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Eleven

Competition, Ethics, and Coaching Youth

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Although organized youth sports in the United States date back to the nineteenth century, it was in the last fifty years or so that the experience became prevalent in the life of youths and their families.¹ One indication that youth sport has become a significant phenomenon in society is the widespread use since the 1990s of the term “soccer mom,” which designates those mothers who coordinate the sport schedules of their children. One study indicates that in the year 2000, the number of youths “who played on at least one organized sport team was found to be 54% of kids ages 6 and 17.”² A 2005 study shows that “among a slightly older age group of 10- to 17-year-olds, participation had jumped to 59%.”³ According to Ronald B. Woods, “Participation in youth sport [is] at an all-time high.”⁴ Along these lines, Christina Theokas reported in 2009 that “frequency of engagement in sports is extremely high for children and youth” and that “for the 19th consecutive year (2007–2008), the number of students participating in high school athletics increased.”⁵ Participation in youth sports is so extensive in the United States that Mark Hyman believes the country is obsessed with it.⁶

Hyman's characterization is meant as an indictment of the problems being set, not a citation of its merits. Competition, which typically plays a prominent role in youth sports, is at the center of this indictment. The condemnation of competition in this setting is nothing new: For example, the New York State Public High School Athletic Association temporarily abolished its state championships in the early 1930s "due to charges of overemphasis and overspecialization."⁷

While some critics simply oppose participation in competitive youth sports programs, others have taken a reformist approach.⁸ This chapter analyzes the role of competition in youth sports and the ethics of coaching in such programs. Our approach will not focus on the consequences, negative or positive, of sports competition, but on its intrinsic character. We begin with an exploration of the most common criticisms of youth sports and of some of the reforms proposed to improve it. We then present an interpretivist account of competitive sports and its central purpose, which establishes a framework through which (1) a case can be made for competition in organized youth sports, (2) proposed reforms can be analyzed, and (3) an ethics of coaching that respects competitive sports' central purpose while advancing youth's interests, needs, and welfare can be proposed. We intend to demonstrate that understood from an interpretivist perspective, competition in youth sports is morally defensible and coaches have a pivotal role to play in promoting and designing morally beneficial competitive experiences.

Problems and Reform Within Organized Youth Sports in the United States

The landscape of youth sports in the United States is haunted by a variety of ethical problems, many of which are related to those manifesting themselves at the elite level. Examples of on-field and off-field cheating and poor sporting behavior can be found in both media reports and the discussions of coaches, administrators, parents, and young athletes. Recruiting and eligibility violations, deceptive on-field rule breaking, the use of illegal performance enhancing substances and methods, intimidating and threatening forms of trash talk, and disrespectful behaviors toward coaches and teammates, as well as opponents and officials, are just some of the issues challenging proponents of youth sports today.

Many of these problems are grounded in the attitudes and tendencies of individuals within sports and society in the United States. One such tendency is what R. Scott Kretchmar has referred to as runaway individualism—an extreme form of individualism in which "individual rights, interests, and

activities dominate and overwhelm social duties and concerns."⁹ Among other things, runaway individualism "can lead to an insensitivity regarding the rights of others" and "can cause a person to lose touch with his or her cultural roots and shared community values."¹⁰ This tendency can be observed more generally in people's habits of seeking their own interests through activities of their choice, without consideration for others participating in the activities or for the activities themselves.

Runaway individualism is evident at all levels of sports in the United States, where the members of sporting communities often seek personal gain in the form of achievement, advancement, financial profit, and legacy, without much thought for their moral obligations to other community members or for their sport as a unique type of activity. In the words of Alasdair MacIntyre, the reasoning of these individuals is instrumental rather than practical in nature—focused on goods external to their sport (e.g., fame, fortune, status, recognition, etc.) rather than on its internal goods (i.e., the challenges, skills, and strategies that make sports unique social practices) or the virtues that should be cultivated and employed in determining and overseeing their sport's best interests and interpretations.¹¹

Two subcategories of runaway individualism have been identified. The first, which Kretchmar seems to recognize,¹² is a tendency to overemphasize personal achievement and personality; the second¹³ is what appears to be an escalating obsession with advantage seeking. These tendencies toward egotistical self-aggrandizement and obsessive advantage seeking have become so habitual for many athletes, coaches, and administrators that they have formed cults to rationalize the tendencies and act as apologists for them and for the poor sporting conduct they encourage and facilitate.

While the cult of egotistical self-aggrandizement operates most visibly at the professional level, it is clearly at work at the youth and amateur levels, where young athletes toil diligently to earn recognition for their talent and gain advancement. In youth sports and interscholastic and intercollegiate athletics, it is not uncommon for such athletes and their parents to lobby coaches for more playing time, for the chance to play a specific position, or for the opportunity to play a more substantial role on their team.

The cult of obsessive advantage seeking has also fastened its talons on each level of sports in the country. Because of the strong emphasis on winning and the belief in doing whatever it takes to win, athletes, coaches, and administrators feel the need to spend increasing amounts of time working to secure as great an advantage (or as small a disadvantage) as possible. The escalation in analysis of game films, in the advance scouting of opponents, and in coaches' expectations regarding the amount of time young athletes

should spend on conditioning, strength training, and sport-specific skill development are just a few examples of how obsessive advantage seeking is reshaping the landscape of youth sports.

A further indicator of this cult's influence is the willingness of athletes, coaches, and administrators to ignore or intentionally violate the rules of their sport and/or the regulations established by that sport's governing body or bodies. Although the majority of rules and regulations have been set in place to maintain sports as unique social practices and/or maintain conditions of fairness within their contests and practice communities, many tend to view competitors simply as obstacles to be circumvented on the road to victory. The violation of recruiting and eligibility rules and the doctoring of equipment to illegally enhance performance are two examples of rule breaking practices that place strategic advantage ahead of fair play in athletic competition.

The tendencies toward obsessive advantage seeking and egregious self-aggrandizement and their respective cults have developed to the point that they have become resistant to simple reforms. This is why simple appeals to fair play and good sportsmanship have done little to stem the tide of negative consequences flowing from them. Several attempts to reform youth sports have been employed to counteract the effects of these cults and tendencies, as well as the inclination to overemphasize winning and outcomes. For instance, the typical approach to reform utilized at the initial levels of youth sports (ages 5–11) has deemphasized competition, eliminating such elements as scorekeeping, standings, play-off and championship tournaments, and even organized teams and leagues.¹⁴ These kinds of reforms were crated by well-meaning individuals who were concerned that youth sports had been corrupted by coaches, administrators, and even parents, whose win-first approach to sports had marginalized the more traditional values of youth sports participation, such as skill learning and mastery, moral and social character development, and fun.

The problem with reforms that deemphasize competition in youth sports is that they stifle attempts to teach youths how to compete in a good and decent manner. We believe that competitive youth sports, when well organized and well led, can play an important educational role by teaching youth how to compete strongly against one another in the spirit of cooperation and friendship, without animosity or jealousy. Reforms that remove competitive aspects of sports or strongly deemphasize them jeopardize sports' ability to actualize its educational potential. Such reforms do not provide youngsters with a view or account of competition and value-based habits of action that will help them compete ethically in sport. Without tools of this kind, young athletes will not be well prepared to be competent contestants in sports and beyond. In the section that follows, we will examine an

account of sports (interpretivism) which offers a different type of youth sports reforms (mutualist reforms) that maintain the competitive aspects of youth sports while increasing the moral accountability of participants as members of sports practice communities.

Interpretivism and Competitive Sports's Central Purpose

Interpretivism is a theory of sports that falls under the larger conceptual umbrella that Robert L. Simon calls "broad internalism," which is "the view that in addition to the constitutive rules of sport, there are other resources connected closely—perhaps conceptually—to sports that are neither social conventions nor moral principles imported from the outside."¹⁵ According to Simon, interpretivism "derives the principles and theories underlying sport . . . from an appeal to the best interpretation of the game or an inference to the best explanation of its key elements."¹⁶ Furthermore, for him, interpretivism maintains that:

Certain principles and theories must be *presupposed* if we are to make sense of key elements of sport, such as the rules, the skills that are tested, and possibly the history, traditions, and central elements of the ethos of particular sports. . . . The form of the argument [that an interpretivist might employ] is that a particular activity, competitive sport, would lack a point, be not fully intelligible, or make no sense (or at least less sense than otherwise) were not certain underlying principles taken as normative or as applying to the activity in question.¹⁷

At its core, interpretivism holds that moral deliberation and assessment in sports should be guided by rationally grounded interpretations of its central purpose and features. An interpretation here means the rational articulation of sports as a comprehensive, coherent, and principled activity, not just as an intelligible activity. What is at stake in an interpretation of sports in general, and of a specific one in particular, are its defining point and most prominent characteristics. An interpretation, then, is not based on preference, thoughtless agreement, or tradition, but rather on carefully constructed arguments that ultimately render it legitimate. As Nicholas Dixon argues, "Whether a position on a debate about sport—be it about a particular issue or about fundamental principles—is defensible depends on the quality of the supporting arguments, not on whether it has the assent of the relevant athletic community."¹⁸

Interpretivists have explained, following the work of Bernard Suits, that a sport is a game—or artificial problem—created by rules and governed by a

“gratuitous logic” that puts a premium on the execution of physical skills. The gratuitous logic is a fundamental element of sports and all games because it refers to the restriction of the means available to accomplish the stipulated goal.¹⁹ This restriction, as detailed by rules, requires the use of less efficient rather than more efficient means to pursue those goals (e.g., hitting golf balls with clubs rather than just carrying them to the target). It is the gratuitous logic of each sport that distinguishes one from the other, equipping each with its distinctive characteristics and charm. In the process, the rules that codify the gratuitous logic of each sport facilitate the emergence of a set of highly specialized skills that Cesar Torres has referred to as constitutive and restorative skills. The former are meant to be tested and are typically implemented during open play; the latter are those that are implemented to restore sports after an interruption.²⁰ For instance, in basketball, the jump shot, the layup, screening, and rebounding are examples of constitutive skills while the free throw and in-bounding of the ball are examples of restorative skills. From an interpretivist perspective, both constitutive and restorative skills and the strategies used in conjunction with them form the basis of a sport’s overall standard of excellence.

J. S. Russell holds that interpretivism presupposes two related principles. The first requires that the rules are interpreted “to generate a coherent and principled account of the point and purpose that underline the game, attempting to show the game in its best light.”²¹ The second states that “rules should be interpreted in such a manner that the excellences embodied in achieving the lusory goal of the game are not undermined but are maintained and fostered.”²² What these two principles indicate is that for Russell interpretivism demands that sports (and different sports in particular) be articulated as comprehensive, coherent, and principled activities. For him, an interpretivist account of sports requires the virtue of integrity: interpretivism looks for the most coherent version of sports’ defining point and most prominent characteristics.

In the philosophy of sports, interpretivism was developed as a theory meant to explain the relationship between sports and moral values.²³ For instance, “Simon’s main thesis is that the moral evaluation of sports should be rooted in the best interpretation of its main point and purpose.”²⁴ Thus scholars working within the tenets of interpretivism have emphasized its normative implications. In this sense, Russell notes that interpretivism, especially in light of its commitment to the virtue of integrity, is a theory of sports “informed by basic considerations of moral equality” and that it implies “duties to foster a context of competition.”²⁵ Consequently, participants in competitive sports are entitled to equal concern and respect, and have the

obligation, for example, to “pursue genuinely worthy adversaries” and to “take reasonable measures to promote conditions that would allow competitors to function as worthy adversaries.”²⁶ Deliberately avoiding worthy adversaries or attempting to tamper with their training would represent moral failures in competitive sports. The notion that interpretivism demands moral equality and the fostering of genuine competition conforms to the principles expounded above: an integrated account of sports requires making the best sense of its point, purpose, and distinguishing features as much as a commitment to advance that best sense.

Although interpretivism has emphasized the moral dimension of sports, it has distinctive aesthetic connotations. Torres has recently argued that interpretivism takes a combined moral-aesthetical point of view.²⁷ Interpretivism’s moral demands are grounded in a systematic characterization of the point, purpose, and defining features of sports, in an effort to display them at their best. Such a characterization requires making reference to the intrinsic properties of sports, from which aesthetic predicates emerge and to which they refer back, considered worthy of sustained attention. These properties are related to the constitutive and restorative skills and the strategies used in conjunction with them that constitute the basis of a sport’s overall standard of excellence. This means that an interpretation of sports involves deliberation and the construction of defensible arguments about the standards of excellence worthy of repaid attention that portrays them in their best light. Sporting communities engage in this kind of exercise when specifying their sport’s best version. Any such specification comprises making aesthetic judgments. For example, soccer has been described the world over as “the beautiful game,” and actions that dishonor such a view are typically labeled as “ugly.”²⁸

“The most cogent version of a sport requires that contestants treat each other as moral equals, and that they honor and foster the intrinsic properties worthy of repaid attention that characterize it.”²⁹ Contestants, then, have simultaneous moral and aesthetic obligations; moreover, these obligations appear to be intertwined. Moral equality in competition is coupled with the “duties to foster a context of competition” in a practice that is defined by its intrinsic properties and standards of excellence. All this suggests that interpretivism presupposes that the central purpose of competitive sports is not simply to beat one’s opponent but rather to accurately measure and compare contestants’ athletic excellence. Simon and Russell, among others, recognize that competitive sports are best thought of “as a mutual striving for excellence.”³⁰ This does not deny the zero-sum quality of competition, but rather puts it in the context of the best interpretation of sport. As Russell argues,

The value of winning seems to lie, then, in its contribution to constructing certain competitive contexts that will foster the exercise and display of distinctive sporting excellences, particularly contexts that attempt to measure and record superior displays of excellence.³¹

Clearly the mutualist defense of the central purpose of competitive sports can be understood as relying on interpretivism's interdependence of the moral and the aesthetic. The moral dimension necessitates fairness, the aesthetic dimension necessitates embodying intrinsic properties, and together they signify a mutual effort as well as a commitment to promote and honor excellence and the integrity of sports' best interpretation. Competition does not disaggregate contestants but rather binds them together in a mutual striving for excellence with moral and aesthetic connotations.

An Interpretivist Case for Competition in Youth Sports

In order to make an interpretivist case for competition in youth sports, it is appropriate to note that the term "youth" refers to the period between childhood and adulthood. More generally, the term is often used as a synonym for "youngster." This varied usage makes it difficult to determine precisely who should be labeled youths. For instance, the World Health Organization defines young people as those between the ages of ten and twenty-four.³² The United Nations includes only "those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years."³³ Acknowledging the significant differences among the people encompassed in this large age bracket, the United Nations distinguishes between "teenagers" (those between the ages of 13 and 19) and "young adults" (those between 20 and 24).³⁴ It is important to note, however, that the United Nations also considers teenagers to be "children," a group that includes "persons up to the age of 18."³⁵

Regardless of the legal parameters of the definition of youth, the differences in the social, cultural, and political undertones and understandings that the term takes in different countries, and its specific age delimitations, the term unmistakably refers to the relatively lengthy period of time immediately prior to adulthood. As mentioned above, the term "youth" also encompasses the early stages of adulthood. This implies that the period of youth ranges roughly from the age of twelve to the age of legal adulthood, and that it shares some of the attributes of childhood. However, as youths are closer to adulthood than younger children, the difference is not of kind but of degree. Some youths are children who are closer to adulthood but have not yet reached that stage of life. This is the conceptualization of youth referred to in this chapter.

What typifies the youth traversing the last part of the path to adulthood? In her influential article "What Is a Child?" Tamar Schapiro, inspired by Kantian ethics, argues that "the condition of childhood is one in which the agent is not yet in a position to speak in her own voice because there is no voice which counts as hers."³⁶ For Schapiro, childhood is a normative predicament in which persons are in a state of underdevelopment: "the undeveloped agent, unlike the developed agent, is unable to work out a plan of life 'all at once.'"³⁷ Schapiro is aware of the enormity of the normative predicament in which children find themselves and believes that such a condition excuses a paternalistic attitude toward children if their ability to work out a plan of life all at once is not yet developed. Thus she proposes that adults have a duty to help children overcome this normative predicament, but realizes that only they can do so. In other words, children have to develop a voice that counts as legitimately theirs that will assist them in conceiving a broad life plan. Schapiro supports a principle stating that adults should, to the best of their ability, help children become developed agents. To do so, she contends that adults must recognize both negative and positive obligations to children:

Our negative obligation as adults must be to refrain from hindering them [children] in this effort [of developing a perspective they can endorse as their own]. We do this by not treating children as if they belonged to a distinct and permanent underclass. . . .

The second part of the principle, which prohibits us from treating children as a permanent underclass, determines both positive and negative duties. Negatively, it implies that we must refrain from acting in ways which hinder children's development as deliberators. . . . Positively, the principle demands that we make it our end to help children overcome their dependent condition. In nurturing, disciplining, and educating children, we must strive as far as possible to make them aware of their natural authority and power over themselves and of its proper exercise.³⁸

For Schapiro, the negative and positive obligations adults have to children, whose ultimate goal is to facilitate the latter's most exigent quest to become developed agents who can authoritatively rule over themselves, "all stem from the idea that in order not to abuse our privilege as adults, we must make children's dependence our enemy."³⁹ This view indicates that paternalistic attitudes toward children are only temporarily justified. It also recognizes that children develop a capacity to authoritatively rule over themselves as they grow. Finally, it suggests that adults should allow this developing capacity to be exercised in matters that children are capable of facing and handling.

especially those that affect them directly. As youths' dependence shrinks, the domains over which they exercise and rely on their own authority expand.

The interpretivist account of the central purpose of competitive sports articulated above is compatible with and advances youths' interests and needs. Specifically, it assists youths on the last part of their journey to adulthood by respecting their emerging authority over themselves, which includes providing opportunities to exercise, consolidate, and expand this capacity. First, by arguing that competitive sports are best construed "as a mutual striving for excellence,"⁴⁰ interpretivism compels youths to ponder their place in this mutuality. Since competitive sports is never an individual endeavor, but rather, as Simon maintains, a cooperative one, it provides youths with valuable opportunities to carve out their own space among themselves, which demands deliberation to find their own voices and make them public.⁴¹ In carving out their own space, youths situate themselves not only in relation to peers but also relative to coaches, administrators, and parents, among other social actors involved in competitive sport.

This point is driven home by Edwin J. Delattre, who maintains that "the testing of one's mettle in competitive athletics is a form of self-discovery, just as the preparation to compete is a form of self-creation."⁴² He further argues that "the claim of competitive athletics to importance rests squarely on their providing for us opportunities for self-discovery which might otherwise have been missed."⁴³ Under this view, sports is a rich terrain for youths to practice in a rather intense fashion their ability to responsibly decide for themselves among peers.

The mutualist approach to competitive sports demands that youths recognize the value of opponents not just for self-development, but instead as moral equals who are also searching for, and affirming, themselves through the quest for excellence. This recognition is important because it implies the realization that treating opponents in this way means also recognizing that the latter "are capable of forming and acting on intelligent conceptions of how their lives should be lived."⁴⁴ And this realization, in turn, might prevent competitors from using others simply to satisfy personal sporting ends or advance their own self-development. In addition, this realization might prevent youths from instrumentalizing themselves to secure victory in a sporting contest by dubious means. Likewise, this realization might assist youths in resisting attempts by others (e.g., opponents or coaches) to instrumentalize them for their own benefit. By conceiving of contestants as partners in a cooperative effort toward excellence, competitive mutualism overcomes the notion that "opponents are at best means to one's own ends, and at worst obstacles to be surmounted."⁴⁵ Through mutualism in sports, youths might learn that respecting themselves necessitates respecting opponents.

Conceiving competitive sports from a mutualist perspective promotes another relevant benefit for youths. As seen above, youths who engage in competitive sports are introduced to a practice with a set of intertwined moral and aesthetic values. Broadly speaking, the former are related to issues of fairness while the latter are related to the intrinsic properties and standards of excellence definitive of any particular sport. To accurately measure their relative athletic merit, contestants are obliged not only to recognize each other as equals but also to foster a context of competition that is conducive to excellence. This requires, for example, finding worthy opponents, following the rules, and demonstrating concern for excellence and self-control, among other qualities. As Simon explains, "The practice of competitive sports and athletics is value laden in important ways. Some values . . . are traits that all competitive athletes have strong reason to commend and act upon themselves."⁴⁶ What can be labeled, paraphrasing him, as the inner moral-aesthetic compound of competitive sports comprises the normative features that are indispensable to the attainment of athletic excellence.⁴⁷ The inner moral-aesthetic component of competitive sports exemplifies a form of life worth aspiring to with undeniable educational characteristics and the potential to positively influence the development of character. When introduced to and maturing into competitive sports, youths are confronted with the decision to embrace this form of life and its ensuing inner values. Whether or not they decide to do so, the deliberation is beneficial in itself as it represents an opportunity to practice their emerging autonomy. This development of autonomy is essential to human flourishing; a mutual understanding of competitive sports offers youths a way to foster it.

There is at least one more reason why the interpretivist account of competitive sports' central purpose advanced here is significant to youth, which is related to the previous point: it demonstrates what a good life entails and at the same time offers a route to pursue it. By a good life we have in mind what William J. Morgan calls a life of wholehearted engagement, which is characterized by an "active, passionate engagement in some enterprise, of engagement that is more mindful and self-conscious than habitual and unreflective, and more touched by *elan* because of the higher sense of purpose and aspiration it embodies."⁴⁸ Wholehearted engagement stands in contrast to mundane engagement, which is epitomized by the taking up of different pursuits simply to be occupied and avoid being bored. Morgan claims that sports "is one form of life in which such full engagement is called for."⁴⁹ Indeed, he believes that it "is one of a select few human undertakings in which full-blown engagement is a characteristic rather than uncharacteristic feature of the actions of its participants."⁵⁰ This is the case because of sports' distinctive and attractive gratuitous logic which inverts the instrumental

rationality of ordinary living and its concern for excellence. To be wholeheartedly engaged in sports portends to value and commit to its defining point and standards of excellence. What this all means for youths is that competitive sports serve as a potent exemplar of not only the substance of a good life but also of what it takes to achieve it.

While the mutualism articulated by the interpretivist account of competitive sports attends to and serves the interests and needs of youths, it also helps in responding to the general problems in youth sports noted earlier in the chapter. Mutualism requires bestowing equal concern to all contestants and fostering a competitive context in which excellence flourishes. As already noted, these broad requirements take different normative form: contestants are obliged to follow the rules of the sport, seeks out worthy opponents, make their best efforts in competition, recognize their strengths and weaknesses as well as those of their opponents, train and perform to the best of their ability, respect opponents and referees, wish and honor excellence, and so on. Undoubtedly, if competitive sports is understood and experienced in its mutualist version, egregious self-aggrandizement and obsessive advantage seeking would have no place in youth sports. As subcategories of runaway individualism, they are in stark contrast to the tenets of mutualism in sports. By overly stressing the advancement of self-interest, even to the expense of the interests of others, egregious self-aggrandizement denies the cooperative aspect of competitive sports and its ensuing duties. On the other hand, obsessive advantage seeking typically implies a “do whatever it takes” or “win at all costs” attitude that often leads to dubious actions that instrumentalize opponents and rebuff excellence. Mutualism in sports does not accept self-aggrandizement but rather self-discovery and self-creation as well as its collective dimension. In competitive sports one needs others to fully know one’s caliber and to create excellence. As for advantage seeking, mutualism does not disapprove it altogether but only when it is contrary to the quest for excellence and the virtues needed to foster a competitive context. Mutualism in sports responds to the general problems in youth sports and presents a direction for more sensitive reforms. In the final section we make suggestions to reform coaching youth sports consonant with this view.

Suggestions for Strengthening Youth Coaching

Given the discussion throughout this chapter, it seems reasonable to argue that the overarching goal of youth sports coaches should be, paraphrasing Schapiro, to make young athletes’ dependence their enemy. Coaches are positively obligated to comport themselves in a manner that is conducive for the young athletes they are working with to develop their own voice. This implies

a careful evaluation and respect of what the young athletes are capable of doing at any given moment and their interests as well as what they will need in adulthood to conceive and pursue a broad life plan. Youth sports coaches should match these elements with coaching practices that promote their athletes’ authority to rule over themselves. This requirement will often demand the implementation of paternalistic attitudes. For instance, as Dennis Hemphill illustrates, “it is justifiable for coaches or parents to insist that young athletes wear protective equipment or sit out of competition due to an injury that, if left unattended, might result in a more serious injury.”⁵¹ However, paternalism is limited to circumstances in which youths are unable to decide for themselves. This is because coaches are also negatively obligated to refrain from practices that will hinder youths’ development of their authority over themselves. That youth sports coaches should make young athletes’ dependence their enemy means negative and positive duties. While asking young athletes to cheat exemplifies a breach of the former duties, neglecting to confront a young athlete who intentionally harms an opponent exemplifies a breach of the latter duties.

We find it reasonable to conceive of youth sports coaches as individuals who open a path to a good life. This is no trivial matter. The role of youth sports coaches is of paramount importance as they are not simply technicians who facilitate skill acquisition and mastery, but rather individuals who introduce and mentor young athletes into a social practice with internal goods and standards of excellence. As such, youth sports coaches are initiators and facilitators of “a life of wholehearted engagement.”⁵² While it is only a possibility that young athletes would embrace sports wholeheartedly, coaches should realize that, as Morgan states, sports is a social practice that calls for full engagement.⁵³ They should also realize that coaching calls for such engagement and that consequently they represent role models for their young athletes. Coaches have a chance to start and guide their young athletes along a road that not only leads to but constitutes a good life.

What follows is a series of suggestions for youth sports coaches that stem from the two general responsibilities that coaches have as individuals assisting youths and the interpretivist framework discussed in this chapter. Far from recipes, these suggestions should be taken as broad guidelines to organize and reform youth sports in a way that respects both their protagonists and the mutualist approach to competitive sports and its central purpose defended here. There is, of course, much latitude for coaches and administrators to develop their own strategies. While there is some necessary overlap among the suggestions, each one stresses a distinctive and important element in coaching youth sport.

Youth Sports Coaches Should Adopt a Mutualist Perspective on Competition

By focusing youths on achieving excellence in sports rather than simply winning, the mutualist perspective can help coaches teach athletes appropriate ways to approach competition. By distinguishing between excellence and winning and emphasizing the former rather than the latter, coaches can help their young charges learn to view the competitive process as one in which it is imperative to respect the internal goods of the sporting practice (i.e., the highly specialized skills and strategies that make their sport the unique type of activity it is), the standards of excellence of that practice, the opponents who provide them with opportunities to test themselves and quest for excellence in the sporting context, and others (e.g., officials, coaches, athletic trainers, administrators, and parents) who provide them with support within that context. Once learned, the mutualist view of sports competition will help young athletes develop an awareness of their moral obligations as athletes collectively striving for excellence within a particular sport, and, in turn, will help them to learn to compete in a good and decent manner within that sport.

The mutualist coach is able to impart to youth the moral duties that they owe to their opponents. Since mutualism recognizes opponents as partners in the competitive process rather than obstacles or enemies to be overcome or dominated, coaches can help young athletes understand why their opponents are worthy of respect, even when unsporting or aggressive behavior may make it seem otherwise. The mutualist coach will also be well positioned to explain to young athletes why they should respect and adhere to the rules of their sport, especially the constitutive rules that establish the means through which excellence in the sport is to be achieved.

Youth Sports Coaches Should Focus Young Athletes on the Goods Internal to Their Sports, Their Standards of Excellence, and the Virtues That Foster Their Attainment

Coaches should teach their young athletes to be strong and vigilant stewards of their sport by encouraging them to consistently strive for excellence in ways that respect and honor their sports' internal goods and standards of excellence, the constitutive rules, the means that are supported by these rules, and the gratuitous logic in which they are grounded. In MacIntyrean terms, coaches should instruct their athletes on how to be caretakers of the internal goods and standards of excellence of their sports and dissuade them from fo-

cus on the subsidiary external goods, such as fame and advancement, that can accompany successful youth sports participation. By emphasizing the goods internal to the sport, its standards of excellence, and the virtues that facilitate their achievement, coaches emphasize the inner moral-aesthetic compound that makes excellence in each sport a unique entity and help their athletes to realize that athletic excellence cannot be achieved without moral responsibility. Such emphasis on these fundamental elements also points to the reason why sports invites a wholehearted engagement. That is, these fundamental elements are related to "the good of a certain kind of life"⁵⁴ that is realized when they are embraced. Coaches working in this spirit, then, open up possibilities for their young athletes to exercise and be inspired by that good.

Youth Sports Coaches Should Seek to Develop Resolution Seekers, Not Outcome Seekers

If coaches adhere to the first two recommendations above, they will help young athletes develop a view of competition that clearly places the pursuit of excellence through the moral and aesthetic process of sports competition ahead of the outcome of winning or competitive sport's external goods. In doing so, they should, in the words of Cesar R. Torres and Douglas W. McLaughlin, help athletes develop as resolution seekers rather than outcome seekers.⁵⁵ Coaches and athletes who place too much emphasis on winning are often outcome seekers who "are not ultimately interested in *how* they solve athletic challenges or in establishing valid differences in performances."⁵⁶ These individuals often find themselves mired in the practice of obsessive advantage seeking as they go to great lengths to pursue victory within their sports.

While the lure of winning can be strong, it should not override the moral and aesthetic obligations athletes have within their sports if those athletes learn to adopt a mutualist perspective that will, in turn, help them to prioritize the internal goods and the standards of excellence of their sports and their supporting values over the external goods that can come with winning. Young athletes accomplishing these two objectives stand out as resolution seekers, who are further characterized by Torres and McLaughlin as contestants who "do not merely hunt for favorable results regardless of athletic merit. Rather, they consider sporting contests as the sites in which athletic superiority is determined through testing excellences."⁵⁷

To emphasize resolution seeking over outcome seeking, mutualist coaches will focus more on constitutive and restorative skill mastery as a means to athletic excellence, and less on it simply as a means to winning and

its subsidiary rewards. While coaches typically stress the importance of skill execution in the pursuit of victory, many competitive foibles are forgiven and forgotten by outcome seeking coaches in winning's afterglow. Those same mistakes remain visible to vigilant mutualist coaches, who focus athletes on correcting them out of a sense of duty to the sporting practice and its standards of excellence rather than a base appetitive desire to win. It is this sense of obligation to sporting practice that mutualist coaches should strive to pass on to their young athletes, thus helping them to develop as both resolution seekers and as wholeheartedly engaged athletes.

Youth Sports Coaches Should Seek to Provide Young Athletes with Opportunities to Develop Their Authority over Themselves

Coaches often fail to give youths the opportunities they need to develop as autonomous individuals. Many coaches hesitate to share power with their young athletes or turn leadership roles or decision-making responsibilities over to their charges because they are afraid the young athletes will make significant mistakes that may lead to losses in competition. As a result, they are frequently stingy when it comes to providing such opportunities to young athletes. However, if competitive youth sports are to help young athletes move out of their state of dependence as both athletes and human beings, coaches must begin to allow their athletes to make more of their own decisions on the playing surface and during training sessions. Such a shift in responsibility will help the athletes develop their abilities to think critically and imaginatively, and to take greater ownership in their decisions and the consequences that stem from them. This does not mean that youth sports coaches should relinquish their authority; rather, they should change their outlook on how they exercise it in order to "contribute to the development of personhood by gradually expanding and supporting opportunities for athletes to develop decision-making abilities and commitments to meaningful engagement."⁵⁸ This does not mean that young athletes should be left in the lurch either. Again, the provision of opportunities for youths to develop their own authority demands that youth sports coaches gradually withdraw their authority. But they should remain available, supportive, and even protective of their young athletes as required by the situation.

Mutualist coaches who take this recommendation seriously will give their athletes more decision-making responsibilities and leadership roles to assist them in achieving greater autonomy and overcoming dependence. These roles and responsibilities might include play calling responsibilities in

sports like soccer, football, and basketball, pitch calling duties in baseball and softball, or game and even practice planning opportunities in a variety of sports. Such opportunities will help young athletes develop as athletes and as human beings, and will allow them to take greater ownership of the decisions and consequences that help shape their sports experiences. Youth sports coaches should be wary of demanding that their young athletes blindly follow their orders.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have defended competition in youth sports and argued that coaches in this setting should be seen as individuals whose main role is to introduce and guide their young athletes in a social practice that, given its structure, leads to a fully engaged form of life while providing them opportunities to develop their own authority over themselves. Based on these general responsibilities, we have provided a number of suggestions to organize and reform coaching youth sports that also respect competitive sport's central purpose as mutualistically conceived. We believe our analysis shows how competition in youth sports and youth sports coaching can be carried out as ethically sound pursuits. While it does not escape us that, when understood in this way, youth coaching is a remarkably difficult pursuit, we would argue that it is extremely important and could also be a gratifying experience. Contributing to the moral growth of young athletes through meaningful engagement in sports would unavoidably test coaches in more than one way. This should make the sporting community more tolerant and respectful of coaches involved in youth sports, but should also make coaches more tolerant, understanding, and respectful of their young charges, together with their abilities, interests, potential, and future.

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. Describe the reforms proposed to improve youth sports in the United States.
2. What are major criticisms of and problems with the reforms proposed to improve youth sports in the United States?
3. How does interpretivism (also called broad internalism) explain competitive sports and its central purpose?

4. How does interpretivism's account of competitive sports and its central purpose help advance youth's interests, needs, and welfare?
5. Given the tenets of interpretivism and the interests, needs, and welfare of youth, articulate a defensible ethics of coaching youth sport.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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