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There's Still Important Value for Youth Participating in Competitive Sports

With the constant media attention given to illegal PED use by elite and professional athletes, along with other cheating and poor, unethical, even abusive behavior by them as well as some coaches, parents and athletes at many levels of sport... you really have to wonder whether kids derive any benefits from participation in competitive sports.

Furthermore, parents of athletic youth (considering the above scenarios) have to question the supposed life lessons so many, including myself, promote as part of this experience. Basically, are the time, energy and effort put into these competitive activities worth what one derives from them? Are the risks worth the reward?

In other words: Are sports valuable for our children to play?

I would answer all the above questions with an emphatic YES!

Even in our current youth sports culture, the opportunity still exists for youth to gain valuable benefits from playing sports. These "advantages" -- being many and varied -- encompass three intrinsic categories involving aspects that both directly and indirectly impact each other.

At the very least, they are an important part of the foundation necessary for teaching the life lessons we hope kids gain from their athletic experiences. Characteristics that can, when the "right" lessons are taught, transcend the athletic arena, creating opportunities not likely available without them. **These positive benefits/aspects include:**

Mental/Conceptual pieces

The CDSPH Principle: A coined term from the book *Becoming a True Champion*, it covers the essentials of Commitment, Discipline, Sacrifice, Priorities and Heart -- all of which are necessary for success in competitive athletics.

Goals: Creating and setting goals is an integral part of being an athlete. They give direction and represent a place in the future where one wants to be. Without them one is just going through the motions.

Desire and Inner Will: These attributes are essential in accomplishing the goals one sets. They become most evident when athletes are put in tough situations that require the actions of perseverance and determination. How bad one wants to accomplish one's goals will be directly proportional to the amount of desire they have to accomplish them.

Perseverance and Determination: Competitive athletes are constantly involved in situations where they are challenged. This not only occurs on the competitive field but also in practice as well. The hope here is that they become stronger within over time.



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Perseverance and Determination: Competitive athletes are consistently involved in situations where they are challenged. This not only occurs on the competitive field of play but in practice as well. The hope here is that they become stronger within over time, as their perseverance and determination are tested.

Coping Skills: No matter how good an athlete becomes, there will always be times when they "fail." It is what one does after a failure, how they cope, that will determine future positive outcomes. Success only tells one where they are currently at, failure tells them what lies next in their path toward excellence.



Character and Integrity: It is not that good character and integrity are automatically developed by participating in sports but rather are revealed through circumstances that normally arise when one is an athlete. The hope is that through making the “right” choices the athlete develops a solid code of ethical standards they learn to follow -- thus, supporting and developing strong character and integrity within.

Mindset for Success: This particular attribute encompasses a host of different concepts. As a competitive athlete, one will need to develop good time management skills, create strategies for improving their skill set, build a strong sense of focus and concentration, develop internal skills for handling pressure, learn how to take calculated risks, and when not to, and take responsibility for one’s success or failure.

Social pieces

Cooperation: Gaining a solid understanding of group dynamics and one’s role in the success and/or failure of a team is a common experience to all sports participants. Learning how to cooperate in a manner that is best for everyone and that enhances the group’s chances of accomplishment is of great value that goes well beyond the athletic field.

Teamwork: Working toward a common goal is an integral part of the sports experience for athletes. It is through this experience that some grow into leaders and others into strong supporters, both of which a team will need to be successful. Finding their role on a team is a similar experience to finding one’s niche in life, a definite life experience for participants.

Friendships: Participating in sports gives athletes the ability to develop tight and lasting relationships with others who have common interests. This is a valuable experience that usually leaves them with lasting, lifelong memories.

Communication Skills: All three social pieces above put youth in a position where they must learn to communicate with their peers. These skills, when used as a positive force, will be particularly valuable throughout one’s life.

Physical pieces

The fitness improvements achieved through training for and participating in athletic activities is a big part of playing sports. One goes hand in hand with the other -- and in a society where obesity has become a major health issue, the physical fitness advantages simply cannot be denied. Lessons learned here, when consistently applied long term, improve the quantity and quality of life.

This is not meant to be an all-inclusive list. There are likely other positive aspects not mentioned. When one takes a good look at the possible benefits available to youth involved in sports, one cannot help but see how comprehensive they could be in the development of a well-rounded individual. The application of these attributes to one’s life outside of sports is something few can argue with.

However, none of these aspects detailed are a given. They are certainly not spontaneously developed by any stretch of the imagination just because one is an athlete and plays sports. You can’t simply sign up kids for sports and expect these attributes to just happen.

Two keys to increasing the likelihood that the above intrinsic characteristics develop in sports-involved youth will be centered on encouraging not only the fun that should accompany playing sports, but also the high levels of effort necessary for improvement. After all, one can only get out of something what one puts in.

In addition, it is important to involve youth in programs that have a strong focus on a positive code of ethical standards (PCES), as not all programs are developed with these concepts in mind. This is something the media painfully reminds us of regularly, with some adopting a code where “winning” takes precedence above all else.

When fun, high levels of effort and involvement in programs that encourage PCES come together, amazing things can happen. These amazing things center on the intrinsic concepts detailed here, and they are necessary for anyone wanting to become successful in sports, or in life for that matter. Of course, there are no guarantees -- just the ability to increase one’s opportunity. That is the best we can do.

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