

Each chapter, other than the two introduction chapters, is followed by a series of review questions designed to bring the main theses and potential lines of criticism of them into focus. A short list of suggested readings also follows, which may include works cited in the footnotes if the author regards them as especially deserving of attention. Those interested in exploring the issues raised even further should consult the sources cited in the endnotes.

TWO

The Coach as Moral Exemplar

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Unquestionably, sports play a significant role in our society. Just consider the enthusiasm generated by March Madness, the Olympic Games, the Super Bowl, and the World Series. But perhaps their greatest significance is the moral role sports play for both the participants and society in general. I have argued that given their nature and design, sports provide a unique model for understanding our society, for seeing who we are, our values, and our ethics.¹

Americans recognize the potential for sports to build character and promote necessary virtues for a greater cause. As a society, Americans value sports and what they can offer. But Americans also believe that an overemphasis on winning threatens sports, possibly by motivating rule breaking and by taking the fun out of it for too many people. Role models, particularly coaches, can play an important part in maintaining the integrity and value of sports. Coaches often function as surrogate parents, bonding strongly with the people they coach. A study by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA), in partnership with Discovery Education, concluded that coaches, more than parents, teachers, peers, religion, and school, have the greatest influence on youth sport participants.²

Sport can be great fun to play and entertaining to watch. However, it offers something more important. The lessons it provides—taught properly—apply directly to life. Many of those lessons are usually taught first by a good mother and father, but sports can help make them stick and add a few more.³

Given the results of the study, the people entrusted to teach these lessons must be the coaches. Like parents they teach skills, but they also teach life lessons, including morals, ethics, tolerance, and most of all respect, both for themselves and for others. So coaches must be good teachers as well as good role models.

A recent USADA survey showed that more than three-fifths of US adults, approximately 162 million Americans, claim some relationship to sports-related activities. Thus, given the engagement and power of sports and more importantly the power of coaches, ethics and sports must be integrated in the coaches who influence those they coach. But this cannot happen unless coaches possess character and integrity, and intentionally teach and model these values. Since sports play a significant moral role in society, coaches have a greater responsibility in how sports fulfill this role. Of course coaches are not the only ones who bear this responsibility; others, particularly well-known athletes, bear some responsibility as well. However, “coaches have an . . . unparalleled power and platform in young people’s lives.”⁴ This is an awesome and sometimes frightening platform for transforming people’s lives. What makes it so is that this is a role they have freely chosen. With that choice comes great responsibility, not just to teach what they know and how to perform and behave, but to model this behavior as well. “There are at least five million coaches with the potential to become one of the most influential adults in a young person’s life. Forever.”⁵ This is a tremendous challenge that requires coaches to serve as moral exemplars.

Coaches are teachers, and coaching, like teaching, takes skill, art, and knowledge. It is a skill that helps young people become stronger athletes and stronger individuals. The hope is to produce excellence in those they coach. We see many examples of this, but unfortunately we see the opposite as well. Part of this has to do with professing one thing while doing another. In the survey coaches responded that teaching self-discipline, doing one’s best, having fun, building self-esteem, and respecting others are among the most important values children will learn from playing sports; they ranked playing fairly and winning as the least important.

But while winning seemed least important to the coaches, study participants responded that winning was what they viewed their coach as promot-

ing, that winning was much more important than other values. And according to a summary in *USA Today*, a new NCAA study of college athletes reveals the following:

- Only 39 percent of Division I women’s basketball players said their head coach “defines success by not only winning, but winning fairly.” Also, just 39 percent said their head coach can be trusted.
- Only half of all Division I men’s basketball players said they felt their coaches were as interested in fairness as in winning. In baseball, it was 43 percent. Football coaches scored highest, a still modest 57 percent. The proportion of players who trusted their coaches ran much the same: 50 percent in men’s basketball, 52 percent in baseball, 56 percent in football.⁶

These findings lead us to examine why so many athletes lack trust in their coaches, the people entrusted to teach fair play, sportsmanship, and winning within the structure of the rules that define and regulate the games we play. Two possible conclusions may be drawn. Either this lack of trust is a result of misperceptions among athletes or it is evidence that many coaches are deceived about their own teachings. The USADA research revealed a disconnect between what coaches profess and what the participants perceive to be the case.

Sports constitute a secular religion and coaches are its ministers. They hold the same power and we expect the same qualities in our coaches as we do our clergy—trustworthy people who exemplify dignity, empathy, integrity, respect, and virtue. Players, like parishioners, evaluate coaches and learn their values by watching how they treat their players, their opponents, and other coaches. They gauge coaches’ values by observing their actions. Given the hypercompetitive atmosphere present in athletic programs at every level, plus the countless documented cases of cheating and malpractice by coaches, it is not unreasonable to conclude that many athletes have good reason not to trust their coaches.

These findings present a sad statement about college sports, which justify their nonprofit status by claiming to teach sportsmanship and character. And this carries over to youth sports as well. However, as a sports enthusiast, ex-coach, and teacher, I argue that the nature and design of sports play a significant moral role in society by *reflecting* and *affecting* changes in our society, and those involved in sports play a significant role in these changes. Sports provide the model for the changes, both positively and negatively. And if the

research is correct, coaches play a significant and exalted role, and if change is to be positive, it is a role that coaches must embrace.

Though I have discussed the nature and design of a sports model elsewhere,⁷ I will briefly describe it and the obstacles to its implementation here.

Nature and Design of Sports

Here I want to present a paradigm or model of sports to illumine their moral significance. (This model is normative in that it presents a morally defensible conception of sports; see especially the chapters by Simon, Russell, and Torres and Hager for fuller discussion of such normative conceptions. It also describes sports at their best.) I identify four features as essential to the model.

First, in its paradigmatic form, sports participation is a freely chosen, voluntary activity, designed with no end outside itself. Though people may participate in sports for many different reasons, sports are designed to be ends in themselves. Whatever reasons people have for engaging in sports, they are designed to have a constant result, which is sufficient to justify the sport. Even if I play for money, the excellence displayed is sufficient to justify the sport.

For example, you may play basketball for money, but basketball itself is designed to develop and display excellence even if that is not your reason for playing it. Thus in order to make money playing the game you will have to display certain excellences. Further, given human nature, you are likely to respond positively to these excellences and to make them your ends. In this way the game is an unalienated activity. Further participation in the many different sports is an expression of the individual's creativity and his or her freedom to choose which of these various excellences to develop.

Second, sports are governed by constitutive rules and regulative rules. Constitutive rules define the game and the permissible moves allowed within it. These rules define the activity and are usually designed to develop and exhibit sets of skills and talents. Some sports have more rules than others, and the rules may change over time. But whatever the constitutive rules, their existence comes from their acceptance.

Regulative rules complement the constitutive rules. These rules govern fair play, decency, and safety. Rules of fair play include penalties for infractions of the constitutive rules and for moves of strategy within the game. For example, in football the defense wants to rush the passer, but according to the constitutive rules no one can cross the line of scrimmage before the ball is snapped. Regulative rules require that a team that violates this off-sides rule be penalized to restore the competitive balance. Rules of decency reflect basic moral standards. For example, after a great tackle, the tackler should not

stand over the tackled player and taunt or gyrate. Rules of safety are designed to protect the participants as they play according to the constitutive rules. For example, no one can tackle a player by grabbing his face mask. In combination, the constitutive and regulative rules impose discipline and create a safe and moral framework for self-expression and self-development. Both sets of rules are regularly evaluated and often revised to promote a competitive, safe, and moral framework.

Third, sports must be physically challenging within the designated framework and rules. This feature contrasts sports to games. Games need not be physically challenging. Again, the constitutive rules are continually evaluated to keep the sports physically challenging.

Fourth, sports involve competition as a mutual challenge to achieve or strive for excellence⁸ within the framework set by the constitutive rules and the regulative rules of fair play and decency. The struggle involves both the process and the product, a desire to win, and a desire to be tested.

The mental and the physical come together in competition. Each participant must develop strategies to counter another competitor's skills and strategies. Competition can lead to respect, friendship, or combat—opponents can be viewed either as partners in the struggle or enemies to be conquered. Here coaches play a significant role as skilled strategists. They work with the athletes in practice and discuss the mental aspects of the sport in the locker room. What the athletes learn from their coaches they carry onto the playing field. They must make quick calculations and decisions based on what they have learned. So it is vital that coaches understand and promote the model.

Obviously this is a model and, like any model, is subject to deviations in practice. Nonetheless, it is the model we should use to evaluate how sports are taught, coached, and played out in society. Given the high status of sports, we need to carefully examine the issues that tear at the fabric of the model in order to ensure the integrity and value of sports and allow us to embrace the role that sports plays in our society. But this is a shared responsibility.

Obstacles

What deviations occur from the model? Here I will briefly discuss three of them: the emphasis on winning, the lack of moral courage, and relativism.

Emphasis on Winning in Competition

There are those who place winning above all else and are willing to cheat to achieve this goal. The high stakes involved in winning factor into this orientation.

The desire to win is fundamental to competition, but this does not entail winning at all costs. People desire to win for different reasons. But as noted above, sports are designed so that in order to win, participants will have their skills challenged and tested, and the results of the tests are displayed in winnings and rankings. This is not unlike the tests we give our students in classes. We challenge our students to learn new material. To meet the challenge they strive to do well on exams that require them to learn the skills. But some place winning (e.g., getting an A) above all else and are willing to cheat for the sake of this goal. It is up to the teacher to promote the desire to do well, but not at all costs. Consider a teacher who said, "Here are the rules, and here are the ways to break those rules and avoid getting caught, so that you can get an A." If everyone were given the ways to break the rules, they would become rules unto themselves and cheating would no longer be cheating. It would be cheating if we provided the information to a few who then kept it to themselves to gain an edge. Maintaining the integrity of the academic endeavor requires that while teachers may give students strategies to help them prepare for the exam, they must challenge students to strive to achieve excellence, not just an A.

Sports are no different. If we are to maintain the integrity of sports, while coaches give strategies to help participants prepare for competitions, they must abide by both the constitutive and regulative rules. They should challenge the participants to strive to achieve excellence, not just to win. In this way coaches must serve as exemplars who uphold the integrity of sports. (Critiques of overemphasis on winning are found in chapters by Reid, Simon, and Russell, among others.)

All of us, participants, spectators, administrators, parents, journalists, and coaches, share responsibility for instilling a culture of honor and integrity in sports. But given the power and influence coaches command, they bear a greater responsibility. The pressures are great, including those posed by the excessive public attention to sports and exaggerated monetary rewards at elite levels of competition, but the willingness to prioritize winning, at the sacrifice of ethics and health, erodes our trust in the inherent value of sports. As a nation, we should embrace the positive role that sports can play in our society, as well as the issues now facing sports, in order to determine how to ensure their enduring integrity and value.

Lack of Moral Courage

My colleague Kim Strom-Gottfried has pointed out, quoting Edward Kidder, that "the key to ethical action is moral courage. . . . When we uphold ethical principles, . . . we are acting with moral courage."⁹

It has been said that we all know right from wrong but lack the moral courage to do the right thing or act when we see others doing wrong. Opportunities for ethical action are plentiful, but so too are the reasons not to act. Strom-Gottfried offers five obstacles to moral courage: discomfort, futility, socialization, bystander effect or diffusion theory, and personal cost.¹⁰ These obstacles apply to all aspects of life and are dramatized in sport. Although participants may know what the right thing to do is, they find it difficult to go against what is actually being asked of them; and if they did, they would be criticized for not being a team player or would find themselves ostracized. Participants get their cues from coaches who either reward or condemn rule breaking and unsportsmanlike behavior. So again coaches must serve as moral exemplars for the athletes they coach. However, coaches face these obstacles as well.

It is equally uncomfortable for them to go against the actual demands of the position. And although they might like to do the right thing, they may see it as a no-win situation. Perhaps no one cares or "everyone is doing it," or they believe that ethical appeals will fall on deaf ears. Moral courage may be too expensive if it costs the coach his or her position or professional standing. But those who worry about the cost of action fail to consider the cost of inaction.

"Ethical action often is not easy, but it can be practiced. It can be taught and can be reinforced when we see it in others. . . . As individuals we can support those around us who do the right thing. We can also demand that our society do the same."¹¹ This is the essence of fair play, sportsmanship, and following the rules for achieving excellence. In this lies the moral significance of sports, the duties of those involved, and their relationship to society. And coaches face even greater demands.

Relativism

People attack moral standards they don't find convenient by making relativistic arguments. Their argument goes something like this: since different societies or institutions in society have differing moral codes, it follows that there is no objective standard that can be used to judge the relative merits of particular codes. But is this argument *sound*? Does the conclusion logically follow from the premise? The premise is about belief systems or what people believe, while the conclusion is about what really is the case.

Because belief systems may have disagreements, does it *logically follow* that there is no objective truth in the matter? Certainly not. The fact that people once disagreed about whether the earth is flat does not mean that there was no objective truth about its shape. Further, it is a mistake to overestimate the extent of the differences. We need to consider underlying goals and

principles. I do not deny that we allow some things in sports that we would not allow in society; the hits that we allow in football we would not allow on the street, for example. It does not follow, however, that society and sports do not share common goals and principles.

The constitutive and regulative rules that govern each sport are designed to challenge participants to develop their skills. But there are also descriptive and moral rules necessary for sports to even exist and must be embraced by all. Deliberate harm and cheating are two examples. These rules are in force in all sports and in all cultures. Sports may differ in what they regard as legitimate exceptions to the rules, but those differences exist against a broad background of agreement. And sports exist within a society that shares this broader agreement. So it is a mistake to overemphasize the differences at the expense of the broader background of agreement, whether in our society or in any society. As Robert Simon so aptly puts it, "Sport . . . provides an arena which illustrates a framework of universal values within which the competition takes place."² (But see Chapter 5 for William J. Morgan's defense of the importance of historical and social context, which might lead him to dissent from the idea of universal values.)

Given the great impact of sports on society, it is critical that they exemplify this broader moral agreement. Sports both reflect and actively affect society. This is one reason for their moral significance. Sports teach us what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, what is condoned and what is shunned.

Understanding the place of sports in our society and our role in perpetuating it requires us to understand the paradigm and how it is applied. Those who coach and administer sports bear the burden of upholding the integrity of sports. It isn't easy; there is no algorithm to plug in the variables, no simple recipe to follow. Sports display excellence and moral courage, as well the undermining of excellence and the lack of moral courage. We expect our teachers, our coaches, to promote the best displays and serve as exemplars. We cannot expect them to be perfect. Coaches are human and fallible, but in accepting the role of coach, they accept the responsibility of developing excellence in those they teach.

Conclusion

The chapters that follow discuss the moral and legal responsibilities of coaches, examine issues of coaching policy such as allocation of playing time among team members, and the proper emphasis on competition in youth sports. They also explore issues in ethical justification that investigate the logical grounds that might be offered in developing and supporting decisions by coaches. Coaching, far from being a purely technical or strategic activity, is

permeated by ethical and related educational concerns. I hope this book contributes to our philosophical and intellectual understanding of the complexities of coaching and to better coaching as well.

Sports provide a unique model for understanding who we are and what we want to achieve. In this way sports serve a significant moral function and as an exemplar for public ethics. Everyone bears responsibility to uphold honor in our society and in sports, but coaches, given their power, bear a greater responsibility. Understanding this is important for all of us, because *the death of ethics is the sabotage of excellence.*