What Teens Need From Sport Programs: Educational Athletics by Transformational Coaches

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What Teens Need From Sport Programs: Educational Athletics by Transformational Coaches

By Dennis A. Johnson and Robert H. Benham
Interscholastic athletics are deeply rooted in American school culture, as fundamental to the high school experience as prom night and report cards (Ripley, 2013). These programs are assumed by many to have potential to teach valuable life skills, such as authentic teamwork and hard work, while also promoting a healthy lifestyle and well-being. Research also supports claims of greater educational outcomes, increased rates of school attendance, enhanced school engagement, and strong sense of belonging, all of which contribute to developing better citizens later in life (National Federation of State High School Associations [NFHS], 2018).

However, some would argue that our high school athletic programs have evolved to resemble Division I intercollegiate programs, resulting in misplaced priorities, including unethical behavior and a growing sense of unrealized potential (Bowen & Levin, 2003). Karissa Niehoff, newly appointed executive director for the NFHS, states that the educational-based athletic environment is under attack by the oppressive forces of professionalization and inappropriate recruitment practices (Niehoff, 2018).

Currently, there is also nationwide concern about year-round training and the growing intrusion of youth and school sport on the lives of kids and families (Hyman, 2013). For too many young participants, the sporting experience has become developmentally inappropriate. Many teens have grown up surrounded by “helicopter/bulldozer parents,” who are deeply invested in their children’s athletic careers. Instead of emphasizing the core values and broader social benefits that are attainable via sport participation, their own goals can become too narrowly focused on the pursuit of an intercollegiate athletic scholarship.

In short, our school sport programs today appear to place less emphasis on educational-athletics and more emphasis on the promotion of individual talent and winning. It is our belief that all children deserve a sporting experience that teaches the positive life lessons obtainable via educational athletics.

Reclaiming the Game

In recent decades, much attention has focused on the importance of developing social and emotional competencies, due in large part to a growing body of evidence demonstrating their positive effects on academic, interpersonal, and mental health outcomes. Sport and other after-school activities have been identified as “fertile ground to develop initiative and feelings of self-efficacy” (Petipas et al., 2004, p. 326), while Hemphill et al. (2018) posited that sport provides a unique context wherein youth are presented with problems and conflicts to resolve. Thus, there are great opportunities for our interscholastic athletic programs to serve as the “extended classroom” for teaching personal–social life skills (i.e., citizenship, civility, character and cooperation).

In a report commissioned by Project Play, “Coaching Social and Emotional Skills in Youth Sports” (Kahn et al., 2019), the authors sought to define what it means to build social, emotional and cognitive skills, particularly in the context of youth sport. Their model describes the foundation of a high-quality sports environment, one that melds together three interrelated domains (i.e., cognitive regulation, emotional competencies, and social and interpersonal skills; Figure 1).

The climate and culture for interscholastic sport must be created by the coach, in support of their school mission. In order for education-based athletics to succeed, coaches must also be intentional and accountable in the delivery of their daily lessons, much like the teacher in their classroom. Coaches should provide structured opportunities for student athletes to engage in activities that are conducive to positive youth development, such as forming close human relationships, developing a sense of worth as a person, making informed decisions, helping others, and cultivating the problem-solving habits for
Creating the Climate and Culture

*Educational athletics for positive youth development*

Middle and high school students should be challenged and engaged in a healthy, safe and inviting atmosphere directed by supportive and caring adults. Teens in schools can thrive in scholastic sport programs offered by middle and high schools that adopt a true education-based foundation. Studies of education-based programs in the United States find that student-athletes achieve higher grade point averages, and have less discipline referrals, better school attendance, and higher graduation rates than non-athletes.

The NFHS (2018) defines educational-based athletics as programs that provide learning opportunities that extend beyond the classroom. Outcomes should include sportsmanship (i.e., win humbly–lose with dignity), playing by the rules, assisting teammates (which may transfer to helping others in life), developing perseverance and resilience from defeats (i.e., to deal with life’s ups and downs), incorporating lifelong learning and adaptability (Petitpas et al., 2004). The following is a template for implementing a truly education-based interscholastic sport program.

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goal-setting, and helping to develop a work ethic that emphasizes preparation and effort (Gardner, 2015).

The authors posit that three components need to be in place to better meet the needs of today’s students and incorporate a true educational-athletics setting: proper environment, revised concept of competition, and transformational coaches.

The educational athletics environment

The environment for educational athletics needs to be inviting and positive in nature. There are many documented instances of negativity and elevated stress associated with schools, as indicated by an increase in anxiety disorders and suicides. Therefore, a positive environment might implement a “we build up–don’t tear down” theme. Student athletes need to understand that hazing, bullying and simple teasing can only serve to damage the sporting context and thus the educational athletics setting.

Thus, coaches and program administrators should have the students practice giving compliments and providing positive constructive criticism during practice and competition. Team “put-ups” might be used in after-practice settings where teammates give positive strokes to a particular individual. In the physical education setting, the utilization of the “we build up” theme has been seen to permeate not only in physical education classes, but throughout some athletic teams and in the entire general school environment (Johnson & Nelson, 1996).

The Rolla, Missouri wrestling program is a another example of educational-athletics-based programming, as recognized by the Aspen Institute’s “Healthy Sport Index” Award. In a community struggling with substance-abuse problems, they feature a team with 80 to 100 participants based on their mission of REPS (Relationships, Education, Passion and Servant Leaders). In the daily practice setting, half of the team works with life skills in a classroom while the other half participates in tactical/technical development. They also offer periodic “captain and coffee” morning meetings to discuss leadership, positive mentality, and life in general (Soloman, 2020).

Alternative paradigm for competition

In addition to the positive environment, coaches might help to alter the general conception of competition. Typically, people in our country view sport competition, or the contest, as WAR, in which the “win at all cost” mentality prevails and the opponent is vilified. Terms such as draw first blood, dodged a bullet, kill, annihilate, and the utilizing the killer instinct mantra are all part of today’s sport lexicon.

Alternatively, sport ethics scholars Shields and Bredemeier (2011) posited that true competition, in its historical definition, means “striving together”; in other words, needing an opponent who is our partner in helping one to achieve excellence. The goal in educational athletics should be learning mastery with a pursuit of personal best rather than dominance and conquest in pursuit of superiority. Their CONTEST IS PARTNERSHIP metaphor illustrates this “striving together” concept of competition:

Let’s play ball.

The teams brought out the best in each other.

Ali needed Frazier before his true greatness could be realized.

The teams swayed back and forth like dancers caught in the rhythm of the game.

They are fighters and friends.

It’s a shame someone has to lose this game.

They turn defeat into victory.

Success cannot be measured by the scoreboard.

They all had fun. (p. 32)

Coaches can also help to alter the current competition paradigm by giving meaning to the pre- and postgame handshake ritual. Instead of slapping hands to get the ritual completed, athletes should be encouraged to give meaning to the action. In shaking hands with an opponent prior to competition, coaches might have the athletes say in their minds, “Give me your best efforts,” and at the end of a contest as they shake hands they should be encouraged to think, “Thank you for your efforts.” Athletes need an opponent and that opponent’s best effort; otherwise, how can one measure their success?

The transformational coach

The transformational coach is the third component for what teens need from the school’s extracurricular experience. Once student athletes understand the true meaning of competition and are placed in a positive learning environment, the life-skill lessons can commence. However, life-skill and positive educational outcomes
The transformational coach is a relational coach who openly communicates with their charges. The connection formed allows the students to be more receptive and responsive with the knowledge that the coach has their best interests at heart. These coaches are “other-centered” and use their platform to nurture and transform players (Jowett & Shanmugam, 2016, p. 472). Students need transformational coaches who are “other-centered” and intentional about teaching life skills for a truly educational-athletics-based program.

The Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility model can be used in the after-school sport arena for coaches who lack an intentional method for teaching life skills (Hellison, 2010). Although Don Hellison’s model was initially designed as a physical education curriculum model, it has proven a successful after-school program model in an array of physical activity environments. Table 1 describes the various levels of respect,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Examples of Behaviors*</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Students control their own behavior and show respect for the feelings and rights of others. Increased awareness of empathy and understanding of the impact of one’s behavior on others. WRESTLING: Implement a “we-build-up” setting, creating a positive environment, thus eliminating bullying, hazing, and other negative behaviors. (When a negative behavior occurs, rather than reprimanding, simply remind wrestlers: hey—we build up here!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Participation and effort</td>
<td>Students are encouraged to explore the relationship between effort and outcomes, try new activities, accept challenges, and arrive at a personal definition of success. Is success participating? Improving? Being socially responsible? Discuss the handshake ritual at the beginning of the match and at the end of the match. We ask the opponent for their best efforts and thanking them for their efforts after the match; otherwise how can a wrestler measure success, without an opponent’s best efforts? Reminders to wrestlers to give best efforts must be given during practice (try new techniques, workout with better athletes, set daily goals, etc.)—otherwise we cheat our practice partner. Score in a match or in life does not matter... IF WE ALL GIVE BEST EFFORTS!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Self-direction</td>
<td>Students assume increased responsibility for their work and actions; they are able to work more independently on tasks. Students learn to set their own goals, establish related tasks for achieving them, and evaluate their progress. In wrestling, coaches might stress the ABCs for success on the mat and in life: 1. Attention; pay attention to what they need to pay attention to 2. Be in the present 3. Control what you can control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Caring and helping others</td>
<td>Students are helped to develop interpersonal skills and to reach beyond themselves to others. Practice partners might be designated as assistant coaches in the wrestling room. They are responsible for helping each other by giving practice partners different looks and encouragement during technique practices. Also, veteran wrestlers can take time to help the rookies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Outside the Gym</td>
<td>Transfer what they learn about being responsible outside the gym Having “class” and always doing the right thing. Being personally and socially responsible off the wrestling mats; at home, in school, and in the community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Adapted from Hellison (2010).
giving effort, self-direction, and caring for others that can be reinforced in a high school wrestling program (Johnson, 2020).

Conclusion

As the professionalization of amateur sport gains further momentum, there is a need for school leaders to take measure of their own educational athletic programs. Schools and their communities should reflect on the developmental outcomes that are attainable via school-based sport programs, as well as the core values being learned. How do schools justify increasing allocations of time and resources to support programs that may only perpetuate the “athletic snowball” effect (Martens, 2012)? Can the “walk-on” high school coach learn to become more reflective in their pedagogical practice and adopt transformative approaches to coaching? Relatedly, are we investing in the professional development of our coaching workforce?

Superintendents, principals and athletic directors are ultimately responsible for the quality and impact of their athletic programs. Are we unified in our vision, goals, philosophies and target outcomes? Do we engage in collaborative efforts to sustain the progressive development of our educational athletic programs? If school sport programs are to offer a climate and culture that is education-based, in order to meet the needs of today’s student, then visionary educational leadership is paramount.

References


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