

Character and . . .

Identity

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ANNALEE R. WARD

Introduction: Character and Identity

Articles

LINDSEY M. WARD

On Becoming a Better Failure: How Failure Stories Can Shape Our Identities

JOSEPH SABIN

Shifting Our Mindset: Sports, Character, and Identity

TIMOTHY MATTHEW
SLEMMONS

Co-Authoring Your Story in Light of God's Epic: Human Identity and the Divine Word

Response

WALLY METTS

Humility and Story: Connecting Identity and Character



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The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

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Shifting Our Mindset: Sports, Character, and Identity

Joseph Sabin

Abstract

It has long been believed and accepted by sports enthusiasts that sports participation builds character. This idea is so firmly held that few outside of academia ever bother to question or look deeper into the concept, in spite of a seemingly endless cycle of high-profile scandals involving athletes, coaches, and sport administrators who show an utter lack of character. Sports can help build positive character traits, but it is far from automatic. In order for this to occur, there must be an intentional effort to intertwine character development with sports participation and provide opportunities for athletes to develop non-sport identities.

“Sports build character.” This adage is used by parents all over to encourage their children to participate and invoked by coaches at all levels to help provide evidence of the validity of their programs. People simply believe it to be true, as if parents could place their children in one end of the sports machine and years later, they pop out the other end as upstanding and forthright as they can be. This idea is so firmly entrenched that few outside of academia ever bother to question it, even in the face of a seemingly endless cycle of high-profile scandals involving athletes, coaches, and sport administrators who show an utter lack of character.


Sports history in the United States has been marred by scandal. The 1919 Chicago “Black Sox” threw the World Series for money (Lamb), Tonya Harding hired a hitman to break rival figure skater Nancy Kerrigan’s leg at the 1994 Olympics (Pak), Lance Armstrong won seven consecutive Tour de France titles only to have them later stripped due to the use of performance enhancing drugs and blood doping (Wilson), and the Houston Astros’ 2017 World Series title was aided by an illegal sign stealing scheme (Anderson and Axisa). These are just a few examples, but there are countless others.

So, what gives? If sports build character, how do we explain all the scandals?

Participation in sports can be a very effective background and vehicle for important character lessons, but it can also teach athletes to lie and cheat.

There must be an intentional effort to intertwine character development with sports participation, and there also must

be an opportunity for athletes to develop identities outside of sports in order to have positive character effects. Unfortunately, character development has seemingly taken a back seat to winning in the overall structure of sports in our society.



There must be an intentional effort to intertwine character development with sports participation.

In this article, I will explore the potential for sports to contribute to or detract from positive character and identity development and explain how the current structure of sports can push toward the negative. More importantly, I will discuss how athletes, coaches, and administrators can shift mindsets to promote positive character development through sports, in spite of the current structures.

Sports and Character

Character Development Philosopher Christian B. Miller describes character as a collection of traits that leads people to think, feel, and act in certain ways. The Wendt Character Initiative at the University of Dubuque centers its definition of good character around virtues like truthfulness, justice, fairness, and service of others. While there is no consensus definition of character in the sports context, many people

Character and . . . Identity

believe certain character traits are developed through sports. Teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, work ethic, mental toughness, respect for others, self-discipline, and self-confidence are all examples of traits associated with sports participation (Rudd 205; Abrams n. 14). Notably absent from the above list are traits such as honesty and moral reasoning.

Studies in the United States have consistently shown that those who participate in high school athletics earn higher GPAs, have lower rates of absenteeism, show more interest in attending college, complete more years of college, and have greater career success than their non-athlete classmates (Coakley 441). These outcomes are not directly related to character, but they are all positive outcomes, and ones likely to be associated with good character. It can also be inferred that in order to achieve these outcomes a level of work ethic, mental toughness, and self-discipline are necessary.

While there are positive outcomes, the evidence of sports participation building character is largely anecdotal. Proponents tend to theorize that the development occurs as a result of athletes being put into trying situations and growing in character through those situations. This sentiment is well outlined by legendary Duke University basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski (affectionately known as “Coach K”) in a 2007 speech at the US Military Academy:

Athletics gives you an opportunity to: one, encounter uncertainty. It gives you an opportunity to encounter competition, a bad call, a bad break, a lucky break. It gives you a chance to experience life in a competitive world and then figure out how you are going to win, while all that is happening. You can't go back to your room and research it. You can't do all those things that you can do in academics . . . for that period of time that you are competing, you have to instantaneously react, be instinctive, who are you, what character do you have,




Coach Mike Krzyzewski goes over plays with his team.

do you do it with honor, do you do it with integrity, do you do it together? Do you win? Do you lose? How do you react? (qtd. in Doty and Lumpkin 19)

Learning how to cope with and navigate adversity at an early age by actually going through it, as opposed to abstractly discussing it, has inherent value. Yet studies that actually show growth in these character traits through sport

participation are extremely hard to come by, if they exist at all, as evidenced by a 2006 review of scholarly literature on the subject (Doty). What is not hard to come by is evidence that people *believe* that sports build character. A 1996 survey found that 93% of Americans believe children learn the value of teamwork through sports and 88% believe sports teach discipline and hard work (Tharp and Chetwynd 30). In a more recent survey, 75% of respondents stated that they believe broadly that sports build character (“Do You Believe that Sports Build Character?”).




Why does the idea that sports build character continue to perpetuate through society?

Despite little to no hard evidence and the endless cycle of scandal in sports, why does the idea that sports build character continue to perpetuate through society? That is a difficult question to answer. It may simply be that people love sports. The popularity of sports is not difficult to prove in the United States. Perhaps the greatest illustration of this is the fact that the three most watched shows of 2019 were Sunday Night Football, Thursday Night Football, and Monday Night Football, in that order (Fitzgerald). Leading sport sociologist Jay Coakley states that our fervent love of sports has led to a blind belief that they are essentially pure and good, and their purity and goodness is transferred to all those who participate in sports. This belief is something he refers to as “The Great Sport Myth,” and it may help support the notion that sports build character despite there being nothing but anecdotal evidence to support it (11). Even the positive outcomes discussed above that have been linked to sports participation may have an alternate explanation.

Scholastic sports have a filtering-out process that may explain the higher GPAs, graduation rates, and career success. For example, in order to remain eligible to play sports at any scholastic level, athletes must maintain a certain grade point average and stay out of trouble. If they fail to do these things, they are either suspended or removed from the team. It may be true that those who maintain their status as an athlete have desirable character traits, but were those built by sports or do interscholastic sports simply weed out those who came in with poorly developed character? Further, if sports remove and disallow the people most in need of character development from participating, can we really tout sports participation as a character builder?

In addition to the filtering out process, sports also have a selecting-in process, as Coakley explains:

People who choose or are selected to play sports often have different character traits than those who do not choose to play or are not selected by coaches. Therefore, sports may not build character as much as they are organized to select people who already possess certain character traits that are valued by coaches and compatible with highly organized, competitive, physical activities. (62)



What is more troubling is the amount of research that shows that sport participation actually damages character and moral reasoning.

We can call this the Harvard paradox. According to their website, Harvard admitted only 2,009 of 43,330 applicants (a rate of 4.6%) for the class of 2023. By just about any metric, Harvard is a great school. They have a massive endowment, and their graduates are among the most successful people in the world. Will these 4.6% of applicants be successful because of Harvard, or could they have been just as successful

elsewhere? To reframe the question for this specific issue, are scholastic athletes more successful because they played sports, or did they possess characteristics of success to begin with?

In addition to the lack of hard evidence of sports building character and alternate explanations for the positive outcomes that sport participation brings, what is more troubling is the amount of research that shows that sport participation actually damages character and moral reasoning. While coaches and parents claim to be teaching respect and fair play, the results of several studies suggest otherwise (Doty 6).

In a study involving over 1,300 high school students, non-athletes scored significantly higher than athletes in terms of their moral reasoning. This study concluded that athletes are less impartial and reflective in their moral reasoning than non-athletes (Beller and Stoll 352). A 2004 study of collegiate athletes returned similar results (Rudd and Stoll). Possibly the most surprising study indicated that even cadets at the US Military Academy showed a decrease in moral reasoning that correlated with the amount of time an athlete spent playing the sport (Doty and Lumpkin 24). It is also worth noting that each of the studies suggested that the decline in moral reasoning is more precipitous for male athletes than it is for female athletes, more prevalent in team sports than individual sports, and more pronounced in high contact sports than non-contact sports.


Youth Sports So, why do sports fail to build character? Clearly, we as a society want sports to build character and continue to believe that they do, despite the aforementioned studies. Are sports incapable of building character? I believe that sports *can* build character, but it cannot be taken for granted, an assumed outcome. It will not happen automatically. There must be an intention to teach and develop character built into the sport experience. Sadly, the way sports are structured and approached by many coaches, administrators, parents, and athletes is not conducive to this.



Youth sports can build character with intentional teaching and leading.

Youth sports in the United States were originally created with the purpose of developing certain character traits. Early organizers hoped

that youth sports would teach children to obey rules and work together productively (Coakley 80). Fast forward a few decades and we find that sports organizations and leagues, even at the youth level, are largely profit-motivated.



The importance placed on winning can lead athletes to believe that it is the only thing that matters.

As public funding continues to be cut from youth sport programs, those who wish to play must frequently turn to the private sector. Private youth sports programs are not beholden to the same standards of fairness and inclusion as their publicly funded counterparts. Additionally, there has been an increase in elite

private training facilities with the goal to prepare youth athletes to compete at a high level. This means parents are spending significant amounts of money on youth sports, in some cases as much as \$1,000 per month (Gigante). This leads to increased parental involvement and pressure (Coakley 83-84). The extremely high visibility of collegiate and professional sports adds to this pressure as well. Well-meaning parents want their kids to get big-time athletic scholarships or multi-million dollar paydays as professional athletes, so the zeal of parents and youth coaches to win frequently surpasses any effort to teach character lessons (Abrams 256).¹

The emphasis on winning in sports is even less subtle at the collegiate level. While the NCAA and various institutions often state that their intercollegiate athletic programs are intended to supplement the institutions' educational missions, academic fraud, major clustering, and other tactics are frequently employed to keep athletes on the field, all in the name of winning. A recent FBI investigation into college basketball recruiting also revealed what many people already knew: many of these athletes are persuaded to attend specific institutions because of financial bribes, not because of the education they might receive (Norlander).

Winning is big business at the NCAA division I level, which is why coaches who are good at winning are paid millions. In 28 states, the

highest paid public employee is a football coach, and in 12 others, a basketball coach (Gibson). For example, in 2017 the five highest paid employees of the state of Iowa were two football coaches, two basketball coaches, and an athletic director. This list was topped by University of Iowa head football coach Kirk Ferentz with a salary of \$5.075 million. For reference, Iowa's governor Kim Reynolds has a salary of \$130,000, roughly 2.5% of Ferentz's (Clayworth).

The importance placed on winning can lead athletes to believe that it is the only thing that matters. There is certainly nothing wrong with winning. Competitive sports are, at their core, a pursuit and display of exceptionalism. However, if we want to use sports as a vehicle for character building, winning and skill improvement cannot be the top priority. For our youngest athletes, they should not be a priority at all.

The problem is that a win-at-all-costs mentality does not pair particularly well with our normal senses of right and wrong or what we in society typically value as integrity. Dishonesty has become normalized in sports to such a degree that many people do not flinch at dishonest conduct, no longer considering it cheating, but instead as "part of the game." What athletes, coaches, administrators, and fans fail to realize is that it only becomes "part of the game" because we allow it to. Examples of this normalized cheating are present in most sports, whether it be "selling" a foul in basketball, selling a catch the player knows he did not make in football, or leaning into a pitch in baseball. These are all dishonest attempts to gain a competitive advantage that is not within the spirit of traditional good sportsmanship, and would certainly not be as readily accepted in other facets of life.

Perhaps no example better illustrates the compromised moral code of sports than the aforementioned Astros sign-stealing scandal in Major League Baseball. Stealing signs is nothing new in baseball. Before every pitch, the catcher signals to the pitcher which pitch to throw using hand signals. The catcher takes great care to keep the signals private, placing his hands low to the ground and between his legs so nobody has a good view. Some catchers are better than others at this, and at all times the opposing team is trying to figure out the catcher's hand sign. It is usually easiest to do so once the team gets a runner on second base. Knowing

what pitch is coming is a massive advantage for the batter. Just take it from notorious steroid user José Canseco.



Teams are perpetually trying to steal the other team’s signs, and it is typically written-off as “part of the game.” What makes the Astros’ case different is that they incorporated technology—a video camera set up to see the catchers’ signs. That seemingly small difference generated a massive response in the baseball world. Many lambasted the Astros as cheaters and the league handed down severe penalties (although not severe enough, in the estimation of many) (Anderson and Axisa).

I am not, by any means, condoning what the Astros did but am merely trying to point out what appears to be a logical flaw in reasoning. If stealing signs is bad, it is bad. The mechanism or method of doing so should not mean the difference between “part of the game” and the largest cheating scandal in baseball history.

Another example of compromised moral reasoning in sports is illustrated in the reaction I get from students when I show them a certain PSA from PassItOn.com. The video features what looks to be a high school basketball game in its waning seconds. A close out-of-bounds play gets called in favor of the team in white jerseys by the official. In the team huddle, one of the players on the white team exclaims to his coach “I touched it,” referring to touching the ball before it went out of bounds. This is met by much dissension from his teammates, but nonetheless the player goes and informs the official

that he was the last one to touch the ball, prompting the official to change his call (“Sportsmanship”).

That video is typically met with incredulous laughter from my students, many if not most of whom are current or former athletes (the corny acting probably does not help). I admit, my initial reaction to the video was similar. When I ask, “why does this seem so crazy?”, the room goes deathly silent until one student says, “because that would never happen.” And they are probably right. The odds of someone being so noble in a basketball game are low. But isn’t honesty a value we hold dear in society? There is little argument to the contrary, but it seems for many athletes that dishonesty can be justified, maybe even encouraged, if it can help them win. Unfortunately, such attitudes are also antithetical to integrity and character growth.

Sports and Identity

The win-at-all-costs mindset of sports can have negative consequences beyond compromised moral reasoning. If winning in sports is so vitally important, it may pressure athletes to dedicate their time, energy, focus, even their very identity to being an athlete. It is, in fact, glorified in Gatorade ads (“Is it in you?”), Nike Commercials (“Just Do It”), and by athletes and coaches everywhere. When I ask my students as an icebreaker to tell the class something interesting or unique about themselves, the most common answer by far is what sport they play.

Having one’s identity tied to being an athlete does not necessarily sound like a bad thing. Maintaining one’s status as an athlete usually requires doing reasonably well in school and generally keeping out of trouble. But problems still exist for those who wrap their identities around being an athlete—mainly hubris, accompanied by major struggles adjusting to life once their athletic careers are over.

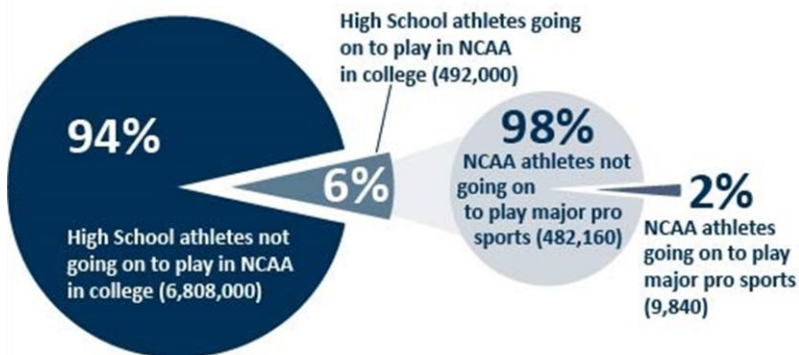
There is a certain status that accompanies being an athlete in the United States, particularly at the high school level and up. This status grants scholastic athletes special treatment and a degree of admiration among their peers that is not typically afforded to those involved in other extra-curricular activities, which can lead to some interesting and potentially dangerous group dynamics. As individuals maintain their

identities as a part of the “in-group” of athletes, many develop a level of hubris, another character flaw. Hubris in this context can be defined as pride-driven arrogance that leads one to feel separate from and superior to others. When left unchecked, hubris can lead to the belief that non-athletes or even non-teammates do not deserve their respect (Coakley 112).

Another issue with having one’s identity centered around being an athlete is that most athletes will not be athletes for much longer. As depicted in the graphic below, the percentage of high school athletes who go on to play in college is extremely low, and the percentage of collegiate athletes who go on to play professionally is even lower. For example, of the 429,000 high school women who play basketball, only 16,600 of them continued to play basketball in college (3.9%), and fewer than 1% of those who play in college continue to play basketball professionally. This means that the vast majority of scholastic athletes are just a few years from going as far in their sport as their talent allows.



Probability of Continued Sports Participation after High School



(NCAA Recruiting Facts)

The Cases of Leaf and Luck

What happens when someone whose identity and main motivation to stay out of trouble is suddenly gone? One example is the story of Ryan Leaf.



Ryan Leaf, former Chargers quarterback. © Tom Reel/San Antonio Express-News via ZUMA Wire

Leaf had a very successful collegiate career as a quarterback for Washington State University that culminated his junior year in 1997 after finishing third in the Heisman Trophy voting and leading the school to its first Rose Bowl appearance since 1931. He was selected second overall in the NFL draft the following year, notably one spot behind future Hall-of-Famer Peyton Manning.

Unfortunately for Leaf (and for Chargers fans), Leaf's collegiate success did not translate to the NFL field. His poor play on the field led the Chargers to move on from him after just three seasons and he bounced around a few years from team to team. His poor attitude off the field caused him to butt heads with management everywhere he went, all the while failing to notice that the common denominator in all these situations was him.

After his unceremonious exit from the NFL, his life and decision-making only got worse. He was fired from his assistant coaching job at West Texas A&M for stealing painkillers from one of his injured players. At one point he cut his wrist in an attempt to take his own life and later he was imprisoned for nearly three years for stealing prescription drugs from houses in his hometown.



Former NFL player Ryan Leaf in court, May 8, 2012.

While it is documented that there are several NFL players who struggle with substance dependency for pain management, Leaf's reasons for abusing prescription drugs went beyond physical pain, as he states, "I'd taken them [painkillers] throughout my career because of surgeries, and

they alleviated my physical pain every time. This would be the first time I took them for my emotional pain, and it worked” (Farmer).

What happens when someone whose identity and main motivation to stay out of trouble is suddenly gone?

Leaf played football nearly his whole life and failed to develop an identity outside of sports, a situation which apparently caused him substantial emotional pain and led him down the path from NFL star to attempted suicide and several years in prison. In Leaf’s own words “My identity was wrapped up in not only being a football player, but a failed football

player, somebody who couldn’t cut it. Not only that, I was a bad person” (Farmer). With only football as his guide to life, he did not develop the moral compass to keep him on a path of integrity and character growth.

Leaf is not alone in these struggles. As Scott Tinley highlights in his book, *Racing the Sunset*, many elite athletes struggle to find an identity outside of sports once their careers are over. This is particularly true for those, like Leaf, who could not end their athletic careers on their own terms, i.e., they were forced out either by injury or because, as Leaf says, they couldn’t cut it.

Even those with long, successful careers are not immune to these types of identity issues, as illustrated in this quote from former NFL defensive lineman Jerry Sherk: “Without football, without my ability to express myself through football I am nobody. I will disappear. Football has been my life and I have so little else” (Tinley 133).

While many people in all occupations struggle with identity issues upon retirement (Jayson), athletes appear to be particularly susceptible to mental health issues (Rice et al). A study by Giannone et al. points out that the greater an individual identifies as an athlete, the more difficult their transition is, noting that “the strength and exclusivity of the athletic role during sport participation increase athletes’ potential vulnerability to psychiatric distress after leaving sport” (600). More simply put, the more one’s identity is wrapped up in being an athlete, the harder time they have when they leave the sport behind.

Contrast Leaf's story with that of Andrew Luck. Luck's early life and entry to the NFL read very similarly to Leaf's (and both are coincidentally linked to Peyton Manning). Much like Leaf, Luck had an extremely successful collegiate football career in the quarterback position for Stanford University. After graduating from Stanford in 2012 with a degree in architectural engineering, Luck entered the NFL draft, where he was selected as the No. 1 overall pick by the Indianapolis Colts (largely to succeed Peyton Manning, who the Colts lost in free agency).

This is where Leaf's and Luck's stories diverge. Football went well for Luck in the NFL. He finished second in rookie of the year voting and was selected to the Pro-Bowl in his first season. He would go on to be selected to four total Pro-Bowls, including in 2018. His career was not all sunshine and rainbows, as he battled more than his fair share of serious, sometimes season-ending, injuries. But he persevered through them to have one of his best seasons in the NFL, leading the Colts to the playoffs. He was 29, at the top of his game, in his prime, and the Colts were widely considered to be Super Bowl contenders heading into the 2019 season. Which is exactly why what he did next was so shocking.



Andrew Luck, former Colts quarterback


Andrew Luck announced his retirement a mere two weeks before the season would have started. Facing down another painful injury, this time his ankle, and having made nearly \$110 million in his career, he decided it was time to move on. While the exact reasoning for his retirement is still a mystery (he has not given an interview since), a teary-eyed Luck stated "I haven't been able to live the life I want to live. It's taken the joy out of this game (Kerr)."

The reaction by the media and fans was one of shock and anger, and understandably so. It is exceedingly rare that a player in his prime simply walks away from professional sports. Add in the fact that there was still \$64 million on his current contract, and the fact that his next contract would likely have paid even more, he potentially walked away from several hundreds of millions of dollars (Matthews).

Many described his retirement as tragic, and I suppose in the pantheon of “what might have been,” it is tragic. But from a standpoint of a human being and his identity, it is anything but tragic. Luck’s identity and personal value expanded so far beyond football that he was willing and able to make this difficult decision in the face of harsh criticism.

A deeper look at Luck reveals that he has never seen himself as *just* a football player. He loves reading and has his own book club with the mission of “building a team of readers of all levels.” He also caught an interviewer off guard when his response to the question of what he may do after football did not involve coaching, the broadcast booth, or anything to do with football at all. Luck stated, “I think I could be very happy teaching high school history” (Feinstein).

What is the biggest difference between Ryan Leaf and Andrew Luck? Luck, while obviously taking football very seriously, appears to have developed an identity and a purpose beyond football, while Leaf, at least at the time when his football career came to an end, had not. It would be difficult to argue that Luck displayed poor character at any point of his career. He was never suspended, never in trouble, and you would be hard pressed to find him ever speaking ill of anybody. In fact, the most objectionable thing he has ever done in the eyes of most football fans is retire too early. Conversely, Leaf is remembered largely for being a jerk. While many players who fail to live up to their athletic potential are lamented by fans and observers, few names will raise the ire of football fans as much as Leaf. While Leaf found purpose, maybe even a new non-sport identity, after football, it is clear that he is still struggling with himself. In May of 2020, Leaf was arrested on suspicion of domestic battery (West).



Many elite athletes struggle to find an identity outside of sports once their careers are over.

In *The Happiness Equation*, author Neil Pasricha speaks about the Japanese concept of *ikigai*, which loosely translates to “the reason you wake up in the morning.” In Okinawa, where this concept originates, the average life expectancy is over seven years longer than that in the US.

Interestingly, in Okinawa, the peoples' *ikigai* rarely centers around their occupation.

Logically, an occupation does not operate particularly well as a reason to wake up in the morning unless the plan is to keep working until death. After retirement, we still need a reason to get up in the morning. If an occupation generally is a poor choice for an *ikigai*, sports participation is a far worse option. We have already discussed the extremely low percentage of individuals who are fortunate enough to reach a level where they are paid to participate in sports. This means that most athletes are “retired” before they reach their twenties.

Even for those that do excel in sports and make it to the highest level, careers are extremely short as compared to other occupations. Athletes like Saints quarterback Drew Brees and Olympic sand volleyball legend Keri Walsh Jennings are frequently lauded for playing in their late thirties into their forties, but in few, if any, other career paths can an individual be revered for continuing past fifty, let alone forty.

The point is that athletes who believe themselves to be more than *just* athletes—those who have purpose and identities outside of sports, the ones who have a true, non-sport *ikigai*, are the ones who have the most success when they retire from the field of competition.

Too many athletes, even at the Division III level, believe they have a long future of playing their sport, and they therefore can avoid finding an answer to the question, “what will I do after sports?” When good character gets added to the mix, and an athlete’s purpose has less to do with how they perform on the field and more to do with giving others a fair shot at life or being good stewards of their time, resources, and talents, their purpose does not have to disappear when they retire. Think about athletes like Walter Payton, Kurt Warner, Eli Manning. Not only did they find a greater purpose and identity outside of sports, but they demonstrate the way good character can then be expressed in meaningful lives.

If young athletes develop good character traits through purposeful training in sports, they may begin to identify not only as an athlete, but also as someone who values sportsmanship, honesty, and fairness,

aspects of good character. When they retire, even if they haven't cultivated other interests or a purpose outside of professional sports, they still have these virtues to help them identify who they are and a moral compass to orient them toward a bigger purpose.

Shifting Our Mindset

So, how do we fix sports so that they will actually achieve what people seem to think they do: build character? It starts with overcoming the win-at-all costs attitude that has permeated sports culture. The simplest way to do that would be to take the profit incentive out of sports at the youth and scholastic level, but that ship has sailed. There are simply too many people who make too much money from sports to enact the kind of structural changes necessary for this to happen.

What may be a bit more pragmatic is a simple mindset shift for all parties interested in building character through sports, including administrators, coaches, parents, and the athletes themselves.

Administrators can combat the win-at-all costs mindset in a very meaningful way by simply using more criteria than a win-loss record to evaluate and hire their coaches. That is not to say it cannot be included. If a coach's team consistently fails to be competitive on the field, it is likely that there are some off-the-field failures contributing. Other criteria that should be emphasized for coaches include academic performance and retention rates. This can remove the constant pressure of coaches to over-prioritize winning and empower them to focus on being real mentors.




Statue of Coach John Wooden, known for his focus on character development

Coaches should make an intentional effort to be mentors to their athletes and consider their influence on athletes beyond the field of play. They should always treat their athletes as an end in themselves and not simply as commodities to help them win. Coaches should also promote good character by creating and enforcing very clear codes of conduct for their athletes,

and discourage cheating in all its forms, even if it is typically normalized as “part of the game.”

Parents need to recognize that a multimillion dollar contract for their young athlete is highly unlikely, and they should not be afraid to take a much more hands-off approach to their children’s sports participation. While most parents are likely well intentioned, being overly involved can add undue pressure on young athletes to perform well. Additionally, parents should reject elite youth sports teams and training programs in favor of community sports, which can also help relieve pressure on young athletes. Perhaps the most important role of parents in this regard is to understand that character lessons are not learned through sports automatically. Helping athletes, particularly younger ones, apply their sport experiences to potential real-life experiences can be of major help as younger athletes are typically unable to make these connections themselves, and there is no guarantee that the coaches are going to do it.



Moral character has the power to shape a life of purpose, a life of meaning.

Finally, I would like to speak directly to the athletes. The most important thing you can do is realize that you are, or at least should be, far more than *just* an athlete. You likely occupy many roles in life, whether it be student, sibling, friend, role model, etc. Furthermore, if you are playing in high school or in college, you are very likely nearing the end of your athletic career. Take time to develop an identity that does not include playing sports. Recognize that moral character has the power to shape a life of purpose, a life of meaning. Contemplate what you are going to do with your time when you no longer have several hours of practice each week and games to gear up for. You owe it to yourself to have a life after sports.

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Character and . . . Identity

Photo credit p. 32: “Mike Krzyzewski talks to his team during a timeout” by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CC BY 2.0, creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en_GB, lightened.

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Notes

¹ An aside of free financial advice for parents or future parents of youth athletes: If you put \$1,000 a month into a college fund (instead of paying for elite sports training) from the time your child is 6 until they are making college decisions, you will not need to worry about your child attaining an athletic scholarship. You will have enough money to send them to just about any school you want.

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Character and . . . Identity

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