



What Coaches Can Do

by GLEF Staff

This section is edited from "Guidelines for Effective Character Education Through Sports," by Jeffrey P. Beedy, Ed.D., and Russell W. Gough, Ph.D., and is excerpted with permission. Copyright 2000, The Character Education Partnership, Washington, D.C. For the complete article visit their Web site..

Sports play a powerful part in molding the character of the nation — especially the character of millions of our nation's youth who participate in organized sports programs. The following guidelines can help make youth sports programs (K–12) positive character–building endeavors. They are intended for coaches, as well as other stakeholders in a sports program — administrators, teachers, parents, game officials, players, students, boosters, and fans.

Create and implement a guiding sports philosophy that promotes core, ethical values. A sports program that seeks to build character in youth needs a shared philosophy that guides all aspects of athletics. This overarching philosophy should define a set of core ethical values such as respect, responsibility, caring, compassion, honesty, cooperation, fair play, and perseverance. Sports program leaders should communicate to all stakeholders the importance of the philosophy and the idea that character development is pursued for its own intrinsic value. A sports contract is one way to help players and others live the shared philosophy. At the beginning of the season, players read and sign a contract — often in the presence of their parents and coaches — pledging to uphold the sports program's core values and to abide by its behavioral rules. All players are then held accountable for following the terms of their contract.

Define the program's values behaviorally. For players to adopt and exhibit core ethical values, parents, players, and coaches need to spend ample time discussing specific behaviors — both acceptable and unacceptable. For example, so-called trash talking is a disrespectful behavior that can be seen, heard, and understood by players. Implementing a rule that requires players to help an opponent up after a hard hit drives home values like compassion and caring.

Balance the drive to win with the program's core values. There is nothing wrong with playing to win — virtually no one plays to lose. But winning can just as certainly become a character–defeating concept when competitive attitudes, behaviors, and strategies begin to undermine basic values. Even at the secondary level, where the emphasis on winning is often greater, coaches can cultivate an environment in which all players feel involved, valued, challenged, and safe. This is why it is critical for programs to choose and develop coaches who recognize that winning is only one part of a larger education process.

Design a proactive game plan for building character. Coaches should have a game plan for character education, just as they do when they teach athletic skills. Warm–up and cool–down meetings provide excellent opportunities to set specific goals with the team — such as stronger teamwork or greater self–discipline — and explore examples of the program's values in action. For real learning to occur, incidents of values being followed or not upheld need to be addressed explicitly.

Create a positive learning environment. Healthy, meaningful relationships are often cited as the primary factor contributing to students' positive athletic experiences. Coaches and parents must strive to cultivate relationships based on respect and caring. Adults who consistently exemplify these values help students form trusting, respectful, and caring relationships. Coaches should make every effort to get to know each player on their team as an individual. Understanding what each boy or girl enjoys about the sport, what motivates them to excel and learn new skills, and what teaching style each young athlete best responds to will help coaches develop the self–confidence of all players.

Promote positive role modeling. Coaches are often the first significant adult role models beyond a player's parents and teachers;

this makes their influence particularly important. Coaches are particularly important in developing the value of self-respect in players by encouraging proper nutrition and training techniques and care for one's physical and emotional well-being. Student athletes are equally important as role models, especially at the secondary level. Programs that actively promote character education will help these young athletes understand the power of their example and the positive impact they can have on and off the playing field.

Respect individual and developmental differences. Research in developmental psychology suggests that children move through various stages of social and psychological development, with each stage influencing when and how the students understand concepts such as teamwork and responsibility. For example, a young child's understanding of how a team works tends to be egocentric in nature, explaining why younger children play "bee-hive" soccer (swarming around the ball). As children mature, they better understand collaboration and teamwork.

Develop communitywide support for character-based sports. A youth sports program that promotes character will be far more effective if it enjoys broad-based support and forms partnerships with other community groups, such as storeowners, police, libraries, community leaders, town officials, and so forth. Information about a sports program's philosophy and core values can be shared through preseason handouts, newsletters, articles in local newspapers, team brochures, and community meetings.

Link sports to other areas of an athlete's life. A sports program that consistently promotes character links lessons learned on the playing fields to other areas of the young person's life. For example, self-discipline and perseverance are necessary for achieving academic success and reaching personal goals. And respect for others is key to getting along with classmates and succeeding in a career. By applying the core values to home, school, and the larger community, athletes learn to live with integrity. This is critically important within the larger school community. Due to the star status of professional athletes and the emphasis on sports in many secondary schools, young athletes are often encouraged to think of themselves as more important than those who do not play sports. They must understand that their athletic status does not give them special rights or privileges, nor make them in any way better than their peers who are not athletically inclined. Coaches, teachers, and parents must help young athletes understand that it is a privilege to play and that they have an obligation to uphold their program's values on and off the field.

Evaluate the program's effectiveness. Coaches, school administrators, and student athletes need to evaluate their efforts and use the results in their program planning. For example, coaches can help players establish team and individual goals that reflect their program's philosophy and core values. A team can monitor the number of put-downs heard during practice or a game, and individual players can reflect on their progress in assisting younger or less-skilled players. Whatever goals are established should be attainable and measurable.

Resources

The American Sports Institute. ASI's programs and workshops incorporate the positive aspects of sport culture into the academic setting to improve attitudes and skills in concentration, self-discipline, and personal leadership and responsibility.

The Character Education Partnership. CEP is a nonpartisan coalition of organizations and individuals dedicated to the development of character education programs in our nation's schools. Visit the CEP site for its excellent resources on character education, including the full article, "Guidelines for Effective Character Education Through Sports," by Jeffrey P. Beedy, Ed.D., and Russell W. Gough, Ph.D., from which the above is excerpted.

Citizenship Through Sports Alliance. CTSA is an organization of ten members including the National Federation of State High Schools, the National Junior College Athletic Association, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, and United States Olympic Committee. The alliance is a joint effort by the school-college community and professional sports organizations to promote the values of citizenship that are realized through sportsmanship and ethical play in athletics.

Positive Learning Using Sports. PLUS is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the use of sports as a positive educational medium. The organization develops research-based programs that foster character and moral growth of children and youth through sports.

The following Web sites appeared in this article:

The American Sports Institute: www.amersports.org

The Character Education Partnership: www.character.org

Citizenship Through Sports Alliance: www.sportsmanship.org/

Positive Learning Using Sports: www.sportsplus.org

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