

Eight

Bench Players: Do Coaches Have a Moral Obligation to Play Benchwarmers?

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Anyone who has ever played on a team or coached one knows the high stakes involved in grouping athletes into starters and reserves. Undoubtedly the public nature of organized sport contributes to these dynamics. After all, it is in front of fans, friends, parents, and sometimes national television audiences that athletes play lead roles, secondary roles, or no role at all.

I know there is safety on the bench. I have spent time there. Athletes who do not get into the game will never make the mistake that turns a certain victory into an improbable defeat. Those who live at the end of the bench will not face the sometimes extreme pressure and so-called trait anxieties encountered by those who play regularly (Smith et al. 1995). But there is potential harm there too. Every athlete, from the fabled Rudy of Notre Dame to the youngster on the local sandlot team, wants to get into the game.¹ While simply belonging to a team has its rewards, that is usually not enough.

In this chapter, I do not present knock-down arguments in favor of more equitable methods for distributing playing time. Rather, I argue that concerns over winning and excellence should be toned down in favor of better meeting

the rights and interests of the players to get on the court or field. My theoretical framework is informed by deontological sentiments. I believe that context matters in deciding appropriate amounts of playing time. Thus I generally favor act over rule approaches to this problem. The deontological side of my thinking privileges the rights of players over arguments for utility. I will not be arguing that spreading out playing time maximizes pleasure or any other benefit. Rather, I argue that it is the right thing to do for the players involved.

Others take different positions on this issue and have good reasons for doing so. Isn't it sufficient, they would ask, to be identified as a talented performer by virtue of one's team membership, to wear the jersey, to work under the watchful eye of a coach, to practice and improve, to go on team trips, to experience the friendships that grow between members of close-knit groups? Shouldn't players be able to gain satisfaction by helping the squad in ways other than making plays on the court or field? Furthermore, if coaches are forthright about playing time, if they tell athletes and parents up front that they will be making decisions based on maximizing chances for competitive success, where is the harm? Sport is egalitarian, but it is also a meritocracy. Nobody is guaranteed playing time. It must be earned.

These considerations are persuasive but not decisive. I say this because the issue of rights to playing time is complicated. First, it depends, at least in part, on context. Moral qualms about a lack of playing time are typically greater in youth sports than, say, Division I NCAA college athletics, and even less so in professional sports. In other words, from the fact that it is morally appropriate to keep a reserve on the bench at one level of sports, it does not necessarily follow that it is equally appropriate at other levels or in other athletic contexts. Many youth leagues have rules that require minimum levels of participation. Such rules, however, would be inappropriate or even laughable if applied to the Boston Celtics or New York Yankees.

The second complicating factor is related to the goods that are said to accrue to benchwarmers. They may or may not be sufficient. We cannot assume that reserve players are "getting a good deal" merely by being members of the team. Much would seem to hinge on how these individuals were treated and on such contingent issues as whether or not the athletes were on scholarship or were being paid. And much would depend on how we adjudicate individual rights against corporate goals and how much weight we give to such stakeholders as fans and those with business interests.

Third, while a coach's honesty about playing time is laudable and helpful, it is not sufficient. Telling players up front that they may be treated, in effect, more as means than ends does not necessarily mitigate or excuse harms befalling athletes from subsequent manipulations. Of course athletes, so informed, could choose not to play. But in sporting situations where many

players achieve elite status on the foundation of large financial and psychological investments, the choice not to participate or to participate only under unfavorable terms places them in a very difficult situation, to say the least.

These kinds of considerations suggest that the rights, goods, and harms associated with access to playing time will not be easily determined. Before launching into this matter, however, I will clarify precisely what the issue is.

Benchwarmers are athletes who rarely play in actual games or play only for short periods when the game outcome has been decided. Typically, these are the younger, less seasoned, and less skilled individuals. These are the players who sit at the proverbial end of the bench. I am not as concerned about reserves who play significant minutes, who come off the bench regularly as role players, or who otherwise get into many contests when outcomes are still up for grabs. While some arguments presented here apply to them as well, their status as game contributors significantly reduces ethical concerns related to playing time.

In addition, playing time does not necessarily mean equal playing time. "Meaningful playing time," as I call it, has to do with when an athlete plays as much as how long that individual is on the court or field. Allowing subs in high school basketball to play the last twenty-two seconds of a blowout victory would not count as meaningful playing time to my way of thinking.

My analysis works better for team sports like basketball, football, soccer, and baseball, for example, than individual sports like tennis, golf, swimming, and track and field. Some of the sting of not getting to play seems less severe in these activities if only because many of them do not typically take place in front of large crowds. Yet even in these sports, there are individuals who get into the game and others who do not. The question of the ethics of playing reserves is still relevant, even if at a lesser level.²

Finally, it is important to distinguish between ethical and prudential reasons for playing reserves. Coaches may have strategic reasons to use their entire bench, but these motives and decisions do not speak directly to moral duties or responsibilities. To be sure, moral and prudential reasons can coincide, and when they do so, we count it as fortunate. But this need not be the case. Thus I will not be focusing on strategic reasons for playing benchwarmers, such as the following:

1. The importance of keeping starters fresh and ready for late-game surges
2. The importance of having starters get out of the game to watch and reflect, get instructions, improve their mind-set, or spend time on the bench for other reasons

3. The significance of preparing for injuries to starters, of having well-seasoned reserves ready to step in
4. The possibility that reserves may mature into better players than some current starters
5. The likelihood that disgruntled reserves will quit the team or, at the college level, transfer to another institution
6. The fact that team morale may be improved, that practices may go better if everyone can look forward to playing time
7. The importance of providing stability to a program, of protecting it from the ups and downs due to graduation or departures for other reasons

Clearly coaches have strategically sound reasons for playing reserves. Consequently it is both ethical *and* smart for coaches to give meaningful playing time to all or most of their bench players. But once again, for purposes of this analysis, I will focus on the ethical requirements for such a decision.

First Experiences: Playing Time, Learning, and Fun

Moral hackles about lack of playing time seem to be raised most often when young children do not get onto the field or court. If my seven-year-old were to remain on the bench because some coach is nervous about losing a game, I might justifiably conclude that things are not right. Youth sport, it is commonly thought, should afford participation opportunities for the talented and untalented alike. Winning, if it is to have any influence on coaching decisions, should be a secondary consideration at most.

Even Little League, an organization that has been criticized for placing financial objectives over educational values, has a mandatory play rule.³ Rule 8.3 reads as follows:

In all divisions except Senior and Big League, every player on the team roster must have at least one plate appearance and play three consecutive outs on defense in each game. The penalty for a manager violating the rule is a two-game suspension. This rule is waived if the game is completed prior to the usual duration of the game (six innings in Little League and below, seven innings in Junior League). http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_League_Baseball#Mandatory_Play_Rule

Virtually all youth sports coaching books include similar recommendations, and most town leagues around the country have mandatory play rules. A virtual consensus exists that all team members in what might be called early or first-experience sporting contexts should get to play in all the games.

This insight seems to rest on what Simon (2010) and others have identified as rights to basic benefits. In a nutshell, the argument runs as follows: in youth sport, the focus should be on learning the game, on developing personal skills, and on enjoying the activity. Every kid, it would seem, has a right to learn and improve. Every child has a right to play in a physically and psychologically safe environment. Because of this, playing time should be well distributed. Performance anxiety should be kept to a minimum. This is a time for development and fun.

The developmental or educational side of the argument is a powerful one. It relies on old physical education principles related to preparation for life. Everyone, physical educators would say, should have skills that allow them to engage in healthful and enjoyable recreational activities across the life span. With a so-called obesity epidemic facing American youth, it is important for kids to get away from their computer screens, develop some skills for negotiating outdoor activities successfully, and enjoy themselves.

The idea of playing time as a basic benefit and an educational experience also points to the future well-being of young athletes. It is very difficult to tell who will excel in different domains of learning. Some mature slowly but pick up the pace later. Particularly in anatomically and physiologically intensive activities like sports, it is sometimes difficult to predict later performance capabilities. Thus in a liberal democratic society like our own, we should err on the side of opportunity. We should provide a basic education to everyone and keep these doors of empowerment open as long as possible so that late bloomers, as well as those who face socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, or biological developmental barriers, will have a chance. In most youth sports settings, this means that children should have access to the full sporting experience . . . both the practicing and the playing.

Furthermore, positive affect is crucial to the educational agenda. Those who enjoy the sporting experience are more likely to persist. Those who persist will continue their activities into adulthood and even old age. Those who have the lifelong companionship of a favorite sport or outdoor activity will lead healthier, happier, and longer lives. Positive affect, on this line of thinking, is tethered to participation. And, all things being equal, it is far more fun for a seven-year-old to play than to watch.

Empirical studies support these speculations. In a landmark survey of 20,000 American youth, researchers found that the number one reason given by athletes for participation was “fun” (Seefeld et al. 1992). Fun was followed

by “doing something I am good at,” while “staying fit and healthy” ranked third. Winning did not even crack the top 10. Children want to play, and they enjoy doing things that show some degree of competence.

Nationally recognized youth coaches like Bob Bigelow take positions that are consistent with this research. He argues that “meaningful playing time for every player is job one.” He goes on to suggest that if playing reserves “ends up costing the game, and if that hurts [coaches] too much, they should get out of coaching youth athletics and do something else” (Bigelow 2011, 1).

Youth Sports: Playing Time in a Period of Transition

The language of rights and benefits works well with young children, but it loses force at higher levels of competition. As already noted, it does not carry much weight in professional sports where athletes are elite performers, where imperatives of winning and market logic hold sway, and where even benchwarmers command handsome salaries. But what about college . . . high school . . . or even junior high? Where do the right to playing time and the commitment to education and play disappear or at least carry less weight?

Many years ago I learned that the cut-off point could be found at the middle school level. Our family had just moved from upstate New York to rural Pennsylvania. My daughter had successfully tried out for the seventh and eighth grade girl’s basketball team. Prior to the start of the season, the coach called a meeting for the parents and players. We were told to sit on the bleachers in the gym.

The coach was all business. With a serious expression on his face he informed us that the team would be focused on winning and preparing select players for future membership on the JV and varsity teams! Regular practices would be demanding, voluntary practices were not really voluntary, and playing time would be limited or nonexistent for “those who are not ready.” Before sending us off, he reminded us that he, and he alone, would decide who, when, and how much anyone played.

I have some sympathy for the message delivered by the coach. I can appreciate problems presented by basketball parents who expect the coach, as the old joke puts it, “to start their child and the next four best players.” Furthermore, this coach’s businesslike, competitive approach is probably not unusual, even at the middle school level. These kids are in the pipeline, as it were, for future athletic experiences where winning and losing will matter more and the public will take greater interest in game results.

However, it still makes sense to ask if this approach is appropriate, particularly for middle school athletes. After all, we do not usually cut students out of any significant learning opportunities at this level of education. We don’t

say to those who are less capable in math or English that “they do not get to play anymore.” Should we not, therefore, keep the educational door open and the play spirit alive a little longer in the athletic domain? A heavy focus on winning and excellence can come later. The earnestness against which Johan Huizinga (1950) railed—that overly sober and serious attitude that replaces the play spirit—can come later too.

These concerns are not shared by everyone. Some might cite the fact that schools place gifted academic students into accelerated curriculums by the seventh grade. Less talented students simply “do not make the team” and are channeled into less demanding courses of study. Also, some schools participate in competitions sponsored by Knowledge Masters, National History Day, Mathcounts, spelling bees, or science fairs—events that are designed to pit the best intellects from one school against those from another. Critics might point out that nobody is guaranteed “playing time” in these activities either.

While this is true, and while playing time for athletes might be dealt with more judiciously in middle school than in children’s sports settings, this argument does not settle the case. To be sure, caution about playing time for a low-end reserve is warranted both for the sake of the team and the potential embarrassment for that individual. On educational grounds alone, we would not want to put a youngster in a situation where high cost and publicly visible failure is likely. Similarly, we would probably not want a coach to sacrifice all team goals for any hard and fast commitments to equal playing time.

On the other hand, we have to remember that we are dealing with eleven-, twelve-, thirteen-, and fourteen-year-olds in this situation. And we have to remember that controversy often surrounds educational stratifications and the limitations they place on those who are deemed “unqualified.” Many educational policies are based on the premise that individuals need time to develop . . . sometimes even through their college years and beyond.⁴ For reasons that are often outside their control—reasons that range from biological and economic to cultural—some students arrive at desirable destinations earlier than others. While the promotion of excellence is culturally important and while the rights of the gifted are as important as the rights of others, some balance would seem to be in order, particularly at these earlier levels of education. Because of this need for balance, some weight should still be given to the basic benefits argument. How much weight is merited is, of course, open to question.

I don’t see any slam-dunk answers to this question. Conclusions have to do with judgment, with how values are prioritized. Middle school athletes are, as my daughter’s coach reminded us, preparing for varsity experiences several years hence. Such preparation places a priority on excellence, winning, individual rights, and ultimately on public or fan interests and so-called front

porch values of athletics for a school or school system. These can be important considerations.

The basic benefits argument, on the other hand, prioritizes competence and learning rather than excellence, group rights and participation, personal educational benefit over fan interest, and sports as an educational laboratory more than a high-visibility vehicle for educational or noneducational ends. These too are, or can be, important values.⁵

My own judgment is that the junior high school level of sporting experience should privilege basic benefits over scarce benefits, educational values over public entertainment benefits and related emphases on winning. Perhaps the ratio should be something like 70:30 or 60:40. This would suggest that coaches still have an important moral obligation to play all their athletes. The moral obligation is tethered to the fact that middle school is still a time for development, fun, and protection from overspecialization and high doses of performance anxiety. While the winnowing process has begun, while victories take on increased importance, and while all individuals cannot expect or get equal playing time, the logic of education and play should still provide the dominant themes for the experience. The coach should still be far more the inclusive, duty-bound educator than the exclusive coaching technician or instrumentalist.⁶

High School Athletics: Playing Time and Reciprocity

If my argument is on track, it stands to reason that high school coaches are less obligated to give playing time to benchwarmers. In this setting the group works more exclusively toward common ends—a victory, a winning season, a championship. Sacrificing individual interests for corporate goals is expected. Coaches can lose their jobs if win-loss records are not favorable. Hardly anybody in this kind of competitive environment is guaranteed playing time. This is where a commitment to excellence makes sense—both individual and team excellence. And arguably, team excellence cannot be achieved when coaches have to worry about playing time for low-end reserves, individuals whose play will likely endanger team objectives.

Furthermore, reserves at the high school level enjoy any number of benefits, even if playing time is not one of them. Several of these goods or benefits appear at the beginning of the chapter. Given these realities and under these circumstances, shouldn't lesser players be happy with their lot . . . or at least appreciate the reasons for their spot on the bench? I am not sure that they should.

First, although the educational, basic benefits argument is less weighty in high school and high school age settings,⁷ it does not follow that it should

disappear altogether. After all, high school sports take place in an educational context. Extracurricular activities like varsity sports are compatible with core educational values and purposes espoused by school systems and contribute to those ends. If playing, in addition to watching and practicing, carries educational benefit, and if rights to educational benefit apply to all members of a team, then coaches have a *prima facie* obligation to allow kids to play. Coaches, in other words, have a moral obligation *as educators* to give lesser players meaningful playing time.

I say that there is a *prima facie* obligation because I admit that the *actual* obligation, as noted previously, is undoubtedly less than the ideal of equal playing time. Rights to educational benefit do not trump all other values or considerations. Equal respect accorded to starters and reserves, for instance, may well provide a rationale for meaningful but unequal playing time.

Second, the ethics of fair play in the form of reciprocity could be used to forge a more equitable arrangement between coach and bench player. Coaches need the services of reserves, even individuals who are not required for game contributions. Much team success can be attributed to how well reserves practice, how well they serve as “scout team” members, how much spirit and enthusiasm they show, and so on.

But reserves want to play. They hope against hope that they will improve enough to become starters. If not that, they picture themselves getting into a game when the outcome is still undecided, perhaps even doing something heroic. But for that story to have any chance of becoming reality, the coach needs to put the athlete in the game.

Ethics enters this scene of mutual need and potential benefit, as Singer (1995) noted, on the foundation of two virtues—trust and fidelity. The athlete has to trust the coach because the player has to meet his part of the bargain first. A coach could defect and not put the player into the game in spite of the player's previous goodwill actions. Thus the coach must show the second virtue—fidelity—in order to make good on his promise to the player.

Kohlberg (1981) argues that this kind of “I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine” ethic involves a relatively low level of moral thinking.⁸ It would be better if the issue could be settled on principles of justice—on the idea that fairness requires the coach to provide at least a taste of what the benchwarmer really wants in light of that individual's hard work and contribution to the team. But in the absence of high-minded ethics, trust, fidelity, and reciprocity might provide a degree of protection for athletes who want to get into the game but find themselves blocked by coaches who have the final say.

Critics might insist that the reciprocity argument does not work. First, reserves may be expendable. To that extent, coaches have no incentive to enter into such agreements. In addition, some might point out, this is not a

relationship among equals. The coach is in charge. Compliance on the part of the player can be required. Coercion can serve as a substitute for ethics by agreement. The coach does not need to promise playing time because the coach does not need to offer it in order to get what he wants.

I do not find these arguments persuasive because they seem more descriptive than normative. The unequal status of the coach and the players fuels many of the ethical dilemmas that occur in sports. While the coach may be able to replace a reserve who is audacious enough to bargain for playing time, and while the coach has most of the power, the coach is still mentor and educator. As an individual who should have concern for all athletes on the team, the logic of reciprocity should appear attractive both ethically and motivationally. The coach should be sympathetic to the fact that the hardworking reserve has at least some call on a benefit that all players desire—getting on the court or field in a real game when it still matters . . . and for more than a couple of seconds.

It stands to reason, then, that *prima facie* educational obligations and the ethics of reciprocity (if not principles of justice or loyalty) would suggest that high school coaches do have a moral obligation to find meaningful playing time for all reserves . . . at least those who are dedicated, hardworking, and committed to team success.

Collegiate Level: Playing Time and Competitive Excellence

It's not unreasonable to hold that basic benefits arguments, educational obligations, the ethics of reciprocity, and even principles of loyalty and justice continue to be operative at the collegiate level. This is still an educational setting. A reasonable presumption is that sports in this environment should privilege players and their interests over business-related, front porch-driven, win-at-all-costs philosophies. Thus college athletes who sit at the far end of the bench should get a chance to play too.⁹

A number of utilitarian economic arguments might be offered in opposition to this perspective. Particularly at the NCAA Division I level, and most notably in football and basketball, it could be argued that economic imperatives do (and should) trump educational objectives. Winning is essential. The use of low-end reserves flies in the face of this reality. Even coaches who would like to play reserves regularly will not do so. Unilateral disarmament, in big-time sports, is a nonstarter.

But there is another, less controversial argument against using reserves in games: college sports require the prioritization of excellence over mediocrity.

College athletes are elite performers. They should focus on team and individual excellence. They should aim at perfection . . . even if they never achieve it.

Here is where the ethical rub comes in. Arguably, team excellence is promoted most efficiently and effectively by catering to the best players on the team or those with the greatest potential. Time and energy investments make more sense there than elsewhere. On this line of reasoning, reserves in general, and end-of-the-bench reserves in particular, should serve facilitating roles—not to foster each other's performance but to maximize better players and thus the team. For any low-end reserves, this facilitating role will perpetuate their lesser status. After all, time used to facilitate teammates' growth is, at least in part, time lost for one's own performance needs.

This claim could be verified empirically. How do reserves spend their time in practice? How many reps do they get? How often does a coach give them individual attention, especially in contrast to the starters? How often are they required to learn the next opponent's offense in order to facilitate the starting team's defensive preparations? How infrequently are the starters asked to return the favor and facilitate the reserves' readiness to play against the next opponent?

Answers to these questions, for anyone who has participated in or observed college practices, are clear. Lower-end reserves are asked to sacrifice their own quest for excellence for the sake of the team. To be sure, this can still be a gratifying experience, and college athletes enter into such agreements with their eyes wide open. But it still needs to be made clear that the quest for excellence (and the winning that goes with it) carries risks for those who show less promise of achieving high levels of expertise and whose services are needed to facilitate the excellence of others.

Many reserves who are used as means to team ends but are not compensated with opportunities for playing time still approach practice with determination and hope. Like Rudy, they may put forth twice the effort of some starters. Because they are part of the team, they have a chance to get on the court or field . . . even if the cards are stacked against them.

And the cards usually are stacked against them. They begin their team journey with lesser skills and less game experience. Without equal attention at practice, and without learning opportunities provided by playing time, the gap between the starters and reserves tends to increase. In corresponding fashion, the odds of the reserve earning much playing time before graduation grow longer.

However, excellence is a powerful value and worthy objective. Sacrifices by teammates in its pursuit may be warranted, particularly at elite college levels. Nevertheless, when the value of excellence is combined with the logic of

instrumentalism, individual rights may be put at risk and a more balanced view of sporting values may be lost.

These are precisely the concerns raised by the NCAA Committee on Women's Athletics (CWA) in 2007 when it argued that male practice players should be barred from women's intercollegiate programs. They claimed that the use of men violated the spirit, if not also the letter, of Title IX legislation and cited two reasons. First, the availability of males for practice allowed coaches to carry fewer women on their rosters. This reduced opportunity. In addition, with males on the court or field at practice, women reserves were standing on the sidelines and thus receiving less practice time.

No less personages than Tennessee's Pat Summit and Rutgers's Vivian Stringer supported the use of male practice players, and their primary argument rested on an appeal to excellence. Stringer said, "It is the male practice players that allow us to get better. . . . Male practice players are the most important element to the continued growth of women's basketball players" (*USA Today* 2007).

Jim Foster, the Ohio State women's basketball coach, took an opposing view. When told of all the good the male practice players brought to the sport he replied, "I'd like to hear the stories of the [women] who didn't get to practice and had to stand and watch." He continued, "To take even more time and more reps from a segment of players almost dooms them to mediocrity" (*USA Today*, 2007).

Most women coaches and administrators sided with Summit and Stringer. They agreed that male practice players can expedite the development of good female players and women's teams in the direction of excellence. At this level excellence should trump opportunity. There should be no turning back on the commitment to enhancing the quality of play. If males proved more efficient and effective in producing excellence in women's basketball, they should stay.

Predictably, the legislation proposed by the CWA went nowhere. Thus in Division III, male practice players are still permitted with certain restrictions.¹⁰ In Divisions I and II, males can serve as "practice guys" with few limitations.¹¹

This nexus between excellence and instrumentalism has obvious and important implications for the rights of benchwarmers and for any moral obligations of coaches to let them play. If those last few seats on the game bench can be left vacant—for purposes of promoting excellence—any and all moral obligations about playing those individuals disappear. No one needs to worry about the rights and interests of players who no longer exist.

Some might argue that the last few positions on the bench, at least at the college level, are not playing positions anyhow. Normal rotations in football,

basketball, soccer, and the like do not require the full complement of athletes carried on a team. The use of male practice players, therefore, merely formalizes a relationship that existed before their use. End of the bench positions are de facto practice positions, not playing positions. Whether they are males or females makes no difference. They are facilitators. If men function better than women as practice facilitators, why not use them? Either way, no *playing* positions are lost.

But this begs the very question at issue. Should end of the bench positions be strictly practice positions? And should individual and team excellence stand as sufficient warrant for the sacrifices required of those who would facilitate such excellence? Could the logic of excellence and facilitation be extended to male teams too?

Why not reduce men's collegiate basketball teams to ten or eleven players, just as many women's teams have done? Perhaps new NCAA legislation could be passed to allow recently retired NBA players or semipro who are not even students to serve as practice guys for the men's teams—all for purposes of promoting excellence.

Michael Sandel (2007) confronted similar logical possibilities when he examined issues of technology and interests in achieving perfection. He worried that an unbridled quest for perfection can rob us of crucial elements of our humanity—humility, responsibility, and solidarity.

The most relevant of these for current purposes is probably solidarity. Teams, it seems to me, pool both their resources and their risks. Because individuals cannot control all sporting variables, they join hands in hopes of flourishing on the back of combined talents but also in recognition that protection is needed from unforeseen problems. Not all will play starring roles, but all could play important roles. Humility and mutual dependency lead to strong feelings of community, of "us."

According to Sandel, Promethean hopes for total control work against an ethic of solidarity. Social and psychological engineering replaces the magical "chemistry of a team" that often surprises us and fills us with gratitude. Maximal developmental strategies, controlled environments, and ideally prepared practice players replace the nonlinear and unpredictable drama of learning. Efficiency substitutes for the uncertain dynamics of the benchwarmer who lives with hope of playing time while sacrificing for the good of a larger cause. These trade-offs move us to a place where we no longer depend, wonder, and support.

Sandel would prefer the messier situation in which individuals willingly and humbly choose to pool their assets in order to minimize their liabilities. This is a world in which choice is tempered with chance.

The coach should be part of this pooling of risks and resources. A team is a family of stronger and weaker members, of individuals who serve different

roles but have common aspirations. The coach and superior team members should be rooting for the lesser players to improve and succeed—to get into a game and do something well.

Conclusion

Benchwarmers occupy the real estate for a variety of reasons. Some individuals deserve to be there . . . and perhaps some even deserve to *stay* there. There is no absolute right to playing time at the upper levels of sports. Correspondingly, coaches have no absolute moral obligations to play reserves.

However, I have argued that a *prima facie* obligation does exist. It is stronger at introductory and youth levels of sports and lesser at higher levels. In youth sports settings, education, development, opportunity, healthful exercise, and play are basic benefits that should trump any concerns over winning, excellence, financial gain, and the like. Everybody should play, and everybody should play for significant portions of the game.

I derided the overly serious attitudes of middle school coaches for quickly abandoning these values. Late bloomers deserve a chance. All kids are still learning the basics. The spirit of play should be kept alive. All players should be given a reasonable chance to get on the court or field.

I suggest that educational values should play a role in high school sports. The ethics of reciprocity might serve to mitigate potential harms of the unequal power relationship between coach and benchwarmer. A coach might feel that justice requires at least a degree of compensation (in the form of playing time) for the hardworking low-end reserve. I agree, however, that both for the sake of the lesser player and the team, decisions about how much playing time is provided need to be judicious.

At the college level, commitments to excellence provide arguments that justify the parsimonious use of low-end reserves or even their elimination . . . if and when practice functions can be assumed more efficiently and effectively by others. In such an instrumental sporting world, a coach would be blamed not so much for abusing reserves but for having them on the team in the first place.

I prefer to err on the side of opportunity. I like the moral ties that exist in large families where one person is encouraged to look out for the other. I think it is a sign of strength, not weakness, when a coach worries about providing meaningful playing time for the last person on the bench. It is when those concerns disappear, and even more so when the players who should be the objects of such concerns disappear, that I worry about the health of the entire sporting enterprise.

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. Why does Kretchmar argue that context is so important in deciding on the ethics of playing time? Can you identify ten contextual issues that might affect an athlete's right to play . . . and a coach's moral obligation to put him on the court or field?
2. How important is it for a coach to be honest with players and parents up front about playing time? Do you agree with Kretchmar that such "truth in advertising" does not remove moral obligations for playing benchwarmers?
3. Was it useful to organize the article chronologically—from youth sports through intercollegiate athletics? Can you imagine other ways in which this argument could have been formatted?
4. Kretchmar places great emphasis on education in order to support his arguments for more equitable playing time. If one removed this issue, what other kinds of arguments remain?
5. Where do you stand on the issue of promoting excellence? What kinds of trade-offs are justifiable in a society that honors fine performances? Can you rally an argument to the effect that excellence should trump learning and athlete's rights to playing time at elite levels?

Suggestions for Further Reading

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Nine

Coaching, Gamesmanship, and Intimidation

MARK HAMILTON

Having lived in Ohio all my life and being an avid Ohio sports fan, I know about coaches who use intimidation. I grew up watching Woody Hayes coach Ohio State; Bobby Knight is a local hero who grew up less than an hour away (my high school basketball coach was one of his college teammates). Throughout junior and senior high school I watched basketball games coached by Bill Musselman at Ashland College. Known for creating intimidating, energy-charged pregame warm-up drills and for later coaching the University of Minnesota in college basketball's best known on-the-court fight against Ohio State in 1972, Musselman is quoted as saying, "Losing is worse than death because you have to live with defeat." The list of intimidating coaches from Ohio is extensive—coaches who know how to threaten officials, players, and reporters, who bully anyone else who gets in their way on or off the playing field. And they are praised as coaches who know how to motivate players and win games. This used to be an accepted practice among coaches. While it has waned, it is still overlooked in a coach who wins. Any serious evaluation or moral critique of coaching ethics must include a close inspection of intimidation and bullying by coaches as a means of gamesmanship.