Olsen, Former Defensive Lineman of the Los Angeles Rams (1981)

The topic of competition in sport has often generated controversy. Some people claim sport competition builds character and prepares participants for life in contemporary society. Others say it destroys confidence, creates anxiety, and leads people to value winning over fair play and self-development.

Four things will be done in this chapter. *First,* we will define the concept of competition. *Second,* we will see how competition is incorporated into the way sport is organized in different societies, and played by different individuals. *Third,* we will examine the impact of competition on motivation, the achievement of excellence, and the development of character. *Fourth,* we will focus on whether competition in sport provides people with experiences that will make them more successful in the rest of their lives.

# The concept of competition

The term *competition* is popularly used to refer to many different situations. We say that we compete against others, against ourselves, against the clock or the record book, against objects or the elements (as in mountain climbing or in white water kayaking), and even against animals (as in hunting). Although it would be worthwhile to look at the consequences of each of these types of competition, we will limit our discussion to situations in which people compete against other people in formally organized physical activities. For our purposes, **competition** will be defined as *a process through which success is measured by directly comparing the achievements of those who are performing the same physical activity under standardized conditions and rules.*

According to this definition, competition is a process through which winners and losers are identified on the basis of who does better than whom. Although individual participants may bring different personal goals to competitive events, the competitive process itself is focused on defeating opponents.

In addition to being a process, competition may also be described as a type of **reward structure.** As a reward structure, competition sets the rules for distributing rewards and influences relationships between people. The crucial thing to remember about competition is that not everyone can be a winner. The success of one participant or team automatically ``causes" the failure of others. Rewards are distributed on the basis of how each competitor does when compared with the others. Competition always involves a direct comparison of participants.

A classic nonsport example of a competitive reward structure is a classroom in which the traditional grading curve is used. Within this classroom situation, the teacher assumes that a predetermined quantity of As, Bs, Cs, Ds, and Fs will be given to the students. Usually, it is also assumed that the statistical distribution of these grades should conform to the normal bell-shaped curve. Thus for each of the relatively few students receiving an A, there would also be a student receiving an F; the frequency of Bs and Ds would be greater, but for every B there would be an accompanying D; the most frequently given grade would be a C. This method of grading guarantees both ``success" and ``failure," regardless of how any student performs in terms of absolute standards. Everyone could do poorly and there would still be a certain number of As. Conversely, everyone could do very well and the proportion of Fs would not change. This means the students are in a situation in which the success of one person is inevitably accompanied by the failure of another. Within a competitive reward structure like this, the goals of the students are mutually exclusive. The relationships among the students are organized so that they are in competition with one another.

Of course, this is not the only way to award grades in a classroom. It is just one of the reward structures teachers can use, and most avoid using it because it often undermines the learning that could occur through student relationships with one another. Students who live with curves in their schooling are conditioned to thrive on the failure of their classmates; in fact, the worse your classmates do on a test, the better your grade will be when a competitive reward structure is used. Most teachers realize that this orientation subverts students' interests in helping each other learn and that it undermines the process of education. Other teachers still use it for reasons having nothing to do with learning; it is an easy way to award grades.

### *Noncompetitive reward structures*

Competition is not the only type of process through which success can be measured and performances be rewarded. The achievement of success and the earning of rewards may also be based on *cooperation* or the use of *individualized standards*. **Cooperation** is *a process through which success is measured by the collective achievements of a group of people working together to reach a particular goal*. Rewards are shared equally by everyone in the group and depend on the collective achievement of all the participants. An example of this type of reward structure is a classroom in which students participate together in a group project. The same grade would be given to all students depending on the achievement of the group as a whole.

When *individualized standards* are used to measure success and to earn rewards, there is no direct dependence on other people. Achievement does not depend on outperforming others, nor does it depend on working with others. Rewards are earned by reaching a prearranged goal or level of excellence. Individualistic reward structures are found in classrooms where grades are given on the basis of how each student meets a predetermined set of expectations. Those who do an excellent job of meeting the expectations receive As; those who fail to meet minimum expectations receive Fs. In an individualistic reward structure students can help each other learn

without worrying about whether the people they help may ``raise the curve'' in the class; success does not depend on everyone else doing poorly.

### *Competition as an individual trait*

In addition to being conceptualized as a process or a reward structure, competition can be thought of as a personal motive or orientation. Again, it is necessary to distinguish a competitive orientation from cooperative and individualistic orientations. A **competitive orientation** is *characterized by the tendency to evaluate achievement in terms of how one person compares with others*. Competitive people view goal achievement in terms of outperforming others; they seek to demonstrate superiority over others rather than working with others or judging themselves apart from others.

A **cooperative orientation** *is characterized by a tendency to define the rewards in an activity in a way that makes them available to everyone*. Goal achievement is seen in terms of maximizing the rewards for all participants through coordinated action. A person with a cooperative orientation tries to get others involved in an activity so the group's potential will be maximized.

An **individualistic orientation** *is characterized by a tendency to see rewards as being unrelated to the behavior of other participants*. People with this orientation assess their behavior in terms of how it measures up to standards based on personal rather than relativistic criteria. These personal standards are based on their past experiences or future goals rather than any direct comparison with other people.

When these three orientations are discussed, confusion is often created by the tendency to equate a competitive orientation with a strong achievement orientation. It is mistakenly assumed that anyone who sets goals and works hard must be a ``competitive'' person. Hard workers may be competitive, but people with cooperative and individualistic orientations may also be achievement-oriented. It's just that they use different strategies to achieve their goals, and they evaluate their accomplishments in different terms than the ones used by people with competitive orientations.

Successful, hard-working people are not necessarily competitive. They may be people who combine strong achievement orientations with cooperative or individualistic orientations. Success (*as used in this chapter, success refers to relatively high levels of achievement in activities where performance is the basis for receiving prestige, wealth, or power. Career success is the primary focus of attention*), even in capitalistic societies, can be based on any one of these three orientations. People who are cooperative or who judge themselves without making comparisons with others are just as likely to be successful as those who always try to outdo and establish superiority over others. They are usually happier people, and they are more pleasant to work with and, especially, to play with (Kohn, 1986).

## Reward structures and personal orientations in sport

Competition is a part of sport. This means that in formal terms, only one individual or team can be the winner in a sport event and, whether we like it or not, there is always a loser. However, sport also offers opportunities for combining competition with cooperative and individualistic reward structures. For example, a sport activity could be played in a setting in which competitive outcomes were not the only basis for defining success and failure. Formal

recognition or rewards could be given to participants who initiate or maintain cooperative relationships or who show some type of personal development.

It is also possible for the participants in a contest or game to change their personal orientations so the competition in their activity is controlled. For example, if participants are primarily interested in creating an enjoyable group experience or in developing personal skills, less emphasis can be placed on comparisons with others and establishing superiority over others. This does not mean that competition is eliminated from the activity. It only means that the competitive aspects of the sport experience are redefined through the use of cooperative and individualistic orientations.

Because reward structures and personal orientations can vary from one situation to another, it is possible for sport and the sport experience to change when there are differences in circumstances or participants. Studies in anthropology provide many examples of how competition is defined and used in different ways in different cultures; in fact, competitive reward structures do not even exist in some cultures (Kohn, 1986). Research in social psychology shows that competitive orientations vary from one person to another, and vary from situation to situation for specific individuals.

## *Reward structures and competition in sport*

The process of competition and the use of competitive reward structures vary from one society to another. For example, being a ``winner'' or ``loser'' is not nearly as important to people in most countries as it is in the United States. People who visit the United States from other countries are often amazed at the extent to which competition is used to distribute rewards and evaluate the worth of human beings. Most people raised in the United States do not realize this until they leave the country and see how things are done in other parts of the world. This point was recently made by Dean Smith, the respected basketball coach at the University of North Carolina. After returning from an extended trip outside the United States, he observed that ``Our American culture is far more competitive than any other culture I have observed.'' He goes on to say that, “We tend to toast `winners'--whether it is in business or athletics--regardless of the methods used to become a winner'' (in Pritchard, 1984).

Statements by other athletes and coaches clearly support Smith's observations. For example, world-famous middle-distance runner Mary Decker Slaney (quoted in Didinger, 1984) described her orientation toward sport in the following way:

> From the time I started running, I won. . . . To me, that was the only place to finish. I wasn't like some kids who would finish second and say, `I ran a good time.' Good time, heck. I want to win. I'll do anything I have to, to win.

George Allen, a respected former coach in professional football, emphatically stated that ``One of the greatest things in life is winning. If you can live with yourself and lose, I don't know how you can be happy'' (in Dufresne, 1984).

Another coach explained, “Defeat is worse than death because you have to live with defeat.” When Pat Riley, the popular coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, told reporters what was important in the National Basketball League, he said, “There are only two things in this league, winning and misery. And the Lakers don't want to be miserable” (*Rocky Mountain News*, 11/16/88: 68).

These statements all point to the same conclusion: competition is heavily emphasized in U.S. sport. The formal and valued rewards are given to the victors, and victory depends solely on overcoming opponents. Cooperative behavior and individual development may be mentioned in speeches, but the real focus is on being ``Number One." This emphasis is so strong that even silver medals and second place trophies are sometimes defined as reminders that someone else was better.

To suggest that other methods of evaluation be given priority over competition would be considered by many Americans as a distortion of the character of sport. Of course, there are exceptions, but at most levels of competition there is a strong emphasis on win-loss records, league standings, play-offs, and championships.

In many settings, sport is even organized to take coaches and athletes beyond the philosophy that "winning is the only thing." One successful basketball coach in a Pennsylvania high school explains how this happened to him:

> Through the years I've developed my own philosophy about high school basketball. Winning
>
> isn't all that matters. I don't care how many games you win, it's how many championships
>
> you win that counts (in Michener, 1976).

Such an approach to sport is a reflection of a structure in which winning is important only when the first-place tournament trophy is brought to your sponsor's display case.

In some settings, there may be rewards for individual accomplishments or for special displays of cooperative behavior, but these are often viewed as consolation prizes. Many athletes would even say that victory is preferred to a good individual performance. In fact, if members of a losing team take visible pleasure in their own accomplishments, they may be subject to the criticism of fans, coaches, and other players. Athletes are quick to learn that a personal accomplishment is meaningless unless it contributes to victory, and they are quick to point this out in their interviews with media people. If cooperative behavior is emphasized, the coach or players may be praised by others, but if cooperation is not accompanied by some degree of competitive success, praise is quickly withheld. They may even be described by the statement popularized by baseball's Leo Durocher: "Nice guys finish last."

In U.S. sport, there are many references to sportsmanship, but it is generally understood that sportsmanship refers to a commitment to the rules and a lack of animosity toward opponents. If sportsmanship goes beyond this commitment so that cooperative behavior occurs *at the expense of* competitive success, athletes might be accused of not taking the game seriously or lacking the "killer instinct." Not everyone endorses the locker room slogan ``Show me a good loser and I'll show you a loser," but the slogan certainly serves as a warning to those who might carry a cooperative orientation in sport too far.

In the United States, there is also much lip service given to the idea that winning means doing your best. However, most sports are not organized to emphasize individual development over competitive success. Many coaches have taken the idea that winning means doing the best we can and turned it into the statement, "We can beat this team if we only do our best." This quickly changes the method of evaluation so performance is viewed in terms of competitive success rather than individual development.

These comments on U.S. sport should not be taken to mean that only competitive behavior exists. They only mean that the formal rewards available to participants are <u>primarily</u> given to

those who are successful within sport's competitive reward structure. From Little Leaguers to professionals, the emphasis on being ``Number One'' permeates U.S. sport. Individuals, teams, and coaches are evaluated and remembered by their win-loss records. Other qualities may be mentioned and described in books, but books are written only about winners. If players and coaches are not winners, their personal qualities will gain them friends and good memories but no sport trophies. This shows that little has been done to control the heavy emphasis on winning. Competitive behavior is taken-for-granted, and competitive success is seen as a means to fame and fortune by many. Cooperation and the use of individualistic standards rarely receive the emphasis put on competition, nor do the people who use them to achieve success receive the publicity received by those with outspoken competitive orientations.

A qualification and analysis.

This discussion of sport competition in the United States is subject to qualification. It is based on generalizations and does not consider that rewards come in many forms and may not be based on the same factors in every situation. In the United States, the types of valued rewards vary in different sports and at different levels of competition. For example, the account of a Special Olympics event at the end of this chapter illustrates a case in which competition is balanced with cooperation and the use of individualistic standards.

An emphasis on competitive success varies from one cultural setting to another. Not all reward structures in sport emphasize competition in the same way it is often emphasized in the United States. ``Going for the gold'' and striving to be ``Number One'' decrease in importance when there is a real emphasis on cooperating with others and individual development. But when the rewards for competitive success increase, it is likely that competitive behavior will be given a higher priority by both participants and spectators.

From a sociological perspective, there are additional important factors to consider in understanding the use of competitive reward structures in sport. The countries in which the competitive dimension of sport is heavily emphasized are the same ones in which individual merit is widely believed to be the basis for wealth and power. It is in the political and economic interests of powerful people in these countries to promote the belief that rewards always go to those who deserve them. If this belief is widespread, it leads people to conclude that inequality is a natural part of life in society and that rewards are distributed in the way they were ``meant'' to be distributed. This, of course, also leads to the conclusion that those who are well off possess personal qualities making them deserving of the rewards they have received, and that those who are not well off must lack the character to improve their condition. In other words, everyone deserves what they have or do not have. This way of thinking enables those who are well off to command respect and admiration in ways that help them maintain and increase their power and resources.

Since sport can be used to emphasize competition in a way that promotes the idea that rewards always go to those who deserve them, there is a tendency for powerful groups within many societies to support highly competitive sport programs and emphasize competitive reward structures and orientations. This is especially the case in capitalist societies because they are built on the belief that rewards always go to those who achieve more than others and have earned what they possess. When a significant proportion of the people in a capitalist society no longer believe they live in a meritocracy (that is, a system in which opportunities are available to all and rewards go to those who earn them), those with wealth and power lose the legitimacy of their position, and their status in society is threatened.

Those in positions of power in socialist countries do not emphasize the competitive dimension of sport to the same degree or in the same way it is emphasized in capitalist countries. In China, for example, there is a heavy emphasis on cooperation and ``collective spirit'' in sport. Chinese leaders talk about using sport to gain strength for the cause of socialism. Even though sport is heavily tied to militarism, and even though there has been a recent emphasis on achievements in international sport events, cooperative reward structures remain widely used in sport programs. In fact, sport itself is seen as a part of the larger sphere of ``physical culture'' in socialist society. Success is defined in terms of contributions to the larger community. Sport is seen as a tool for physically strengthening people and developing in them the kind of group or collectivist spirit needed to make socialism a success.

People in positions of power in socialist societies must be careful to balance their support for elite sport and their support for physical culture as a whole. The general population must believe that its participation in physical culture is valued or else questions will be raised about socialist ideology. The preservation of collectivist spirit requires a popular belief in the state's commitment to social progress and responsiveness to social needs despite the existence of differences between people within society. Individual achievements can be highlighted, but they must be highlighted in terms of their contributions to the group rather than the advantages they bring to individuals.

The purpose of this discussion is to show that there are important differences in the way competitive reward structures are incorporated into sport in socialist and capitalist societies. As a country leans more toward socialism, competitive reward structures will be used and emphasized less often; as a country leans more toward capitalism, competitive reward structures will be used and emphasized more often. According to our definition of sport (in Chapter 1), competition will always be a part of sport and the sport experience. However, success in sport may also be defined in terms of cooperation and friendships and individual growth and development. When rewards are given for these other dimensions of the sport experience, competitive success becomes less important.

## *Personal orientations and competition in sport*

Our personal orientations toward competition, cooperation, and the use of individualistic standards are learned. Our definitions of success are learned. This learning takes place through the socialization process (**socialization** *refers to the process of ongoing social interaction through which human beings come to know who they are, how they are connected to the social world around them, and how they can change that world*), and it reflects the social setting in which it occurs. In capitalist countries, success is usually defined in competitive terms. Children are taught to be competitive in their relationships with others. In countries like the United States and Canada, for example, these competitive orientations sometimes become so strong that children engage in competitive behavior even when it is in their best interests to cooperate. They insist on defining success in terms of establishing superiority over others even when greater personal rewards are available through cooperation (Pepitone, 1980).

People with competitive orientations are not the only ones to resist situational pressures to behave in different ways. For example, among some Native American peoples, cooperative orientations are so strong that tribal members either avoid competition or redefine competitive situations so that cooperative relationships are emphasized (Allison, 1979; Allison and Luschen, 1979; Benedict, 1961; Duda, 1981). In the case of Navajo high school athletes, Maria Allison has

reported that cooperative orientations influenced their perceptions of opponents, their definitions of opponents during games, and their responses to rewards for competitive success. When compared to Anglo athletes, the Navajos were more likely to use sport as a means of reaffirming their relationships with others; group solidarity was more important than winning. They were also more concerned with using sport to extend their personal qualities; they used individualistic instead of competitive orientations to evaluate their own performances. They were less likely to try to dominate opponents, and they felt uncomfortable using their bodies as tools of domination. Finally, they were embarrassed by the status and rewards that accompanied competitive success because they had always been taught not to raise their heads above others (Allison, 1979).

Of course, there are exceptions to Allison's findings. In cases where Navajo culture has been weakened, some young Navajos have learned Anglo orientations toward competition. This has also occurred among other native peoples in the United States and Canada and among some immigrant groups in both countries. Even when people come from cultural backgrounds in which cooperative orientations have been emphasized, many of them gradually take on competitive orientations as they face the challenges of attending schools and living in communities in which competitive orientations and the use of competitive reward structures are widespread. The important point here is that the orientations people use to “see” the goals of sport participation are *learned:* they are ``a matter of social structure rather than human nature" (Kohn, 1986). Therefore, they can vary from culture to culture and from group to group within cultures.

It should also be pointed out that problems can occur when personal orientations do not match reward structures. For example, Anglo coaches have a difficult time dealing with Navajo athletes whose orientations don't fit with the coaches' ways of defining competition and success. When Anglos in North America lack competitive orientations, they often are perceived as being abnormal. In fact, some sport psychologists have even suggested that athletes whose weak competitive orientations interfere with performance might be suffering from ``success phobia" (Ogilvie and Tutko, 1966). Strong competitive orientations are defined as normal in North American sport. When athletes do not have them, they may be encouraged to seek psychological help.

**In summary,** our personal orientations toward competition are grounded in the cultural context in which we are socialized. Once formed, these orientations tend to resist change. However, change is not impossible. When reward structures change so that new approaches and definitions of success are emphasized, it is likely that individuals and groups will gradually modify their orientations to fit the new circumstances.

### *REFLECT ON SPORT*

## The Special Olympics: A Case for Controlled Competition

The pervasiveness of competitive motives is so great in our society that we often forget there are other ways of approaching sport involvement. I became aware of my own forgetfulness a number of years ago when I witnessed a special form of sport competition. At the time, a friend of mine told me that if I was interested in observing a unique sporting event, I should attend the Special Olympics Games in our community. I had heard of the Special Olympics program and knew that it involved the participation of mentally retarded children and adults, but I had never seen the program in operation.

My curiosity and my interest in sport led me to attend the games on the following Saturday. When I entered the stadium where the track and field events were taking place, I was surprised to see there was no admission charge and there were few spectators in the stands. However, the track and the grassy infield were teeming with activity. Everyone was milling about, and there was much laughter and joking. It certainly did not resemble any track meet I had ever attended, and I naively wondered when the people were going to get serious and when the events were going to begin.

To my surprise, some of the events were already under way, and the people on the infield were the eager participants accompanied by dozens of volunteer coaches, organizers, and officials--many of whom had probably never seen a ``real" track meet. After a few minutes of watching, I spotted a number of events in which participation was taking place. There was the standing long jump, the high jump, the softball throw, and the Frisbee toss. I later discovered that many of the athletes were also involved in the swimming and the gymnastics events taking place inside the high school facilities next to the stadium. The running events began shortly after I arrived. They included the 50-, 100-, and 220-yard dashes; the 440-yard and mile runs; and the 440-yard relay.

Throughout the day, occasional cheers and numerous words of encouragement came from the spectators, who were primarily the relatives of the athletes. They made no negative comments, and they seemed to be overjoyed whenever a finish line was crossed--no matter who was the winner. Out on the field, the athletes cheered for each other and hugged their fellow competitors after an event was completed--no matter what the outcome. And the coaches and other volunteers congratulated the athletes and gave them words of praise whenever they participated--no matter how well they performed. I had never seen anything like it.

The athletes knew who won and who lost; they tried hard; and they cherished their first-, second-, and third-place ribbons *and* the ribbons they received for each event they entered. Their warmth and enthusiasm were contagious. Their coaches gave them advice on technique mixed with encouragement, but the advice seemed to always focus on the individual's effort *apart* from competitive relationships or reward structures. The outcomes were important to the athletes, but outcomes took a back seat to the sheer pleasure and camaraderie of personal involvement. I was repeatedly amazed to see all the athletes become elated when they or their peers finished an event. The excitement of the person coming in last was just as intense and spontaneous as the excitement of the winner. And those watching cheered everyone.

About halfway through the meet, there was an incident that revealed to me that what I was seeing in the Special Olympics was truly a unique form of sport competition. It occurred in a 220-yard race in which three 12-year-olds were participating. They were evenly matched, and when the starter's gun fired, they ran shoulder to shoulder into the curve on the track. As they came out of the turn, one of the runners had taken a two-step lead, but about 25 yards from the finish line he tripped and fell to the cinder surface of the track. Instead of racing past him to victory, his two opponents simultaneously stopped, turned around, and helped him up. Together they brushed him off, and then, each holding one of his hands, jogged together across the finish line. It was a three-way tie for first place.

In all my years of playing and watching sport, I had never seen anything so dramatic. I later discovered that the response of the two runners was made without prior advice from the coaches or anyone else. They did it on their own, and they did it so matter-of-factly that it looked like they never gave it a second thought. Unlike ``normal" athletes, their compassion was not overwhelmed by the heat of competition.

That evening I wondered how many other athletes would have responded in the same manner. Most of us would have displayed compassion for our fellow competitor, but it would have been displayed *after* we crossed the finish line and checked to see if our time had been properly recorded. Our competitive orientations would have led us to focus our attention on the race and the finish line; to do otherwise would have been defined as a ``break in concentration." There are many lessons to be learned from athletes in the Special Olympics. Watching them compete on the local, state, and international level has illustrated to me that a competitive event can evoke joy and compassion when it emphasizes cooperation and individual development. The purpose of the Special Olympics program is to provide the mentally retarded with positive, successful experiences in sport. Through those experiences, it is hoped that they can gain the confidence and self-mastery necessary to build healthy self-images. The parents of the participants judge their sons and daughters on the basis of effort and personal progress--not on the basis of wins, losses, ribbons, trophies, or championships. Pride in their children exists, and, to an extent, they vicariously experience their children's accomplishments. But they are careful not to compare their child with other participants. They remember that each special athlete is a unique individual and that he or she should be judged on the basis of past personal performances coupled with realistic goals for the future.

The coaches are not concerned with records or respectable performances; their jobs do not depend on winning or producing top performers. Instead, they are concerned with the feelings and the overall social and psychological development of their athletes.

What exists in the Special Olympics is carefully controlled competition--enough to make the events stimulating, but not so much that the participants focus on outcomes to the exclusion of fellowship and pride in their own physical skills. If publicity and the future growth of the program lead the coaches and organizers to forget the spirit of the Special Olympics, it will be the participants themselves who continue to keep it alive. Their humanity will remind those who work with them that sport can involve more than competition and that success in sport can be measured in terms of cooperation and human development in addition to competitive outcomes.

*What do you think?*

## Consequences of competition

To deal with the question of whether competition in sport prepares people for success in the rest of their lives, it is necessary to understand the relationship between competition and factors related to success. This section focuses on the relationship between competition and the following:

1. Motivation
2. The achievement of excellence
3. The building of positive character traits

### *Competition and motivation*

Does competition create or destroy a person's motivation? As you might expect, the answer is “sometimes yes, and sometimes no.” It depends on a number of things. Research shows that the relationship between competition and motivation varies with four factors:

1. The social and cultural setting

2. The personality traits of the participants
3. The participants' perceptions of their chances for success
4. The type of activity being performed

Social and cultural setting.

Although some people say that humans are innately competitive, the facts clearly indicate that competitive orientations and competitive behavior patterns are learned. This means some people may not feel comfortable when faced with competitive reward structures. When this happens, competition by itself will not increase motivation.

Studies done by anthropologists clearly show that competitive reward structures do not even exist in some cultures (Benedict, 1961; Kohn, 1986; Leonard, 1973). The games in these cultures often emphasize cooperation; winning in the form of outperforming another participant is irrelevant to game outcomes. Some games end only when there is a tie between players--the object is to establish harmony rather than superiority (Burridge, 1957). It is clear that in this type of cultural setting, competitive reward structures would not create motivation. Our discussion of the Navajo people shows that when competitive games are introduced to a cultural setting where cooperation and personal development are emphasized instead of competitive success, the games are redefined so that they fit the cultural setting and the orientations of the people involved.

It should also be pointed out that the extent to which competition increases motivation varies from group to group within specific societies. For example, in the United States, studies show that competitive behavior is less characteristic among people who live in rural areas and among people in low-income groups (Pepitone, 1980). This is not because these people are born this way. It is because life in rural areas, especially where poverty is widespread, is likely to depend on cooperative relationships rather than being competitive. People who must depend on others in their lives usually learn cooperative orientations rather than competitive ones.

Gender differences have also been found in studies of behavior in competitive situations (Duda, 1986; Ryan and Prior, 1976; Weinberg, 1979; Weinberg et al., 1979). However, these differences are tied to patterns of social experiences rather than to any innate characteristics of men or women. People who have been raised in ways that produce self-doubts, and people who have had experiences leading them to have low expectations for their own success, are not likely to be motivated by competition. On the other hand, those who are self-confident and who expect to succeed in a particular task will be highly motivated when faced with competition. Since females are more likely than males to have learned that they are not expected to excel in particular tasks, especially those demanding experience in sports, they will be less motivated by competition involving many physical skills. However, this does not mean that sex is the determining factor. Sex differences exist only when patterns of experiences related to the competitive situation vary for women and men. It is clear that when men measure low on self-confidence and when their expectations for success are low, they too have low levels of motivation when faced with competition (Pepitone, 1980; Weinberg et al., 1982). In other words, social structure, in addition to culture, has an impact on the relationship between competition and motivation.

Personality traits.

When people view themselves as competitive, competition is likely to increase their motivation. This is not an earth-shaking conclusion, but it is the best one we can offer at the present time. Research on personality does not tell us much about who is most likely to be

motivated by competitive reward structures (Cratty, 1983). However, there is some research suggesting that competitive success is most likely among people with high needs for achievement, low levels of anxiety, and low needs for affiliation (Cratty, 1967; Ogilvie and Tutko, 1971). This seems to make sense, since competitive success is most likely among people who want to succeed, who are not so anxious that competition would make them too nervous to perform, and who would not let their attachments with other people interfere with being successful. But there is other evidence to suggest that this conclusion needs to be qualified (Cratty, 1983). Depending on the circumstances, competition may produce motivation because of a person's desire to avoid failure or to maintain attachments with others, or because of an ability to constructively handle high levels of anxiety. Until more research is done on this question we must be careful about our conclusions.

Perceived chances for success.

Motivation generally depends on the belief that it is possible to achieve a particular goal. We have all heard coaches say that you will not be able to do something until you believe you can do it. Of course, the coaches are correct, but their advice is based on an oversimplified conception of how a person's beliefs are formed. Beliefs are not suddenly manufactured in a locker room before a game. They are built on past experiences combined with personal definitions of the nature of the task being undertaken.

Examples illustrating how perceived chances of success influence motivation are not difficult to find. For example, a student who sees no chance for obtaining a satisfactory grade on a test will not be motivated to study. And if a tennis player faces someone who hits aces on every serve and passing shots on every service return, motivation soon disappears. We have all felt a lack of motivation when we faced a competitive situation in which our chances for success were zero.

The point here is simple: competition will destroy motivation when there are no perceived chances for success. This is why coaches of weak teams try to convince their players that a victory is always possible if they will only try hard enough. If players don't believe them, as often happens, the coaches try to produce motivation by making pride an issue or by setting goals apart from winning. Some coaches are good at this, and they are able to maintain the motivation of their players through losing seasons simply by focusing attention on the achievement of goals other than competitive success.

Type of activity.

The relationship between competition and motivation varies from one type of activity to another. When an activity is simple, competition will generally enhance motivation and performance output (Cratty, 1973; Gross and Gill, 1982). Simple activities are usually those requiring the use of physical force (like lifting weights), uncomplicated motor skills (like riding a stationary bike), or easily mastered cognitive operations (like adding “2” to a successive series of numbers). These are boring tasks, and competition simply makes them more interesting by adding a reason to perform them well.

When an activity is complex (like trying to assemble your new personal computer), or when it involves unfamiliar actions (like trying to wind surf for the first time), or when it requires difficult cognitive operations (like trying to solve a complicated calculus problem), competition will generally destroy motivation.

For example, the use of competitive reward structures in the classroom is usually counterproductive. If classroom activities revolve around the learning of unfamiliar and complicated cognitive operations, motivation will not be increased by competition. Even in sport activities, participants just learning skills are not going to benefit from competition. Most coaches realize that learning the physical and cognitive skills required for sport participation must occur before actual competition. A game will destroy the motivation of players unfamiliar with the basic requirements of an activity. However, for skilled athletes, competition tends to be a valuable source of motivation.

The relationship between competition and motivation is often positive in sport because most sport activities are relatively simple. They demand endurance, strength, and basic physical skills. However, when sport skills are underdeveloped, or when competition becomes extremely anxiety-provoking, both the level of the participants' motivation and the quality of their performances are likely to be low.

## *Competition and the achievement of excellence*

It is ironic that popular beliefs tend to connect the achievement of excellence with competition. Victories within competitive reward structures are not inevitably tied to the achievement of excellence; victories only require comparatively better performances than the opposition. Victors may achieve excellence, but in many cases they simply come up with mediocre performances surpassing the performances of opponents. In fact, nothing more than this is necessary to be a winner within a competitive reward structure.

William G. Sumner, one of the first American sociologists, once said that ``if we do not like the survival of the fittest we have only one alternative and that is the survival of the unfittest.'' His point was that uncontrolled competition was the means through which progress occurred in society. He felt that competition created an endless quest for excellence with rewards going only to the successful. Those who could not compete were forced out of the race. Around the turn of the century, Sumner's ideas were the backbone of a political orientation called Social Darwinism. This orientation has remained popular through the present time in many Western societies, including England, the United States, and Canada. And it is still premised on the belief that competition leads to excellence.

This belief is accurate only if excellence is defined in terms of the accomplishments of a small segment of the population. Competition generally encourages those who already excel to develop their skills even further. For those who are unsuccessful, competition often creates frustration and disappointment and eventual withdrawal from participation. For example, when a competitive reward structure is used in a college classroom, those with As and Bs usually strive to achieve excellence--they think competition is great. But those with the Ds and Fs usually give up--they think competition is lousy, and they would drop the class if they had the opportunity. Teachers realize this and understand that if everyone with Ds and Fs were allowed to drop the class and receive a simple ``withdrawal'' as a grade, it would be necessary to lower the grades of many of the remaining students so that the distribution of grades would again fit the normal curve. This ``adjustment'' would create confusion and resentment among those remaining in the class. That is why most schools have a rule prohibiting students from dropping courses after they have had enough time to figure out where their grade falls on the curve. In other words, competition in the classroom creates excellence among the elite few. It has less positive

consequences for the masses of average performers. And it discourages achievement among those at the lowest performance levels.

A heavy emphasis on competitive reward structures in sport produces results very similar to what happens in classrooms where strict grading curves are used: the best athletes are encouraged to excel, average athletes get frustrated at the scarcity of rewards, and the poorest athletes drop out. Therefore if excellence is defined in terms of the overall accomplishments of the general population, competition may have negative consequences because it tends to create *elitism.*

Competition may restrict the achievement of excellence in other ways as well. For example, in most industrialized societies, competitive success requires athletes to specialize and focus their attention on a single sport. Such *specialization* may lead to excellence in a single activity, but it prevents the development of skills in a variety of activities. This again raises questions about the definition of excellence: is it being the best in one specialized event, or is it being good in a variety of events? Competition promotes the first definition of excellence. This may not be a problem for adult athletes who knowingly choose to spend all of their time and effort on a single sport. But it is a problem for young people who, without knowing what they are doing, end up specializing in a single sport in the hope of achieving competitive success. Those few who achieve success often gain attention and respect and, in some cases, financial rewards. Those who do not achieve success must cope with the consequences of years of specialization without the benefit of attention and rewards.

In addition to producing elitism and specialization, competition also leads to standardization in events and resemblance among competitors. George Leonard (1973) explains that

> To compete with someone . . . you must agree to run on the same track, to do what he is doing, to follow the same set of rules. The only way you'll differentiate yourself is by doing precisely the same thing, slightly faster or better. Thus, though performance may improve, the chances are that you will become increasingly like the person with whom you compete.

Whenever records are kept, standardization is essential. If conditions for different competitors are not the same, it is impossible to determine who is superior. This does not mean that standardization is always undesirable, but we should recognize that competition may do more to develop extreme conformists than creative individualists. Many youngsters have discovered that when they meet their first coach, the highly individualized style they have developed on their own is quickly defined as a bad habit and must be changed at once to fit the standard way of doing things. Excellence may result from this approach, but the range of techniques used to achieve excellence is often restricted when there is an emphasis on competitive success.

**In summary,** uncontrolled competition only produces excellence among an elite few; its effect on the overall level of achievement and participation in the general population is likely to be mixed, but negative consequences are common. Negative consequences take the form of elitism, overspecialization, and the stifling of creativity. To avoid these negative consequences, competition must be controlled and balanced with the cooperative and developmental aspects of the sport experience. Only then will achievements be widely distributed throughout the general population. When discussing the relationship between competition and excellence, remember

that success in a competitive reward structure does not require an excellent performance, only a good enough performance to beat opponents.

### *Competition and building character*

"`Sports build character'--old-timers used to say that. . . . For the young, the lesson from sport is that rotten manners, greed, and determination to win at all cost to body and soul are virtues." This statement made by Russell Baker (1984), a columnist for the *New York Times,* clearly indicates that some people now question the role of sport as a character builder. But old beliefs still persist. Parents often expect sport programs to provide their children with character-building experiences. And top-level players reinforce these expectations with testimonials about what sport has done to make them what they are today.

When we watch athletes demonstrate their physical abilities on the playing field, we often conclude that their success must also be grounded in admirable character traits. In the study of person perception, this is called the ``halo effect." This is because people tend to use limited information about a person to make general conclusions about that person's overall character. This often happens in connection with sport. We want to believe that the athletes who accomplish such great things on the playing field are simply great people. It is much easier for us to hold them up as heroes when we think this way. However, such conclusions are not always accurate. For example, Tracy Sundlum, a former coach of middle-distance runner Mary Decker Slaney, points out that because Slaney uses her accomplishments on the track as the sole measure of her worth as a person, she creates problems for herself. Sundlum goes on to say that most people overlook the fact that ``the competitive nature we so admire in [Slaney] is actually a huge personality flaw." But when people identify with a successful athlete, they are hesitant to admit the existence of these flaws.

According to both players and behavioral scientists, sport is not structured in ways that promote character building. For example, former NFL player Merlin Olsen (1981) has observed from his experience in football that ``the athlete doesn't have to grow up because the coach lives his life for him." He goes on to say that ``the sad thing is [that] it actually benefits the team to keep the player naive and dependent." Chris Evert (Mill) has made a similar conclusion about her experiences in tennis. She says, “You know, I think it takes tennis players longer to grow up than other people. We're so pampered . . . so protected from the real world. I'm still trying to grow up, and, I believe I'm getting there” (in Collins, 1984).

Dorcas Susan Butt (1976), a former number-one\-ranked tennis player in Canada and now a clinical psychologist, agrees with Olsen and Evert. She explains her position in the following manner:

> The social behavior expected of an athlete resembles in many ways that expected of a young, ill, or irresponsible person. Athletes are rewarded to an extreme for good behavior (winning) and punished (often inconsistently) for misbehavior. The athlete is not expected to appreciate and internalize the reason for rules and regulations; he functions under a system of fines and penalties levied against him that force him, like a child, to behave.

This, she concludes, is *not* the way to build character. The rigid rules enforced by many coaches give outside observers the impression that character is being built, but in reality these rules deprive the athletes of the very experiences needed to become responsible and mature people. In line with these statements, a survey of studies in the sociology of sport has led to the following conclusion:

> There is little, if any, valid evidence that participation in [organized] sport is an important or essential element in the socialization process, or that involvement in sport teaches or results in . . . character building, moral development, a competitive and/or cooperative orientation, good citizenship, or certain valued personality traits. (Loy et al., 1978)

Since this conclusion was made, there have been no studies that would lead it to be revised (Coakley, 1987; Kohn, 1986; McCormack and Chalip, 1988; McPherson, 1985; Sage, 1988).

Reasons for popular beliefs.

In the face of all this evidence to the contrary, why do people continue to insist that sport builds character? There are three major reasons. *First,* sport is organized in a way that attracts and selects people with certain characteristics. For example, those with low self-confidence usually do not try out for teams (McGuire and Cook, 1983; Medrich et al., 1982; Orlick and Botterill, 1975; Roberts et al., 1981), and those with traits not liked by coaches are cut from teams. This means athletes at higher levels of competition tend to possess self-confidence combined with other traits defined as desirable by coaches. But this does not happen because sport competition builds character. Instead, those with certain traits become successful in sport and use sport as a setting to nurture and display those traits.

The effect of this selection process can be illustrated by discussing physical traits rather than character traits. For example, if we had data showing that participants in youth sport programs were stronger, faster, and more coordinated than nonparticipants, would it be reasonable to conclude that strength, speed, and coordination among athletes were solely a result of their involvement in sport? Obviously, it would not. It is rather clear that children with certain physical attributes will be attracted to sport, and, once involved, they will be continually encouraged by peers, parents, and coaches. Furthermore, children who lack strength, speed, and coordination may never try out for an organized team. If they do, they may be cut and never receive the encouragement or the experience needed to develop the physical attributes required for success. In older age groups the competition for team membership becomes tougher, and those who are physically deficient in some respect are more likely to be excluded from participation or to drop out voluntarily. Those possessing the desired attributes will probably stay involved and further develop those attributes through continued participation. This does not mean that sport participation has no effect on the development of physical attributes, but it does mean that the effects of sport participation are likely to be limited to a group of individuals who are physically predisposed to that development. Therefore children who are already strong may become stronger through participation, and those who are coordinated may further develop coordination. However, it should be pointed out that fast or coordinated young people may improve their skills even without participation in competitive sport. The same is true for athletes with certain character traits.

A *second* reason why people insist that sport builds character is that they use visible and articulate top-level athletes as examples of what sport does for participants. Of course, such a sample is biased and leads to a distorted picture of what really happens in the sport experience. Studying the effects of sport participation in this manner is like studying the impact of the American school system on students by gathering data from a sample of Ph.D.s, physicians, and lawyers--or like studying the impact of our economy on the general population by getting information on the life experiences of corporation presidents and millionaires. Such research methods would reveal things worth knowing, but they certainly would not give us a total picture of the impact of our educational and economic systems. They focus strictly on the success stories in each field and ignore all those people who have not risen to the top. This guarantees that research findings will emphasize the positive things happening to people and overlook most of the negative things. This is especially true in sport research.

A *third* reason for holding the belief that sport builds character is that in sport events players are likely to face challenging situations in which their behaviors are visible and easily evaluated. It is not often that we get to observe another person facing and responding to clearly defined challenges. When we see athletes do it successfully, we assume they must have stronger characters than those possessed by our friends and acquaintances. This type of conclusion may also be made when parents and other adults watch young athletes perform. Sport allows adults to see young people in new ways. When young people demonstrate their abilities in these public situations, the adults may conclude that those abilities were created through sport participation. However, what probably happens is that sport gives adults, especially parents, opportunities to see young people display traits that have been developed over a number of years and across a variety of different experiences.

Sport as a character builder and athletes as role models.

When people believe sport builds character, there is a tendency to expect athletes to be role models in organizations, communities, and societies. This expectation often leads to disappointment and anger when athletes fail to exhibit model behavior. And the disappointment and anger often lead to condemnations of individual athletes who have ``let everyone down."

The unfounded and naive belief that sport is a unique source of character-building experiences leads people to ignore the situational factors influencing athletes' behaviors. This is not meant to provide excuses for athletes who have failed to live up to expectations. However, it is meant to provide a more realistic perspective in which to understand the behavior of athletes. When athletes take pain-killing drugs administered by team physicians, many people say they are exhibiting character. When athletes take street drugs to maintain motivation in the face of long road trips and extended seasons, the same people say they are letting everyone in the society down. When athletes generate thousands of dollars for their colleges while they play for what often amounts to minimum wages, people say they have character. When they strike to improve working conditions and salaries in professional sports, people say they are letting everyone down. This is a strange way of assessing character; it ignores dimensions of sport and the sport experience that do not fit with the belief that sport builds character.

Sometimes it is necessary to take a critical look at the way sport is organized in order to understand why some athletes fail to live up to expectations. But when sport is seen as a special setting in which character is created, few people will take a critical look at sport itself. Instead they condemn the individual athletes whose behaviors threaten the myth they continue to believe. If they do not blame the athletes, they are forced to question the idea that sport builds character.

Since this belief is widespread in North America and England, it is difficult to question. Therefore, people will continue to look to athletes as role models, and athletes who do not live up to expectations will continue to be accused of letting people down.

Sport as a character builder and gender relations.

The belief that sport builds character leads people to think of character in ways that emphasize attributes traditionally defined as manly (Sage, 1988). It is the character of male athletes and male coaches that come to be defined as ideal when sport is seen as a unique source of character-building experiences. This puts women at a serious disadvantage. It not only perpetuates the basis for male dominance in society as a whole, but it subtly encourages girls and women to buy into the very same attitudes that have limited their sport opportunities in the past and limited the extent to which they are taken seriously as athletes in the present.

According to current definitions of character one hears in connection with sport, women would have to be aggressive, unemotional, willing to play in pain, and willing to sacrifice their bodies for the sake of a victory in order to be seen as having character. In other words, they would have to become ``malelike" to have character. If they do not strive to dominate opponents, if they are sensitive to others, if they show emotion, if they are sensitive to the dangers of injury, and if they prize their health over competitive success, then they lack character as it has been defined in sport.

The definition of what character means in sport is tied to a long history of male participation and female exclusion. This way of thinking has created serious problems in and out of sport. For example, women have constantly been told that to get ahead in the occupational world, they must demonstrate they are qualified. The only problem is that men have defined qualifications to fit the way they have done things for years. This means that a woman is qualified only to the extent that she does her job like a man. The problems this has caused for women outside of sport should alert everyone to the negative implications of saying that sport builds character when sport has reflected the interests of males throughout history.

**In summary,** we can say that some athletes may have their characters built through their experiences in sport competition, but sport in general is not organized in a way that encourages character development. However, people cling to their beliefs about the benefits of competition for three reasons:

1. They are unaware of the selection processes in sport that lead people with certain character traits to become athletes and to remain on teams.
2. They have a biased perspective because they make generalizations about what happens in sport by focusing their attention on successful top-level athletes.
3. They overlook the possibility that athletes may be perceived as different from others only because sport provides them with a stage to display the traits they have developed in the course of normal maturation.

Finally, the belief that sport builds character leads people to expect athletes to be role models, to condemn athletes when they fail to exhibit model behavior, and to ignore problems related to the structure of sport itself. The idea that sport builds character also leads people to define character in terms of traditional male attributes. This creates a definition of the ideal person that works to the disadvantage of half the human population.

## Sport competition as preparation for life

Since many people in capitalist societies believe that life is a relentless competitive struggle, they assume that sport participation is good preparation for handling everyday events. They feel that because sport involves both victory and defeat, it provides people with opportunities to experience success and failure. And the lessons of these experiences are believed to be unique and valuable.

This approach to sport competition is illustrated through the words of Chuck Neidel, who, as a 12-year-old, played first base on the 1954 world champion Little League team from Schenectady, New York. In thinking about the kinds of experiences that would be good for his own son, he explains:

> Robbie, he's a little shy; he needs a little of the Mike Maietta (the coach of the 1954 team) treatment. You know, Mike, he used to purposely try to break kids; he would scream and yell at us and put the pressure on, to see which of us would break down and cry. If you broke down and cried in practice, he figured you'd break down and cry in a game. I don't think it hurt me a bit because that's what life is all about anyway, pressure and competition. Yeah, I'd like my son to go through what I went through in 1954; it would be good for him. You know, a lot of what I learned . . . in Little League, I didn't carry through in sports, but I carried through in work. Competition, hard work; I don't outhustle the other guy or beat him, I outsell him now. . . . You might say I learned the importance of winning when I was real young. I'd like my son to learn it, too.

Now, I'm 31 years old, and I spend all my time working because I'm a successful salesman and I like it. It's like winning in life, instead of winning in baseball. . . . You know, when I was playing in Little League, it was like putting on a uniform and going to work, right? . . . I guess you might even go so far as to say that I learned what life was all about when I was in Little League. That's why I'd encourage my son to play; that's why I'll probably be there as a coach or a manager when he does, to make sure he learns the right way. (From *Destiny's Darlings* by Martin Ralbovsky; copyright 1974. Reprinted by permission of Hawthorne Books, Inc. All rights reserved.)

Although few fathers have had a chance to play on a world championship team, many of them would voice an approach to sport competition similar to the one expressed by Neidel. We can certainly draw some parallels between sport and our everyday lives, but it is doubtful that the similarities are as great as Chuck Neidel claims. In fact, competition may interfere with the ``efficient use of resources that cooperation allows'' (Kohn, 1986). For example, many managers have discovered that using competitive reward structures among employees often subverts the relationships the employees need to have with one another to perform their jobs

efficiently. Success in today's world often depends much more on a person's ability to cooperate and to maintain intrinsic sources of motivation than on the ability to compete. Those who are motivated only to outdo others often cut themselves off from the allies they need to become successful.

Outside of sport, most of us try to avoid, minimize, or eliminate competition in our lives. For example, my teaching colleagues have always reacted negatively when told to formally compete with one another for promotions, tenure, salary increases, and student enrollment. Traditionally lawyers, doctors, and other professionals have formed organizations that restrict competition in their work lives. Leaders in the business world may proclaim the merits of competition in after-dinner speeches and then get together to devise ways of concealing trusts, monopolies, and other anticompetitive practices so that they can increase profits while avoiding governmental sanctions. In less powerful and less prestigious occupations, workers sometimes form unions to restrict competition in their jobs. Students respond in similar ways when they are forced into competitive relationships in the classroom. They develop anti-achievement norms, and they sometimes give the most competitively successful students a hard time by referring to them as nerds, curve breakers, brownnosers, or rate busters. The terms vary from one school to another, but they are almost always negative. This simply reaffirms that we are not naturally competitive. In fact, when we have the power to do so, we restrict competition in the most important spheres of our lives.

One of the reasons we enjoy sport competition is that sport is different from the rest of our lives in some important ways. Table 1 outlines these differences through a detailed comparison of sport and everyday life. Challenges are, of course, faced in both sport and everyday life. But they are different. In everyday life we seldom face our opponents in a direct manner, we seldom get anything except a partial score, and we seldom know if or when the challenge has been eliminated. In sport, on the other hand, opponents are faced directly, scores are always complete, and people have no doubts about when the games are over. Everyday life is complex, ambiguous (unclear), and difficult to understand, whereas sport is simple, clear-cut, and easy to understand (Valentine, 1980). Actions in everyday life have a real moral component to them, and the consequences of those actions are potentially serious. Actions in sport have a moral component that is usually only related to a particular sport setting, and the consequences of those actions have no serious meaning for life apart from sport. This has been demonstrated time and time again when people say that athletes should not be arrested and tried for assaultive behavior on the playing field; an assault during a game is usually defined as different from an assault on the street because people do not use the same system of ethics to evaluate it; nor do they see its consequences in the same way (Bredemeier and Shields, 1984b, 1986).

The purpose of this comparison is not to say that competition in sport is worthless as a source of learning. It is obvious that sport is a part of an individual's experience, and, like any other experience, it can be the context for learning. But it is likely that the overall value of sport as a learning experience is distorted when people think that everything learned in sport competition contributes to success in the rest of life. It is when the differences between sport and everyday life are recognized that people are able to open themselves up to what the sport experience can provide.

When these differences are recognized, one of the most beneficial consequences of sport competition is that it can provide opportunities for experiencing success and failure in an activity unrelated to careers, family life, and friendships. In other words, striking out in a baseball game can be a valuable experience when the game is seen as separate from everyday life. And playing

a tennis match after school or work can be a valuable experience simply because the outcome of the game does not have any impact on grades in class, job evaluations, the love of family members, and the quality of friendships.

Making these distinctions between sport and everyday life is especially important in the lives of children. They need to have an activity separate from the rest of their lives that allows them the freedom to experiment with their own physical skills. This is because their self-conceptions are in the formative stages, and their experiences in sport can enhance their body images and boost confidence in their physical capabilities--crucial dimensions in their developing self-concepts. According to Doug Kleiber, from the Leisure Behavior Research Laboratory at the University of Illinois, this freedom to test oneself through competition is valuable because it ``can provide opportunities for establishing identity and a sense of significance" (1980).

However, when people get carried away with the importance of competition and the lessons it supposedly teaches, sport participation can lead to negative consequences. For example, equating competition in sport with everyday life could lead people to form a limited definition of success in life. If they learn that success depends strictly on establishing superiority over others, they could set themselves up for a succession of defeats in their lives and cut themselves off from other people. Kleiber emphasizes this when he points out that competition has the potential to restrict the range of a person's experiences and relationships and ``replace caring and cooperation with the pursuit of personal gain" (1980). Bob Cousy, a former standout player for the Boston Celtics (NBA) and a respected college coach, has vividly described the negative effects of not distinguishing between sport competition and everyday life. He says that the competitive orientation that makes a person successful in sport ``can do more than blow away an opponent." When it is carried over into everyday life, ``it can kill [a person's] moral sense, the happiness of a family, even the [person] himself" (1975). Cousy's personal statement is supported by some recent research. A study of 57 ice hockey players trying out for the 1980 U.S. Olympic team found that players with cooperative orientations measured higher on psychological adjustment and health than players with strong competitive orientations (Johnson et al., 1987).

**In summary,** sport and everyday life are different. The very uniqueness of sport is based on the fact that it can provide a combination of pleasure and excitement that is different from what is experienced in serious, everyday life situations (Elias and Dunning, 1985). Sport mimics the rest of life and arouses emotions similar to those experienced in other activities, but the emotional arousal occurs in settings that are artificial and controlled. According to Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, internationally known social theorists, this means that the emotions created by sport “are transposed into a different key. They lose their sting. They are blended with `a kind of delight'” (1985). People may wish that life could be more like sport, but when sport and life are equated, people expect too much of sport and misunderstand what is involved in everyday life. When sport is viewed as preparation for life, the emotions aroused by sport do not lose their sting, and much of what sport has to offer as a source of learning is lost.

## Summary and conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been to clarify the concept of sport competition and to show how it is related to culture, society, and behavior. **Sport competition** was defined as *a process through which success is measured by directly comparing the achievements of those who are performing the same physical activity under standardized conditions and rules.* It was

distinguished from *cooperation* and the use of *individualistic standards,* both of which are alternative processes through which people may be evaluated and rewards distributed. Competition was also described as an orientation people use to evaluate themselves and approach their relationships with others. Most important, it was shown how a competitive orientation is not to be confused with an achievement orientation; achievement-oriented people may not always be competitive people. Achievement may also be emphasized in conjunction with cooperative and individualistic orientations.

The ways in which competitive reward structures and competitive orientations are included in sport are connected to the culture and social structure in which sport exists. An emphasis on the competitive dimensions of sport in capitalist societies is used to strengthen popular beliefs in the existence of a meritocracy. This belief reaffirms the legitimacy of inequality and promotes the interests of those who possess large amounts of wealth, prestige, and power. In socialist societies, an emphasis on the cooperative and developmental dimensions of sport is used to promote a collectivist spirit and maintain widespread participation in physical culture. In both capitalist and socialist societies, sport is officially defined and promoted in ways that re-create dominant political and economic ideologies.

In the discussion of the consequences of competition, it was shown that the relationships between competition and (1) motivation, (2) the achievement of excellence, and (3) the building of character all require qualification. In each case it was shown that competition does not always lead to desired behaviors or the development of positive character traits. In fact, in some cases it may destroy motivation, create elitism and overspecialization, and interfere with the development of character. Furthermore, the belief that participation in sport builds character leads people to look to athletes as role models in ways that distort their understanding of sport and athletes' behaviors, and it encourages them to define character in ways that perpetuate sexist methods of evaluating human beings.

Finally, sport competition was viewed in terms of the extent to which it prepares people for successfully handling the rest of their lives. It was concluded that people are most likely to learn valuable lessons from their experiences in sport competition when sport is not used as a metaphor for life. An emphasis on the life preparation functions of sport often interferes with experiencing competition in sport in a way that leads to learning and self-discovery.

## SUGGESTED READINGS


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**Note: All references cited in this chapter may be found in the bibliography of *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies* (1994, 5th edition, The C.V. Mosby Company) and in the cumulative Sports in Society bibliography available through the Online learning Center,** www.mhhe.com/coakley10e

## Topic 11. Coaches: How do they fit into the sport experience?

## (from *Sport in Society:Issues and Controversies*, 5th edition, 1994)

First of all, a coach has to think of himself as a teacher. . . . He has to feel that he has a vocation, not just a job. . . . Too many coaches are so concerned with winning that they neglect the teaching aspects of their vocation.

Joe Paterno, Football Coach at Penn State University (1971)

My doctor ordered me to quit. . . . I found myself taking blood pressure pills, tranquilizers, and sleeping pills, and that's not right. So I backed off and said, ``What the hell is happening?'' It's not a twelve-month job; it's more than that. You can't understand the demands of this job until you walk in the shoes of the man who has it.

Ara Parseghian, Former Football Coach at the University of Notre Dame (cited in Yeager, 1979)

My high school coach was short, white, and out of shape--different than me. But he cared about me even though I wasn't the best player on our team. And it's a good thing, too. Because nobody else was looking out for me then, and I needed his help more than once.

Junior High School Teacher-Coach (1988)

As people grow and face new situations they are influenced by others. *Those who exert a strong influence in someone's life* are described by sociologists as **significant others**. Because of their position in sport it is possible for coaches to become significant others in the lives of athletes. How do coaches define and respond to this situation? Are they primarily concerned with the well-being of their athletes or with win-loss records and building their own reputations? The purpose of this chapter is to examine the factors that shape the orientations and behaviors of coaches. Our discussion begins with a brief description of the coach in recent history, followed by information on the coach as an individual, the role of coach, coaching as a subculture, and finally, the impact of coaches on athletes.

## The coach in recent history

Coaches were never supposed to be like traditional teachers. When people have participated in physical activities simply for reasons of health, enjoyment, and personal development they have looked to physical educators for guidance. The specialized roles of coach, trainer, and sport physician did not exist until physical activities took the form of competitive sport. In other words, the job of a coach has always been to help athletes get ready for competition. The profession of coaching, unlike physical education, is directly related to competition and competitive success.

In the United States, for example, the word *coach* was not even used in connection with games or athletic competition before the Civil War (1860). Up until that time *coach* was an English term used to describe a private tutor responsible for teaching manners or academic subjects. It was not until the 1870s that the coaching of sport emerged as a specialized

profession. And the values underlying this new profession were shaped by the growth of organized competitive sports rather than by the field of physical education (Mrozek, 1983).

The first real coaches in the United States were associated with established schools and wealthy private athletic clubs in the New England states. Although coaches were not regarded as teachers, they were sometimes given academic status in universities and prep schools. This was done so the faculty and administration in those schools could officially keep the athletic programs of the students under their control. But the coaches contributed little or nothing to academic programs.

Historian Donald Mrozek (1983) concludes that coaches, along with the trainers who assisted them, became the new management experts in the field of sport and sport competition. As team records and the achievements of individual athletes became more important for the reputations of the sponsoring schools and clubs, the importance of coaches increased. This development was greeted with mixed feelings by physical educators. On the one hand, they felt sport could be used to scientifically develop the human body. But on the other hand, they were disappointed that sport was generally not being used for that purpose. This split between coaching and physical education has continued through the years; it still exists today.

Although some people complain about how the coaches of today put too much emphasis on winning, this orientation is not new to the profession of coaching. In 1904, an internationally known rowing coach from Syracuse University talked about winning in the following terms:

> Who is it that gets ``a hand'' . . . at the finish line? No thought is given to the losers, it is all for the victors. . . . It is human nature, and things will not change. . . . There is no getting behind the fact that races are entered to be won. (James A. Ten Eyck, cited in Mrozek, 1983)

This sounds much like the ``winning is the only thing'' philosophy popular with some coaches today. The point is that the profession of coaching has grown out of a commitment to competitive success. And as the rewards for success have grown, so has the pressure for coaches to win. Even volunteer coaches in organized youth programs sometimes feel pressure. But it is greatest at the intercollegiate and professional levels where millions of dollars often depend on win-loss records. This has created a situation in which winning coaches are hailed as the symbols of schools and the saviors of cities, and losing coaches are ridiculed and fired. Regardless of their success, coaches must learn to live with pressures to win, and they must learn to handle the expectations of the many different people they deal with while they are doing their jobs. More will be said about this through the chapter.

## Coaches as individuals: what are their personal characteristics?

Efforts to understand the behavior of coaches have often been based on the assumption that coaches act in certain ways because they possess certain character traits. This means that when the behaviors of coaches are questioned, so are the personal characters of the coaches themselves. Coaches who act in an inflexible and traditional manner are often believed to be inflexible and traditional people. But is this the case? Research suggests that it is not.

Studies show that the personalities of coaches are not much different than the personalities of other people who are the same age and sex. For example, George Sage (1974a) collected information from a sample of male high school and college coaches to find out if they had attitudes toward interpersonal relationships that would make them more likely to deal with other

people in exploitive and insensitive ways. When he compared the attitudes of coaches with the attitudes of college students, Sage did not find any significant differences. The coaches were no more likely than the students to have orientations leading them to manipulate others and exploit situations for personal gain. Sage then checked to see if the orientations of the coaches varied with age, years of coaching experience, and win-loss records. He found no consistent variations.

These findings do not mean that there are no manipulative and insensitive coaches in high schools and colleges. There are, but the proportion of coaches who have these traits is no greater than it is among male college students. Other studies support this conclusion (Bain, 1978; Gould and Martens, 1979; Locke, 1962; Rejeski et al., 1979; Stillwell, 1979; Walsh and Carron, 1977).

In another study, Sage (1974b) tried to find out if the general value orientations of male high school and college coaches were more conservative than the value orientations of students and businessmen. His comparisons showed the coaches were somewhat more conservative than the college students but were less conservative than businessmen.

These findings are interesting in the light of the fact that coaches have sometimes been accused of not only being ultra-conservative, but reactionary, fascist, and racist (Scott, 1969; Underwood, 1969). It seems that male coaches may be conservative within the context of a school, but they are probably not any more conservative than male adults in the rest of the community.

Unfortunately, studies on coaches have generally used male samples. We know little about female coaches. Two different studies report that women in coaching are similar to their male counterparts in terms of selected personal attributes (Kidd, 1979; Loy, 1968b, 1969b). Linda Bain (1978) has reported many similar findings, but she adds that female coaches seemed to be more interested than male coaches in providing general learning experiences for all students. Furthermore, the women were also more sensitive to students' rights to privacy. But the samples in each of these studies were small, and none of the data involved comparisons between coaches and women in the general community. Future research cannot ignore women coaching in high schools and colleges.

**In summary,** coaches as a group do not seem to have manipulative personalities, nor do they have ultra-conservative political and social values. However, they may have other traits in common. After all, they do share similar social backgrounds and athletic experiences, and they tend to interact with one another in ways that would reinforce similarities in how they view themselves and how they handle their jobs (Sage, 1975a, 1980d). It is probably for these reasons that some researchers have concluded that coaches are generally assertive, organized, traditional, and highly achievement-oriented (Ogilvie and Tutko, 1966; Sage, 1980d). But it must be remembered that people can act in assertive ways *without* being insensitive; they can be organized *without* being manipulative; they can be traditional *without* being reactionary; and they can strive for success *without* being corrupt. This suggests that *the behavior of coaches is influenced by much more than personality factors.* Behavior is also shaped by relationships and social situations. This is especially true for coaches because they occupy visible positions in important organizations, and the roles they play consist of a unique set of expectations and demands.

## The role of coach and the behavior of coaches

In sociology, a **role** *is a more-or-less consistent pattern of behavior associated with a person's position in a set of social relationships*. These patterns of behavior always emerge out

of interaction with others. For example, a parent's role emerges out of interaction with one's children, and a student's role emerges out of interaction with a teacher. Although roles reflect the characteristics of the people who play them, they are also shaped by what others expect of people in particular positions.

This description of a role means two things. First, the behavior of coaches reflects, in part, the personalities of those in coaching positions. Second, the behavior of coaches is greatly influenced by the organizational settings in which they work, and by the people they interact with regularly. Therefore, an understanding of coaching behavior requires an understanding of what is expected of coaches by sport-sponsoring organizations and by the people connected with those organizations. The following discussion shows that unique pressures and strains are created by the organizations and relationships that make up the social environment of the coach.

## *Organizational settings and pressure*

In comparison with other positions such as teacher, student, parent, husband, or social worker, the position of coach is unique. Coaches often face a form of pressure that others can avoid (see the comparison of coach and classroom teacher in the box at the end of this chapter). Unlike people in other occupational positions, coaches are held totally accountable for the results of competitive activities that are highly spontaneous and unpredictable (Edwards, 1973). What makes the position of coach even more unique is the fact that these competitive activities are highly visible, and the results of the competitions are publicly reported and discussed. This means that spectators are able to view the behavior of coaches. Sometimes spectators number in the millions, and they can assess the success rates of coaches objectively in terms of wins and losses.

When coaches are held accountable for results, it means that they are given credit for wins and they are blamed for losses. And, in many organizational settings, winning is the most important, if not the only criterion used to determine if coaches are successful.

This combination of accountability, unpredictability, visibility, and the objective measurement of success creates exceptional pressures for coaches. The quote from Ara Parseghian at the beginning of this chapter illustrates how severe this pressure can become in certain coaching positions. Of course, not all coaches face the same degree of pressure. Those at top levels of competition feel it most, but many coaches in highly competitive youth leagues and varsity high school programs also experienced it.

## *Relationships and role strain*

In addition to facing unique forms of pressure, coaches are also subject to what some sociologists describe as **role strain**. The role strain they experience is *the result of being in a job where it is necessary to interact with people in many different positions*. Because these people occupy different positions, they tend to have different ideas about how coaches should do their jobs. Whenever coaches try to live up to the expectations of all these different people, they are bound to experience strain. They simply cannot please everyone. Figure 8-1 illustrates the different relationships that may have an impact on the role behavior of high school or college coaches. Because the relationships are so diversified, few coaches are able to escape strain in their jobs.

To get an idea of how this strain is created, it is helpful to look at what the people in each of these relationships might expect of a coach.

School administrators.

Administrators expect coaches to run ``clean" programs and to act as public relations agents for schools. This involves following rules, meeting with community groups and booster clubs, and making sure that players and teams act in ways that enhance the reputations of schools. Administrators also expect coaches to conform to policies about budgets, the use of facilities, and the eligibility of athletes.

Professional and athletic associations.

These groups provide guidelines and standards for coaching behavior. For example, both the NCAA and state high school athletic associations have numerous rules regulating practice and game schedules as well as player-coach relationships. Conferences and leagues have similar rules that coaches must follow. Coaches also have their own associations that issue expectations for their behavior. Conforming to those expectations is helpful in maintaining one's career.

Athletic directors.

Most coaches are directly responsible to an athletic director (AD). It is usually the ADs who enact and enforce policies that have a direct influence on what coaches are allowed to do. In many schools, the ADs make the final decisions on budgets, schedules, facilities, and program philosophies. When their expectations are not met, coaches will usually have problems.

Fellow coaches.

Coaches do not work alone. They must cooperate with coaches from other schools and from their own schools. Assistant coaches depend on head coaches to give them the experiences needed to become qualified for head coaching positions of their own. They realize their careers depend on meeting the expectations of superiors. And head coaches realize the success of their programs often depends on meeting the expectations of their assistants.

Support staff.

Although staff members may not be a visible part of an athletic program, coaches realize they cannot ignore the expectations of secretaries, trainers, managers, team physicians, or even janitors and groundskeepers. Without the cooperation of these people, the lives of coaches would be very difficult. And keeping them all happy at once is no easy task.

Faculty and students.

Faculty members often expect coaches to develop athletic programs that complement academic programs, and students expect athletic programs to provide participation opportunities and exciting teams to watch. At the high school level, faculty members may expect coaches to give priority to classroom teaching responsibilities even though coaching takes up a great amount of time after school and on weekends. At the college level, faculty members expect coaches to arrange practice and game schedules so athletes do not need special treatment in courses.

Fans.

Fans seldom hesitate to offer advice to coaches. And since fans are a diversified group, their advice is usually contradictory. Some fans are more likely than others to place demands on coaches. Those who are influential boosters or important alumni often expect coaches to listen to them when they think changes are needed on a team or in a program.

News media personnel.

People from radio and television stations and from the newspapers expect coaches to answer their questions and give them access to the information needed for interesting and timely stories. When coaches do not meet these expectations, they leave themselves open to unfavorable publicity that can damage their programs or their careers.

Players' parents.

Parents often expect coaches to give their sons and daughters special treatment. They want their children to play regularly, to play certain positions, and to play well.

Players.

Players generally acknowledge the authority of their coaches, but they also expect coaches to be responsive to their needs and interests--which may conflict with the best interests of other players, the team, or the athletic program in general. When coaches deal with many players, it is impossible to meet the expectations of each one.

With expectations originating in so many different relationships, coaches are bound to experience a high degree of strain. Keeping everyone--from presidents and principals to parents and students--happy is not easy. There may be times when it can be done, but there will be other times when the expectations of some people will have to be ignored to meet the expectations of others. When this happens, coaches must be tactful and diplomatic, or they will end up making enemies who can threaten their jobs and make their lives miserable.

## *Handling pressure and strain*

So how do coaches cope with the pressure and strain that come with their jobs? The most effective strategy is simply to win all their games, meets, or matches. Winning makes everyone happy. However, perfect records are rare, and nobody remains undefeated forever, so coaches must use other tactics. Usually, these tactics include the following:

1. *Generating support* for their programs and coaching methods
2. *Gaining control* over their programs and the people connected with them
3. *Being expedient* (that is, using a combination of cleverness and wisdom) when dealing with other people

Generating support.

One way to cut down pressure and strain is for coaches to convince others that their ways of doing things are the right ways. They must be able to describe their programs and coaching methods in simple terms and then explain why these programs will be successful. Although coaches can admit there are other ways of doing things, they must convince those around them that their methods are the best methods.

For coaches to show a lack of confidence in their own methods would be a serious mistake. Any display of uncertainty invites criticism and advice from numerous people. Unfortunately,

this need to appear confident often locks coaches into methods that cannot be changed without leading people to question their abilities. Unlike people in other jobs, coaches also have to make public statements about their philosophies and methods. And to make matters more difficult, they are expected to publicly explain why their methods don't always win games (Snyder and Spreitzer, 1975c). If they admitted that their methods might be weak, the pressures and strains would increase. Therefore, they often say they will continue to do things the same way even though they are not always successful. This leads some people to conclude that coaches are egotistical, stubborn, and dogmatic (rigid and unbending). What these people don't understand is that when coaches appear open to change and new ideas, they invite feedback that creates more strain.

Efforts to generate support may lead coaches to present themselves as rigid and inflexible people, but this image is tied more to the unique social environment in which they work than to their individual personalities.

Gaining control.

According to Penn State University football coach Joe Paterno, coaches cannot do the jobs expected of them unless they have control over their programs and the people connected with them. Coaches realize that without the freedom to make decisions and formulate rules and policies, the success of their teams will be affected by too many unexpected factors. As long as the outcomes of competition remain unpredictable, they often feel a need to control as many of the factors related to those outcomes as possible. Paul Brown explains how this need determined his approach to players when he was a coach in the NFL:

> I never left anything to the players' imagination: I laid out exactly what I expected from them, how I expected them to act on and off the field and what we expected to accomplish. . . . Our team had training rules, too, and we enforced them even though they were grown men.

In further efforts to gain control, coaches often ask for guarantees of autonomy from team owners, school administrators, or athletic directors. This frees them from the expectations of at least one of the important people in their social environments. Gaining control may also depend on limiting contact with some people and completely avoiding others. This restricts expectations coming from others. John Massengale (1975) has described this as ``strategic withdrawal." He explains that coaches often use it to their benefit--in fact, it can lead to ``better coaching positions, more time spent in developing coaching expertise, and a happier . . . more effective mental attitude."

When coaches try to gain control over all the events and people connected with their jobs, they are often seen as power hungry and manipulative. When control is maintained through strategic withdrawal, coaches isolate themselves from everyone except other coaches. This makes them prime targets for negative stereotypes. And again, the personalities of coaches rather than the role of coach are mistakenly seen as the causes of coaching behavior.

Being expedient.

Generating support and gaining control seldom eliminate all forms of pressure and strain. Coaches still face situations where they must make decisions about which expectations they will meet and which they will ignore. Furthermore, coaches can count on receiving negative feedback from those whose expectations are ignored.

In handling situations demanding these types of choices, coaches quickly become aware of who can help or hurt them. Those who can help or hurt the most usually have their expectations

met most frequently; those who can help or hurt the least may be listened to, but their expectations may be ignored. This is not a unique way of handling role strain. Most of us use cost-reward calculations to assign priorities to the conflicting expectations of others. And when we face serious pressures to be successful, we are even more likely to use expedience in responding to these priorities. The same is true for coaches. When they are in high-pressure situations, they are much more likely to respond to conflicting expectations only after carefully assessing costs and rewards (Carron, 1978; Sage, 1975b).

The problem with being expedient, that is, making choices based on self-interest, is that coaches may develop reputations for being manipulative and insensitive. But not using this tactic may lead coaches to be overwhelmed by people who think they could take over the coaches' jobs and win more games and run programs more efficiently.

**In summary,** the pressures and strains associated with the social settings in which coaches do their jobs influence coaching behavior. Coaches must deal with the pressure of being held totally accountable for the spontaneous and unpredictable events in athletic competition--especially the outcomes of those competitions. Adding to this pressure is the fact that they do their jobs in public, and their success can be objectively measured in terms of win-loss records. Role strain is created by the complex and diverse social environments in which coaches must do their jobs. They are in positions where they are often expected to please many different people all at once. Effectively handling these pressures and strains requires tactics such as gaining support for their methods, gaining control over their programs and the people connected with them, and being expedient when dealing with other people. These tactics may cause coaches to appear traditional, authoritarian, manipulative, and power hungry, despite the fact that these traits may not be parts of their own personalities.

## REFLECT ON SPORT

### The Classroom Teacher and the Interscholastic Coach: A Comparison of Two Roles

Some people have compared the role of coach to the role of the classroom teacher and argued that coaches should deal with interscholastic athletes in the same open-ended ways that many teachers deal with students (Scott, 1971). This is a good suggestion, but it overlooks crucial differences between the two roles. James Michener has outlined some of these differences in his book, Sports in America (1976):

> No other member of any faculty is subjected to the close and constant scrutiny which the coach experiences. He is written about in the papers, criticized on radio and televi-sion, and reviewed constantly by the alumni who pay the bills. . . . Nor is any other faculty member subjected to the rigorous performance-evaluation which a coach must undergo. If he is deficient, a crowded stadium witnesses his failure, and he is not allowed to remain deficient very long. An ordinary faculty member can get away with murder for decades without detection.

Michener's references are to male coaches in high-profile, big-time college sports in the United States, but his analysis indicates that the pressures faced by these coaches are greater and more clear-cut than the pressures faced by teachers. And when coaches fail to meet expectations, their failures are publicly observed and discussed. Teachers, on the other hand, can fail in relative privacy. Their students in particular classes may be aware of failures but nobody is televising them, analyzing them in newspapers, or using them as direct measures of on-the-job

achievements. Therefore, teachers can afford to deal with students in less dogmatic ways than coaches deal with athletes. Teachers can afford to make more exceptions to rules and be less concerned about discipline. And they do not have to be as concerned about what their students do outside of class.

To understand this point more clearly, try to imagine what a college teacher might be like if the teacher role was organized like the role of coach. If teachers were hired, evaluated, and promoted on the basis of how their students performed in scheduled competitions with students from other schools, they would probably act differently in their classrooms. If these competitions determined conference standings and national championships and university reputations, they might begin to deal with their students in a more authoritarian manner.

If the contests between their students and the students from other schools were televised, attended by the press, and watched by school administrators, important alumni, fellow teachers, and thousands of other students, the teachers might even become concerned with discipline and what their students did on the night before the weekly contest. And if their careers and the economic status of their families depended on how a group of 18- to 22-year-old students responded to a set of unpredictable academic challenges, they might even develop ulcers to go along with the traditional and rigid training methods they would use more frequently in their classrooms.

This example should not be used to justify the behavior of coaches. In fact, the behavior of some coaches is impossible to justify no matter how much pressure they face. Instead, the example is intended to help understand why the attitudes and methods used by most coaches tend to be different from the attitudes and methods used by most classroom teachers. Personality factors are not the major reasons for the behavior differences between teachers and coaches.

When coaches are more concerned with rules, discipline, and traditional approaches to their jobs, it is likely that many of their attitudes and methods are grounded in the pressures and relationships that characterize their social environments. This does not mean that coaches cannot change. But it does suggest that the likelihood of change is greatest when organizational settings for sport programs are restructured and when coaches realize how those settings influence their behavior.

*What do you think?*

## Role conflict: How do off-the-field roles affect coaches?

In the previous section it was pointed out that the pressures and strains that exist within the role of coach serve to influence the behavior of coaches. However, coaches often face another set of problems created by conflict *between* their coaching role and the other roles they play. The roles most likely to conflict with coaching are those related to teaching and family. In other words, coaches do more than simply coach. In most North American high schools, for example, they are usually hired as classroom teachers and expected to handle a full load of courses. And most coaches have family responsibilities as well. They may have spouses and children. Role conflict is created when they try to meet the expectations associated with all of these roles. (Note: Sociologists often make distinctions between role conflict and role strain. **Role strain** *is related to the problems a person faces while playing a single role.* **Role conflict** *is related to the problems a person faces while playing more than one role at a time.* For example, trying to be a college student and a college athlete at the same time often causes role conflict because there is

not enough time to meet the expectations associated with both roles. But role strain occurs when an athlete tries to meet the different expectations of the head coach, the assistant coach, teammates, and sport reporters about how the role of center on a basketball team should be played.) For many coaches, the day does not contain enough hours for them to do everything.

### *Teacher-coach role conflict*

Research has clearly documented the existence of teacher-coach role conflict in U.S. schools (Chu, 1981; Massengale, 1981). Many of those who play both roles indicate they do not have enough time to meet the expectations in the classroom and on the playing field--even though they work over 60 hours per week trying to do both things. The consequences of teacher-coach role conflict are vividly explained in the following statements of three high school coaches interviewed by sport sociologist George Sage (1987):

> ``There just aren't enough hours in a day to do everything that you want. I know I want to be as innovative and creative as I can as a teacher but my role . . . as a coach really prohibits me from achieving what I want in the classroom. . . . My role as a teacher definitely does suffer because of my dual role as a coach."

> ``You can get so wrapped up in your coaching that you don't do any teaching . . . you may be so wrapped up in preparing for this next team that you give the kids the shaft in your class."

> ``Anytime a coach is teaching a full load he has to make decisions which [job he's] going to do well. . . . I know why they hired me, [the school board] probably won't say [this] but . . . you know why you've been hired. . . . If you do a halfway good teaching [job] they're not going to fire you, and if you don't do a good job coaching they probably are."

When teacher-coaches are faced with conflicting demands, they do not always give priority to their coaching jobs. Some may cut back on the time they spend coaching so they can do a better job in the classroom. Others drop out of coaching to make time for teaching.

Being a concerned teacher and staying current in a particular subject has always been very time-consuming, and many parents and students are expecting more from teachers than they have in the past. At the same time, people have come to expect much more from school coaches. Teacher-coaches are expected to be experts not only in their teaching areas, but in everything from nutrition to drugs, from weight training to biomechanics, and from exercise physiology to eligibility rules in high school and college. As the expectations for both roles increase, there is a decrease in the number of teachers who coach. This means many schools must now depend on walk-on coaches from the local community--people who are not certified teachers but who are thought to know something about a particular sport. People interested in education and the sociology of sport should study the implications of this development. At the moment we know very little about it.

### *Coach-family role conflict*

Many coaches must also deal with what might be called coach-family role conflict. Giving up nights and weekends for practices and games can be a significant problem for coaches who are spouses and parents. The words of three more coaches from George Sage's study (1987) provide clear statements of this problem:

> ``If it's not away from home doing things in your football program, it's time at home when your mind is somewhere else and you're not really relating to your wife or children like you would if you were not . . . involved in coaching."

> ``When I first got into coaching/teaching, coaching was everything [to me]; I mean it was everything. . . . I didn't approach it right, I didn't take time for my family and I lost my wife; I was divorced, and to this day I look back on it and I should have done things differently, but I didn't realize it at the time."

> ``Coaching has taken a tremendous toll on my family because there were times when I should have been there when I wasn't. . . . I cheated my family . . . and to be very honest, any success my children will have I credit my wife rather than myself because of the fact that I just wasn't there."

Marriage partners may feel that coaching interferes with maintaining a satisfying husband-wife relationship, and children may feel ignored when one parent is always at school or with a sport team. Although this form of conflict affects both men and women coaches, it is likely that married women with children feel it most. Unless a married couple has negotiated their relationship in a way that frees the wife from most child care and housekeeping tasks, the woman will have a difficult time maintaining the necessary time commitments to her role as a coach. It is tough to supervise practices every night, plan game strategies, prepare and teach classes, go to games on weekends, and still have dinner on the table every night, take care of the kids, and clean the house. This conflict is probably one of the reasons why female high school coaches drop out of coaching more frequently than males (Mathes, 1982). Of course, males experience this conflict as well. But they are more likely to be able to negotiate their marriage relationships in ways that free them from all but a few homemaking tasks. When a husband-father is not home in time for dinner, he simply has to eat warmed up food; when a wife-mother is not home in time, she has to listen to her family complain about how tough it is without her, and how they had to order pizza for the third night in a row.

Being a successful coach in a highly competitive interscholastic program requires extreme dedication and time commitments. This, in turn, requires exceptional support from family members. When this support is missing, coaches are forced to make difficult choices. Either they have to leave one or both roles or take them both less seriously.

**In summary,** the conflict between coaching and other roles can have an impact on the lives and behavior patterns of coaches. Teacher-coaches often have a difficult time handling the work loads associated with both their roles. Responses to this conflict often involve decreasing one's commitment to the role of teacher, or dropping out of coaching. Coach-family role conflict may also be a problem, especially for married women with children. The expectations of spouses and children can seldom be met by the family member who is dedicated to meeting expectations in

their coaching role. This sometimes forces coaches to choose between their families and their coaching careers.

Coaching as a subculture: How are the behavior patterns of coaches perpetuated and passed on to new coaches?

It has already been explained that the pressure and strain associated with being a coach often lead to ``strategic withdrawal.'' This response provides the basis for the development of a coaching subculture. In sociology, a **subculture** is defined as *a way of thinking and behaving that sets a group apart and makes it unique.* A subculture implies the existence of common values, beliefs, and customs. It is maintained through relationships among a group of people who interact with one another because they have something in common. These relationships provide the social contexts in which identities are shaped, experiences shared, and common interests and values reaffirmed. The relationships also provide group members with social and emotional support, guidelines on how to handle everyday life situations, and feedback to increase attachment to the group itself.

This means that the occupational subculture of coaches is a way of thinking and behaving common to those in the coaching profession. It is maintained through the relationships coaches establish with one another because of their common interests and concerns. These relationships assist coaches in handling the pressures of their jobs and provide the support and information needed to cope with everyday problems, strains, and conflicts (Massengale, 1974, 1975).

Any subculture is likely to perpetuate commonly accepted methods of doing things within a group. This is especially true among coaches. Their occupational subculture provides behavioral guidelines reflecting traditional methods of coaching. Older, successful coaches are often used as role models within the subculture. And those who do not follow the accepted coaching methods risk receiving negative sanctions from others in the profession. This can be a serious problem for young coaches, since their futures usually depend on the sponsorship of established coaches (Loy and Sage, 1973).

The coaching subculture provides needed support for coaches, but it also tends to discourage change within the profession. When a coach uses a new method, success may have to be demonstrated time and time again before it is accepted within the subculture. This causes traditional tactics to be perpetuated. And traditional tactics revolve around efforts to generate support, gain control, and use expedience.

Those who want to enter the profession also feel the influence of the coaching subculture. This process of influence often begins in adolescence when young people ``try out'' the coaching role in youth leagues or as assistant coaches in school programs. These experiences, along with the influence of popular role models within the coaching subculture, lead those entering the profession to use traditionally accepted methods. After they become coaches, their relationships with others in the subculture simply further their commitment to those methods.

Although there is no research on the existence of separate coaching subcultures for men and women, the long-time organizational separation between men's and women's sport programs and physical education programs suggest that separate subcultures might exist. If they did exist, the structure and dynamics of each would be similar, but the content in each might be different, since women's programs have different histories and different traditions from men's programs. As combined programs for men and women replace the old separate programs, it is likely that the coaching subculture for women will become assimilated into the men's subculture, but it is difficult to predict the specific nature of this process.

**In summary,** the coaching subculture exerts considerable influence on the behavior of coaches. It is a mechanism through which new coaches learn traditionally accepted coaching methods and established coaches become more committed to those methods. Since any subculture represents a relatively stable pattern of thinking and behaving, the existence of a subculture among coaches tends to discourage changes in their methods and attitudes, even when pressures and strains are decreased through changes in organizational settings and interaction networks.

## Coaches as ``significant others": Do they influence athletes?

The idea that coaches are ``character builders" originated when people pushed for the development of interscholastic sport programs. It was difficult for them to justify those programs unless they could argue that the students participating in them were learning something more than physical skills. If the character of student-athletes was thought to be shaped during participation, then sport programs could be legitimate school-sponsored activities. So even though coaches were hired to train athletes to perform on the field, they gradually came to be described as teachers of ``character." The fact that coaches emphasized discipline, obedience, and sacrifice contributes to the acceptance of this description.

The image of coaches as character builders has been supported by many athletes who claim their former coaches had a significant impact on their lives. When this claim is made, it generally means that coaches did one or more of the following things for the athletes:

1. Coaches may have had such total control over the lives of the athletes that a dependency relationship was established. In this case coaches were significant in the same way dictators can be said to be significant in the histories of the countries they rule. Their influence may have been great, but it seldom led to the independence of the athletes unless the athletes rebelled or unless the coach eventually provided them opportunities to make their own decisions.
2. Coaches may have served as advisers or advocates for athletes; they may have helped athletes explore alternatives, meet challenges, make choices, and deal with the consequences of successes and failures. In this case, coaches served as adult allies who used their position and influence to keep young people out of serious trouble and in control of their lives and their immediate futures.
3. Coaches may have shared with athletes information about their lives, and athletes may have used the lives of coaches as models for their own lives. In this case coaches became role models, and athletes attempted to pattern their lives to resemble what they perceived to be the lives of their coaches.

Unfortunately, we know little about the actual ways in which coaches have become significant in the lives of athletes. Judging from the love-hate terms used by some athletes to describe their former coaches, I suspect that significance sometimes takes the form of the first category mentioned above. When rigid control leads to dependency, the dependent people in the relationships often use love-hate terms to describe those who have power over them. I also suspect that coaches are most likely to influence athletes' lives when they give tangible forms of advice and assistance to athletes who must make choices or cope with crises in their lives. All young people can benefit from having adults in key positions looking out for them and for their interests. Without this it would be difficult to recover from the mistakes or to take advantage of the opportunities occurring during adolescence and young adulthood.

Finally, I doubt that many coaches ever become role models. Few athletes know enough about their coaches' lives to use them as models, and few coaches feel comfortable with the idea of presenting their lives as models for young people to follow. Expecting coaches to be role models is unrealistic. Development does not occur by following in the footsteps of another person; it occurs through decisions based on information from a variety of sources and through good advice and useful assistance at key points in life. This is how coaches are most likely to be significant others in the lives of their athletes.

Data collected by sociologist Eldon Snyder (1972) led him to suggest that coaches may be important socializing agents for high school athletes who need assistance in making educational and occupational plans for their futures. In a survey of male basketball players, he found that when coaches went beyond just giving general support and actually took the time to give their players recommendations about which colleges they should attend, they did influence the educational plans of some athletes. Influence was especially likely in the case of those students who had no other sources of advice on these matters. But the sample in Snyder's study was weak, and it was not known if coaches helped all athletes who needed advice or if they only helped those who were good enough to get athletic scholarships to college. Snyder points out that sometimes coaches have been known to spend most of their time attempting to influence those athletes who have the potential to add prestige to their own coaching reputations.

It is likely that the impact of coaches as socializing agents depends on the nature of player-coach relationships. In some cases, those relationships are formal and impersonal, and they are kept that way by coaches who feel it is easier to win games if they are not personally attached to their players. However, other coaches structure their relationships differently and look forward to close personal contact with players. It is when this happens that coaches are most likely to become influential in the lives of their athletes (Snyder, 1970).

It is certain that the vast majority of coaches want to exert a positive influence on the lives of their athletes. According to college physical education majors who want to be coaches, their career choices are based on their enjoyment of working with young people and their desire to contribute to the overall development of student-athletes (Stillwell, 1979). This fits with the idea of coaches as ``significant others." It also fits with what most interscholastic athletes expect from coaches--they want them to be understanding, patient, and sensitive to their personal needs (Steinbrecher et al., 1978; Messing, 1978).

But despite what coaches say and what athletes want, the actual behavior of coaches often emphasizes the development of physical skills and overlooks the general social and psychological needs of young people. For example, youth league coaches say that they are concerned with the social and psychological needs of their young players (Weiss, 1984); but out on the playing fields, their interaction with players is almost totally focused on improving physical skills for the purpose of winning games (Dubois, 1981; Lombardo, 1982). It is likely that the pressures and strains associated with coaching lead to more concerns about controlling the lives of athletes than about responding to the overall developmental needs of the young people they coach.

**In summary,** our understanding of the extent to which coaches serve as socializing agents for players is weak. The influence of coaches may involve using their power to make athletes dependent on them, providing useful advice and assistance, or using their lives as models for athletes to follow. Information is needed on these possibilities. It seems that the second possibility holds the most promise for influencing athletes in positive ways. In any case, it may be that the influence of coaches depends on the nature of player-coach relationships, and those

relationships are heavily influenced by the pressures and strains experienced by coaches. When the pressure to win is great, coaches are less likely to be concerned about the overall development of their athletes. The extent to which coaches actually serve as socializing agents is open to debate. Research on this topic is needed.

## Summary and conclusions: How do coaches fit in?

The profession of coaching emerged as sport activities became institutionalized during the last 3 decades of the nineteenth century. Although efforts to make sport seem educationally relevant have led coaches to gradually become known as builders of character, their major purpose has always been to train athletes to be successful in competition.

Research on the personalities of coaches indicates that as a group, they are not insensitive and manipulative people--at least no more so than other adults. The organizational settings in which coaches work and the diversity of their social relationships have a major impact on their behavior. The fact that coaches are held totally accountable for the unpredictable outcomes of games and contests creates a high degree of pressure in their lives. This pressure is intensified by the public nature of sport and by the ease with which the successes and failures of coaches can be measured. Coaches also have to contend with the strains created by dealing with so many different relationships while performing their jobs. The fact that expectations vary from one relationship to the next makes it difficult to keep everyone happy.

The behavior of coaches often reflects their efforts to deal with pressure and role strain. Effective coping strategies include *generating support* for their coaching methods, *gaining control* over any of the factors that may influence the outcomes of competitions, and *being expedient* in managing relationships. These strategies enable coaches to handle the unique characteristics of their jobs, but they also lead them to appear insensitive, manipulative, and authoritarian. This contributes to their reputations as tough disciplinarians, but according to research, their actions ``would appear to be a result of the requirements of the situation and not a product of underlying, generalizable traits'' (Carron, 1978).

Coaches are also affected by conflicts between their coaching roles and the other roles they play. Teacher-coach role conflict is caused by a combination of the heavy work load associated with doing both roles at once. This conflict often leads to a response involving a redefinition of career priorities. Coach-family role conflict is a source of problems for those with spouses and children. This conflict affects both men and women coaches, but it is probably felt more acutely by women. Again, the responses to this form of conflict involve a redefinition of priorities related to family and career.

The traditional behavior patterns of coaches are perpetuated and passed on to new coaches through the coaching subculture. This is especially the case for males. The existence of a coaching subculture discourages changes in commonly accepted methods and orientations. Consequently, coaches continue to engage in the behavior patterns that lead them to be stereotyped as traditional and conservative.

Research on the extent to which coaches actually influence the lives of their athletes is scarce. Coaches want to influence the lives of athletes in positive ways, but as long as pressures and role strains are strong, they may focus more of their attention on building winners than on creatively responding to the overall developmental needs of athletes.

## SUGGESTED READINGS

Hastings, D.W. 1987. *College swimming coach: social issues, roles, and worlds*. University Press of America, New York *(an in-depth look at the job of a swimming coach in an American university; highlights the demands of the job from a practitioner's viewpoint; eye-opening for anyone thinking of becoming a coach).*

Locke, L., and John Massengale. 1978. Role conflict in teacher-coaches. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* **49**(2): 162-174 *(a review of how teaching and coaching often present conflicting demands in the lives of people who try to do both).*

Massengale, John. 1974. Coaching as an occupational subculture. *Phi Delta Kappan* **56**(2):140-142 *(an insightful look at the origins and dynamics of the coaching subculture, especially as it exists in educational settings).*

Ralbovsky, Martin. 1974. *Lords of the locker room*. Wyden Books, New York *(journalist takes a critical look at coaching behavior and the effect of coaches on players, especially players in youth leagues).*

Sabock, R.J. 1979. *The coach*. W.B. Saunders, Philadelphia *(description of coaches' lives; interesting discussion about how the success of male coaches has depended on support and assistance from spouses).*

Sage, George H. 1980. Sociology of physical educator/coaches: the personal attributes controversy. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* **51**(1):110-121 *(review of the literature by the sport sociologist who has done much of the research on the personal attributes of coaches).*

Sage, George H. 1987. The social world of high school athletic coaches: multiple role demands and their consequences. *Sociology of Sport Journal* **4**(3):213-228 *(use of observation and in-depth interviews to provide an insightful look at the everyday lives of male high school coaches).*

Weiss, Maureen R., and Becky L. Sisley. 1984. Where have all the coaches gone? *Sociology of Sport Journal* **1**(4):332-347 *(good review of research on youth sport coaches and useful analysis of the orientations and motivations of a sample of those coaches).*

**Note: All references cited in this chapter may be found in the bibliography of *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies* (1994, 5th edition, The C.V. Mosby Company) and in the cumulative Sports in Society bibliography available through the Online learning Center,** www.mhhe.com/coakley10e