

SPORTS AND CHARACTER: FIVE QUESTION! FIVE ANSWERS

By Edward DeRoche¹

Given the mission and religious orientation of Catholic schools, should athletic program stakeholders be held to a higher standard of character development than their non-religious private and public school colleagues?

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The office phone rings. The person on the line identifies himself as the athletic director at a local Catholic school. He wants to know if we have any information he can send to his coaches, student-athletes and some parent-leaders that addresses matters of character and behavior, “materials we could use to change the negative culture in our athletic program.”

We do not. But as a resource center, we recommend that we meet with him to discuss in greater detail his concerns about the school's sports culture; that we base the discussion on developing a plan of action including available resources, programs and speakers and that he consider a variety of assessment strategies.

In most situations, callers are seeking a “quick-fix,” put a bandage on it and make it go away. This is not a criticism. Their desire, and rightfully so, is to solve the problem as quickly (and sometimes as quietly) as possible. Few callers want to develop a plan that would encompass an assessment of their current situation or to develop a specific, well thought-out program with “intervention strategies.” In some cases, the caller simply wants

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to know how we can recommend conferences, workshop speakers that will help them address their problems. This scenario poses some interesting questions about character development and athlete programs. Five questions frame this article,

1. WHAT IS CHARACTER?

Sports do not build character, they reveal it. — Hale Broun

What was this athletic director thinking when he asked about “character?” There are as many definitions of character as there are letters in the word. In their book, “Smart and Good High Schools,” Lickona and Davidson (2005) define character as a quest for excellence and ethics that includes both “performance character” and “moral character”. They note that “performance character” is not the same as performance (an outcome), but has certain qualities needed for the further development of one's potential toward excellence, such as effort, diligence, perseverance and self-discipline. “Moral character,” they write, “is relational encompassing such qualities as integrity, justice, caring and respect (self respect and respecting others).” “A person of character,” the authors say, “embodies both performance and moral character” (chap. 2).

To define it in another way, character embraces the habits (head, heart, mind) one learns and the choices one makes that result in good or bad character. It is complex, but in order to give it an operational focus, let's say that character is about behavior, about how one acts. It is about relationships. It is about virtues (respect, responsibility, honesty) that inform the choices one makes whether they are good or bad / poor.

Character also is learned; there are no character genes. Character is not about reputation—it is not about status, fame or wealth. Educating for character is about offering student-athletes opportunities to study, clarify, reflect, decide, practice and act on such virtues as respect, responsibility, perseverance, honesty, ethical problem solving and decision making, both on and off the field or court.

2. DOES PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS CONTRIBUTE TO OR DETRACT FROM GOOD CHARACTER?

Know a culture by how it plays its games. — **Marshall McLuhan**

The answer to this question is a “jump ball,” or a tie game. One approach says, “Sports build character.” Another says, “Obviously, sports do not build character.” While it is not my intent to review the research on the topic, three examples will provide some insight into what is being discussed about this question.

Fullinwider (2006) in his comprehensive and critical analysis of reports and research on character building and sport participation suggests that the results are mixed, and that the picture is unclear and incomplete.

Doty (April, 2006) writes that whether sports build character is an ongoing debate, but concludes that "if sport is part of a young person's life, then the sport experience will influence his or her character development—hopefully in a positive way" (p. 8).

On one side, 65 percent of 5,300 high school athletes surveyed in 2005 and 2006 by the Josephson Institute of Ethics admitted to cheating in the classroom more than once in the previous year, while 60 percent of non-athletes admitted to cheating. Varsity athletes were more likely to cheat than non-varsity athletes.²

On the other side, Lopez and Moore's research (March 2006) shows that high school students who participated in sports were more likely than non-participants to have volunteered, registered to vote, actually voted and followed news closely. The results suggest that "sports have many positive civic effects for many young people."

If we look at comprehensive character education efforts in schools, where the athletic program is one aspect of the total school experience, we find positive results. For example, the late Victor Battistich of the University of Missouri-St. Louis, after examining 15 years of research, concluded that comprehensive, high-quality character education efforts in

² See www.charactercounts.org/programs/reportcard .

schools can prevent a wide range of negative student behaviors

(Haynes & Berkowitz, 2007). There also is a range of positive behaviors, under a school's "character education umbrella," from students who participate in service-learning programs and co-curricular activities (Reeves, 2008).

"Good character In and off the field or court should be nurtured; bad character should be corrected. Catholic school athletic programs should be the model used for the character development of all students who participate in athletic and community sports programs."

Examples, stories and testimonials offer two sides of the character-sport coin. Let's accept the fact that the research is not clear and unequivocal on the question: Does participation in school sports contribute to the character development of young participants?

Yet, if we are unsure, do we simply give up? Do we abandon our charge to use sports to develop the physical skills and social-emotional skills of student athletes? Do we put aside interest in the character development of young athletes waiting for clear evidence that there is a "pay-off"? Or do stakeholders in school athletic programs do what most athletic directors and coaches encourage—help athletes learn and practice the concepts and virtues (respect, responsibility, empathy) of good character and sportsmanship? A school's athletic program should be evaluated on a regular basis. The key to assessment is asking the right questions. Question-asking is like using a camera to take snapshots of an athletic program in order to find out what works, what doesn't, why it does or doesn't, what can be done to improve, what should be retained and what needs to be changed (DeRoche, 2004, p. 8).

Yeager, Buxton, Baltzell, and Bzdell (2001) outline a series of questions for assessing a school's athletic program that includes questions about "why and how" and the time, energy and resources. They suggest attention be given to who will do what, what will be assessed and the willingness for stakeholders to live with the results of the assessment (pp.134-136). This is an outline of an evaluation "game plan":

STEP 1, The principal and athletic director create a committee of eight to 10 stakeholders who should decide, after reviewing the steps below, whether they will do the detailed work required to complete an assessment or whether they will seek help from outside evaluators. The committee is given information about time, effort and resources.

STEP 2. Before commencing with the assessment, the committee reviews the literature and research about evaluating athletics and character development programs. The committee also examines the school's athletic policies.

STEP 3. The committee decides on the questions that are most worth exploring. For example, does the athletic program promote the mission and goals of the school? What are stakeholder (and public) perceptions of the school's athletic program? Are the adults, particularly coaches and their staffs, meeting the goals of the athletic program? Do athletes' behaviors (academic, social, emotional) differ from those of the greater student body? Does the athletic program contribute to the core values and virtues of the school, particularly to the development of the positive, good qualities of character?

STEP 4. There may be many more questions posed than there is time to answer, so a timetable is essential. Once the key questions have been identified, the committee should decide how best to get the questions answered.

STEP 5. How will information be collected? The committee may use a "tool kit" of data-collection such as surveys, observations, interviews, videos, questionnaires and focus groups (DeRoche, p. 9). Yeager, et. al. (2001) provide a useful form called "The Snapshot Assessment," which is a tool designed to help committees obtain an overview of their athletic' programs (pp. 98-99).

STEP 6. The committee decides how the data will be collected. Who will do what and when? Once the data is collected, who will do the analysis and the interpretation that will decide if the data answers the questions posed? What in the data reveals areas of success, concerns and requirements for further investigation? What action plans emerge from the data and from the experiences of committee members?

It is one thing to collect data, another to decide what it means. The committee has to have comprehensive discussions concerning the findings and bring their experiences and insights to the table regarding the findings.

STEP 7. When ready, the committee decides how the data will be reported (reports, newsletter, Web site, meetings) and invites others to respond to the report.

STEP 8. The committee suggests policy and operational changes or modifications, if any. The committee also suggests to the administration areas for further study.

4. WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE?

A wealth of resources promote, teach, foster, encourage and demonstrate a sports focus that is

values-based and virtue-driven. Many Catholic-oriented speakers and writers have combined the concepts of "spirituality" with discussions about sports, coaching and the culture of a school's athletic program. For example, NCEA offers a list of publications including "Athletics and The Gospel Mission," "WE: A Model for Coaching and Christian Living," "Coaching Catholic: Gospel Values in Youth Sports" and "Catholic Youth Sports: A Guide for Coaches, Parents, and Others." See page 30 for details.

To try to list all of the available resources in this article would be foolhardy. The sidebar offers a few examples. Google "character and sports" or "character and coaching" and the number of links is startling.

Good character in and off the field or court should be nurtured; bad character should be corrected. Catholic school athletic programs should be the mode! used for the character development of all students who participate in athletic and community sports programs. Maybe the matter comes down to the knowledge, skills and commitment that athletic directors and coaches need to develop an environment of character that encourages athletes to "put character in action (Davidson & Miller, 2005).

The call is clear: Join the "character matter team" in sports and in life. Speakers, writers, programs and other resources offer an array of suggestions, plans, techniques and strategies for addressing the character development of the young in sports programs in Catholic schools. Since a central point to this article was question-asking, we pose a key question for your consideration: Given the mission and religious orientation of Catholic schools, should athletic program stakeholders be held to a higher standard of character development than their non-religious private and public schools' colleagues? If so, why and what would that higher standard look like? If not, why not?

Sport is, in itself, an important moral and educative significance: It is a training ground in virtue, a school of inner balance and outer control, an introduction to more true and lasting conquest

— Pope John Paul II

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