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Athletic Competition for the Young

Sport has become a cultural phenomenon which cuts across virtually every facet of society. As Loy and Kenyon state:

Sport is fast becoming a social institution, permeating education, economics, art, politics, law, mass communications and international diplomacy. Its scope is awesome: nearly everyone has become involved in some way, even if only vicariously.¹

A large part of the rationale behind the impetus which sport presently enjoys has come from some educators and youth leaders who claim that sport is the panacea for all the problems confronting youth today. It is believed by many that qualities such as cooperation, courage, and group loyalty are natural outcomes of sports participation. Sport, it is argued, is capable of developing human values and, in fact, reshaping the personality of the participant. There is widespread support for the theory that competitive athletics, particularly those of the vigorous bodily contact variety, serve as a normal outlet for aggressive tendencies and thus have an ameliorative effect on many participants. It is further held that participation in physical activities promotes not only sportsmanship and tolerance, but also brotherhood and international goodwill. Reuben Frost comments on the role of sports in our society today as follows: "One of the most universally held tenets is that sports are a microcosm of life itself and thus serve as a laboratory where a positive value system may be formulated and developed."²

How is it possible, therefore, that strong debate has raged for a quarter of a century as to the desirability of sports competition for the young? If participation in physical activity has such a positive effect on human value systems, does it not follow that support of athletic competition should be almost universal?

play and competition

The urge to play is natural in children. Berlyne points out that "...almost all actual human societies appear to expend a great part of their time and energy in playful and humorous pursuits."³ Among educators, there is broad acceptance of the proposition that a wide experience in play activities in early life is desirable, and indeed necessary, to the child's optimal development. Controversy arises, however, when young children are led to structured play situations in which competition is introduced.

Ellis suggests that the free play of children will quickly pass from competition to cooperation. It is his thesis, that, as children engage in competition, a hierarchy of performance is quickly established and this requires cooperative exploration to establish new, mutually acceptable goals or arousal-seeking. That is to say, competition must not have a predictable outcome if it is to arouse all the players. Ellis asserts that where the outcome may be predictable, extrinsic rewards such as public recognition, trophies and money, must be substituted. With the introduction of extrinsic pressures the competition is no longer play. He states:

... the contemporary American scene imposes competition and competitiveness to such an extent that there is cause for concern that behaving for the rewards attendant on the processes themselves rather than the outcomes is often preempted. In this sense competition and play are antithetical.⁴

This brings us to one of the underlying issues in the controversy over competition for the young. Recognizing that spontaneous play activity for children is not only desirable, but necessary, how much adult supervision and structuring of children's play activity is recommended? The formation of Little League Baseball in the United States in 1939 probably marked the beginning of the debate. Little League is for children between eight and twelve years and today involves over 4 million boys throughout the world.* The average schedule involves about twenty games and playoffs lead to district, state, regional and even world series playoffs. In Canada, a number of organizations provide similar competition for young boys in football, basketball and ice hockey. In hockey, competition is provided

*It should be noted that virtually all of the studies cited in this paper involve athletic competition for boys. Very few studies have been conducted with young female athletes. The absence of athletic competition for young girls reflects the difference in philosophy which existed from 1930 until the middle 1960's regarding competition for boys and girls.

in many parts of the country for boys as young as six years of age. Leagues operate at different levels within a given age classification. For example, mosquito hockey players (8-10 years) may play in a house league, inter-park league or inter-city league in schedules comprising twenty or more league games leading to provincial championships. In soccer it is possible for an atom player (8-10 years) to participate in national championships. Similarly, many of our schools provide interscholastic competition, even at the elementary level.

In an attempt to resolve the question of the merits of competition for the young, it would seem wise to examine the research which bears on this question. Fortunately, there is considerably more evidence available today than was the case in the 1950's when the controversy first began. At that time arguments were based largely on speculation and personal opinion. Today, the research findings are still far from complete but there is sufficient evidence to permit some conclusions to be drawn.

physiologic considerations

A number of papers were written in the 1950's and early 60's indicating that there were physiological hazards inherent in competitive sports for pre-pubescent and pubescent athletes. One of these concerns centred around the danger of intense competition to the young performer's heart. The preponderance of evidence now indicates that a normal healthy heart is not predisposed to cardiac enlargement. Much research has been conducted to determine the physiological adaptation of young children to exercise. These studies include such parameters as heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate and volume, oxygen consumption and blood cell counts. The one significant conclusion that can be drawn from these studies is that great variability is to be found among pubescent children. Hale asserts that physiologists and physicians who specialize in sports medicine agree that within the human organism there are numerous safety mechanisms which prevent the child from experiencing physiological trauma during and after strenuous physical activity.⁵

Another major concern has been the question of the effects of strenuous exercise on muscle and bone growth. Studies on the effect of athletic participation on physical growth of children are inconclusive. McCraw reported that participation stimulated growth,⁶ whereas other studies reported that junior high school athletes did not grow in height and weight as much as non-athletes.^{7, 8, 9} The more recent works of Rarick¹⁰ and Astrand¹¹ indicate that physical growth was actually augmented during periods of heavy training.

Rarick suggests that any conclusions regarding the intensity and duration of exercise in childhood must consider the maturity level of the child, his constitutional makeup, his nutritional and health status and his pattern of living.

The Medford study is perhaps the most comprehensive longitudinal investigation thus far conducted on young athletes. In this study, Clarke found that boys who are successful inter-scholastic competitors in both elementary and junior high schools are definitely superior to their non-athletic peers in maturity, body size, muscular strength, endurance, and power. Athletes, according to Clarke, were significantly more mature in skeletal age than all other groups at the elementary and junior high school levels.¹² Adams conducted roentgenographic studies on 162 Little League pitchers, aged nine to twelve years, which indicated various conditions such as epiphysitis and osteochondrosis in their throwing arms. He recommended that no pitcher below the age of fourteen be permitted to pitch more than two innings in a single game and that the curve ball be prohibited up to this age.¹³ In discussing endurance type activities, Astrand¹⁴ concluded that since the aerobic capacity of young children is relatively as great as that of male adults, children should be capable of doing prolonged strenuous exercise. However, he pointed out that capacity to perform does not necessarily mean that such endurance events are desirable for young children. These events require long, carefully regulated training regimens which are not normally consistent with the mentality of the young.

In summing up the findings regarding the physiological effects of physical competition for young children, it is apparent that early writings reflected a very conservative position regarding the value of athletics. More recent studies support the position that strenuous physical activity will not physiologically harm the child who enjoys normal health. Accidents can and will occur during competition at a rate somewhat greater than for those who engage in non-inter-scholastic team play, just as a higher percentage of accidents occur with the post-pubescent group. These same surveys report that inter-scholastic athletes spend more hours per week in training than non-inter-scholastic participants. Older players also have longer and more frequent training periods than do younger boys.

psychological and emotional considerations

The research findings relating to the effect of physical competition upon the emotional, psychological and personality develop-

ment of the young athlete are much less precise. Research in these areas is fragmentary and too often has taken the form of opinion surveys.

There are a number of studies which indicate that young subjects (8-12 years) who have participated extensively in athletics score higher on personal and social adjustment tests than non-athletes.^{15, 16, 17} It must be remembered, however, that these results may simply reflect a greater psychological maturity among athletes, since it has been established that athletes are more physiologically mature than non-athletes and that at this age a positive correlation between physiological and psychological maturity has been found. Such psychological maturity might well account for the higher personal and social adjustment scores.

Seymour studied Little League players and non-league players to determine if changes occurred as a result of a season of Little League play. His study revealed that the Little League players had higher initial scores and that they made greater gains on personality traits and social acceptance than did the non-league players after a season of play.¹⁸

Studies of parental responses as to the effect of competitive athletics on their children indicate a high consistency.^{19, 20} Desirable outcomes, as identified by parents, include cooperation, self-confidence, leadership, concern for others, sportsmanship, sense of responsibility and sociability. Teachers and school administrators report similar effects as a result of school competition.²¹

Great concern has been expressed regarding the effects of competition upon the emotions of the participant. Skubic^{22, 23} undertook several studies to examine the question of whether competition overstimulates the young athlete. He investigated a group of Little League and non-league players before and after competition. The non-league players were tested before and after a softball game in the regular physical education class. Emotional response was measured by a galvanic skin response test. The results showed no differences between the two groups. In a paper presented to the Fourth Canadian Symposium on Psycho-Motor Learning and Sports Psychology, Berkowitz refuted the commonly held belief that competition is an acceptable outlet for aggression. He concluded by stating:

A growing body of carefully collected evidence indicates that athletic competition doesn't necessarily reduce the chances of violence and may even increase the probability of aggressive outbursts under some circumstances. Sport is no royal road to peace and social harmony.²⁴

Studies to date would clearly indicate that children who participate in competitive athletics achieve high social status and prestige, are popular, exhibit strong personality traits and are well adjusted. These findings must be accepted with great caution. It is entirely possible that they simply reflect the early psychological maturation of the athlete. It is equally dangerous to assume a cause-effect relationship between the possession of certain personality traits and sport participation. Ogilvie and Tutko²⁵ suggest that the personality of the superior athlete may reflect nothing more than a selection process in which certain personality types tend to gravitate toward a particular form of athletics.

educational values

We may assume from the foregoing that most of the concern for the health of the young athletic participants is unfounded. Nevertheless, there appears to be sufficient evidence to question the educational value of athletics as they are presently conducted. It is common practice within our schools to use competition as a means of increasing achievement. This may prove successful when used to encourage the individual to improve his/her own personal performance. However, as English cautions us: "Unfortunately, competition usually works best in the very pupils who need it least."²⁶

Although it is frequently emphasized that we live in a competitive world and children must get used to competition, it is also true that a child must experience some degree of success before he/she can be expected to take competition in stride. The ability to handle competition comes slowly and is built upon self-respect and self-confidence. Educational objectives place the emphasis for young children upon cooperation, success and the improvement of skill. If children are to learn to handle competition effectively, they must have "a chance to win." Good educational practice would suggest that all children should have an opportunity to participate, including those who need participation the most, not just the highly skilled. Because society places a premium on high levels of performance we, too often, respond to this social demand rather than the individual needs of the child.

Another hazard of intensive athletic competition is that the child will overspecialize in one area of athletic concentration and will have little opportunity to develop a broad base of recreational interests. This writer had an opportunity to visit the USSR recently where children of ten years of age were training up to forty-two

hours per week in one sport in hopes that they would eventually represent their country in international competition. Such intense concentration on a single activity virtually precludes the possibility of engaging in other recreational endeavors. Evidence to refute the contention that specialization results in restricted exposure to other activities has been presented by Skubic²⁷ and Seymour.²⁸ Their findings indicate that Little League participants did engage in more activities than non-athletic samples. Nevertheless, it must be clear to the reader that if a child is expected to practice five times per week in a given sport this will reduce his opportunity to follow other pursuits.

Another danger inherent in an intensive school or community athletic program is that the needs of the many will be sacrificed for those of the highly skilled few. Where there is limited space, equipment and leadership personnel, it stands to reason that if these resources are reserved for large periods of time for the talented athlete, the house league and intramural program must suffer. Athletic programs should provide the greatest service to the greatest number of children. Intensive athletic competition for the physically gifted should only be provided where instructional, recreational and intramural participation is not sacrificed.

Some evidence of player reaction to competition is available in an interesting paper in which Orlick examined the problem of the athletic drop-out in Canadian hockey.²⁹ He reported that of the 600,000 players registered in, or affiliated with, the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association in 1973, 53% were under 12 years, 34% were from 12 to 15 years and only 11% were over 15 years of age. Apparently, these percentages have been remarkably stable since 1970. There is also evidence to support the drop-out trend in other organized sports. Orlick reports that 67% of the drop-outs interviewed cited the main reason as an undue competitive emphasis. Of those players who were of elementary school age, *all* children indicated they dropped out for reasons based on the competitive emphasis of the program. In other words, our athletic programs are so heavily "win oriented," that children by the thousands are being "turned off" each year.

leadership

It should be clear from the foregoing, that athletic competition is neither good nor bad. If some of our present practices in athletics are wrong, the answer does not lie in abolishing athletic competition

but correcting the evils. The key to rectifying present shortcomings lies with enlightened leadership. Too often, well-meaning but inexperienced non-professional coaches have accepted the responsibility of coaching non-community teams; too often the least experienced and least skilled coaches are assigned to the young athletes. In any sport, it is not enough to have a thorough knowledge of the techniques and strategies of the game. It is at least as important to have an understanding of, and sensitivity to, the human growth and development patterns of young people.

Unfortunately parents must often share the blame for the fierceness of competition. It is not uncommon to see a father reliving his athlete childhood vicariously through the child or, perhaps worse, experiencing through his youngster the thrill of competition which he himself never had as a child. If mothers or fathers continue to demand of their child standards of excellence which will allow them to bask in reflected glory, the work of even the most enlightened leader may be negated.

guiding policies

Whatever the arguments for and against various organized athletic activities, children will probably participate in athletic activities no matter what adults plan for them. It is the responsibility of those charged with the planning and conduct of athletic competition for the young to establish workable guidelines. The following are submitted toward this end:

1. Proper physical conditioning of the participant.
2. Adequate medical supervision.
3. Careful matching of competitors as to physical maturity as well as age, size and body type. (This is crucial in body-contact sports.)
4. Athletic programs for the young offering opportunity for *all* children to participate in both competitive and non-competitive sport and play activities.
5. Opportunities for the development of skills in a wide range of individual and team activities.
6. A high premium placed on teaching proper skill techniques.
7. Rules and regulations, equipment and facilities suited to the particular age of the participants.
8. Representative team athletics should never be emphasized to the detriment of the programs of instructional physical education and intramurals in our schools. (With regard to community athletics, bowl games, all-star contests, excessive publicity, commercial

- promotion, victory celebrations, paid admission and exploitation of children in any form must be avoided.)
9. Finally, both school and community be prepared to provide competent leadership.

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