

# Competition At What Price?

## Rethinking the Role of Athletics in Our Schools

By

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For close to 100 years, highly competitive, elite athletic programs have been part of our nation's educational system. It is notable that the U.S. is the only country in the world in which such programs are sponsored by **secondary schools**. In Europe, for example, the responsibility for the development of elite athletes and teams is borne by private sports clubs or professional teams. The purpose of this essay is to explore the following question. In the case of the development and promotion of highly competitive, elite athletics, could it be that the Europeans, rather than we Americans, have it right?

While we tend to think of sports as simply fun and games, the fact is, organized athletics has a tremendous impact on our lives. It's influence ranges from the culture that exists within our educational institutions to the taxes we pay, to our public health, to the lessons we are teaching our children, to the types and tenor of the communities in which we live. That being the case, the way in which our schools handle the cultural subject matter of athletics is an important public policy issue with far ranging and long-lasting impact.

At issue is not whether they are good or bad, but rather whether the current system is best suited for maximizing athletics' ability to serve our nation's education and public health needs. Undoubtedly, fitness activities should be an integral part of our nation's educational system. The Greek ideal of a sound body/sound mind is, in fact, sound. And there is definitely a place for elite athletics in our culture. The question is simply whether that place should be in our school systems. As an alternative, what would be the educational and societal cost of restructuring our nation's athletic system to mirror those of European countries?

To answer this question requires that we identify the fundamental justifications for the incorporation of interscholastic athletics into the fabric of our educational institutions. The supposed benefits of this relationship are as follows. First, involvement in athletics is educational for, and builds the “character” of, participants. Life lessons in discipline, sportsmanship, teamwork, communication skills, and sacrifice are being taught on the playing fields and courts by coaches who are educators. Second, athletic programs serve a unifying function for the school and surrounding communities, generating positive school and community spirit. Third, school sports provide entertainment. And finally, participation in athletics is not only healthy for the athletes but also serves an important public health function by promoting awareness of the value of being fit.

#### An Honest Assessment

Despite widespread belief that elite athletics has the potential to contribute to the missions of our educational institutions in vibrant and meaningful ways, and by doing so, have a positive impact on our society, it is becoming increasingly apparent that it is not or, at the very least, is falling far short of its’ potential to do so. For example, there is a growing body of research that casts serious doubt about whether the win-at-all-cost culture that permeates throughout elite athletic programs has a positive impact on the teaching and development of character. For example, according to a 1999-2000 study by the University of Rhode Island’s Institute for International Sport, 26% of NCAA Division I basketball players agreed that their teammates would *expect* them to cheat if it meant the difference in winning a game. And the ways in which the athletic culture undermines our nation’s educational values and institutions has been well documented.

The claim that athletic programs serve a unifying function for an educational institution can also be disputed. There are just as many students, faculty, parents and taxpayers who would rather see institutional resources and energy devoted to improving their school's art, science, theater, or English departments than to buying new uniforms for the football team. Further, there are risks in relying on athletic teams to unify educational communities. Schools that use athletics to solve the problems of a fragmented community run the risk of making athletics, and not educational and academic excellence, the primary purpose of the institution. Although a football or basketball program can unite a high school in a way that an English department cannot, the primary purpose of the institution remains, as it always has been, educational. In short, a winning football team does not make a quality educational institution.

Of all the justifications for athletics being sponsored by our educational institutions, it is the entertainment function that current programs are meeting most effectively. This however, begs the larger question of whether our educational institutions should be in the entertainment business, particularly when so many of the values and attitudes that permeate the entertainment culture run counter to those of the educational community.

But it is in the area of public health that the current structure of athletics within our school systems is failing most dramatically. For example, it is ironic that the vast majority of health, physical education and athletic related extra-curricular school spending goes to fund football, a sport in which the final high school game in which 99% of the students participate will be the last time they will ever play football. This, while gym class requirements are being reduced in high school. "Nationally, only 29 percent of high school students had daily physical education in 1999, down from 42 percent in 1991. Two years ago, Virginia stopped requiring physical education in elementary schools. In 1996, Massachusetts did so for high schools. By

1999, only 61 percent of Massachusetts high school students had gym class even one time per week, down from 80 percent five years earlier.” N.Y. Times, 11/29/2000 p. A-29) In short, encouraging a healthy lifestyle through exercise is simply no longer a priority for our nation’s schools. Meanwhile, our nation becomes more obese.

The disturbing truth is that it is in great question whether the justifications for highly competitive, entertainment based, elite athletics being an integral part of our nation’s educational system are being realized. Again, the issue is not the value of elite athletics in our culture, but whether our educational institutions should be saddled with the responsibility of developing our future college and professional athletes.

### Rethinking Our Educational Mission

Given these concerns, we are faced with a disturbing truth as it relates to the role that athletics plays in our educational system. What if the justifications for highly competitive, elite athletics being an integral part of our nation’s educational system are no longer relevant in a world that is much different than the one that existed when they were incorporated into that system? Or, if these justifications remain timely and relevant, what if our athletic programs are not meeting them? What does this mean for athletics, our nation’s educational system, and our society? As elite athletics in America evolves toward a model based more on the values and practices of the entertainment industry rather than the educational enterprise, we must honestly assess its impact on our educational system and culture. And we must be willing to restructure our educational and societal investment in organized athletics accordingly.

For example, at a time when our nation is struggling to meet the rapidly changing economic, business, educational, intellectual, and social demands of the twenty-first century, shouldn’t we be investing our time, emotion and precious educational resources to ensure that

our students have the very best in educational resources, equipment, and instruction? This, as opposed to a new weight room for elite athletes? The information-based, high tech, global economy of the future will require all of us to be better educated. The challenges we face in educating our children and maintaining our economic status as a world power are simply too great to invest in activities that, despite being entertaining, have demonstrated a consistent tendency to undermine academic values and educational institutions.

And perhaps our nation's general health needs are better met through other exercise and athletic programs. What if, for example, rather than spending an increasingly large commitment of time, effort, and emotion on the development of elite athletes and teams, our nation's schools concentrated on conducting programs that emphasize broad based participation in health and fitness activities that can be practiced for a lifetime? Inasmuch as the health and physical fitness of our nation's youth should be a societal issue of utmost importance, the effectiveness with which our school systems are fulfilling this function should be as well.

While our schools systems may be less dynamic, and in some ways, less fun without elite interscholastic athletics, they will continue to go about the business of educating. In fact, the education of students would likely improve with the elimination of such programs, as the focus on academics would intensify.

What would happen to the athletes and coaches? As in Europe, elite sports activities and training would simply shift to other local sponsoring agencies. Local organizations and youth groups that receive no public funding would develop and sponsor more comprehensive athletic programs. And professional teams and leagues would begin to sponsor feeder programs and minor leagues, similar to the one that currently exists in American baseball. In short, the

responsibility for developing future professional athletes would shift from our high schools and colleges to private sports clubs and pro teams.

As a result, our educational system would be rid of a highly visible and expensive source of hypocrisy and scandal. Further, intramural, physical education, and wellness programs could be expanded, resulting in far more students being able to avail themselves of health and exercise related resources. With such a change, our educational system would be better positioned to begin the process of serving the broad, long-term, health and exercise needs of America.

Given the ever-increasing economic pressures facing our educational systems, educators and school boards will face mounting pressure to justify spending precious educational resources on extra-curricular activities. Specifically, the burden of proof that such activities have a direct, vital and productive impact upon the institution's fundamental educational purposes will increase dramatically. This educational cost/benefit analysis will cut two ways. First, the educational return on dollar invested in the elite athletics for entertainment model versus athletics designed to encourage broad-based participation in physical activities that can be enjoyed for a lifetime must be considered. And, second, funding for athletics versus other extra-curricular activities such as the arts and music.

Undoubtedly, cultural and community attitudes against moving interscholastic athletics out of the educational system will be strong. Regardless, it is imperative that we critically assess our nation's educational priorities and outcomes, including elite interscholastic athletics and its tremendous influence on those priorities and outcomes. Ultimately, American education must structure itself according to what will best enable it to meet its responsibility to provide leadership in addressing the many challenges facing our society.

## What Do We Lose?

So, what would we lose if our schools, and colleges for that matter, relinquished the responsibility of developing elite athletes and teams?

Very little.

Contrary to what avid sports fans might believe, our nation's educational system would not collapse if the responsibility for developing elite athletes and teams were "privatized". While our school systems might be less dynamic, and in some ways, less fun without elite athletics, they will continue to go about the business of educating. In fact, the education of students would likely improve with the elimination of such programs as the focus on academics would intensify.

Athletes and coaches would continue to have the opportunity to hone their skills as elite sports activities and training would simply shift to other local sponsoring agencies. As in Europe, local sports organizations would develop and sponsor more comprehensive athletic programs and professional teams would sponsor feeder systems and programs, similar to the one that currently exists in baseball.

Further, there is nothing to suggest that athletic programs must be a part of an educational institution for a young person participating in that program to learn the lessons being taught by coaches in discipline, sportsmanship, teamwork, communication skills, and sacrifice. The potential to utilize athletics as a tool to build character and teach these lessons will remain, regardless of the team's sponsoring agency.

Finally, after an initial outcry from those who do not fully appreciate the purpose and responsibility of our nation's educational institutions, fans would come to identify with the team of their choice, despite the fact that it might be sponsored by the local car dealership rather than

the high school. And it is likely that supporters of the institution would display their school spirit by supporting other activities such as music or theater groups.

On the other hand, the positive benefits for the institution as well as for our society would be enormous. The credibility of and public trust in, our educational system would increase dramatically as such a change would signify that our schools and communities have strong educational values and priorities. Such a shift would better enable our schools to fulfill their missions, which to this day, remains education, without the distractions and drain on resources that go along with sponsoring elite athletics.

The fact is, our educational institutions will teach far more, far more clearly, and to far more people about the importance of education by relinquishing the responsibility of developing a small number of elite athletes. The mixed messages being sent and the educational compromises being made, all for the athletic development of a small fraction of our student population, has increasingly undermined educational values and our long-term civic priorities, cultural welfare, and public health.

### Meeting Our Leadership Responsibilities

There is no American institution better suited than our school system through which to promote public health through participation in exercise. Thus, we must ask whether our nation's health interests are being met by the increasing emphasis in terms of time, effort, emotion, and money that is being spent on entertainment based, elite interscholastic athletics as opposed to physical education, intramural athletics, and wellness programs. Expanding exercise and fitness programs that have as their primary focus broad based participation would result in far more students being able to avail themselves of health and exercise related resources. With such a change in our athletic and health and physical education priorities, our educational system would

be better positioned to begin the process of serving the broad, long-term, health and exercise needs of our country.

Our societal investment in organized, elite sport is enormous. That investment has been justified largely on the health, educational, and socialization benefits both to participants and the larger society. But in the face of Nike commercialism, NCAA Final Four hype, ESPN highlights and Allen Iverson's latest scrape with the law, it is increasingly difficult to see any connection between athletics and such "higher purposes". Sport in America has become more about money, winning, and ego than about education, sportsmanship, and ethics; more about commercialism, sneaker deals and trash-talking than about personal development and educational opportunity; and more about being a passive spectator than an active participant.

In the final analysis, society looks to our educational institutions to provide leadership on a broad array of issues, including the proper role of athletics in our culture. That being the case, it is time to consider seriously whether our current system of elite athletics, sponsored mainly through our educational system, continues to be in our best interests. A move toward the European model of elite athletics would send a very clear and important message to our sports crazed populace that as much as we love highly competitive, elite sports, we must love and value the education, health and fitness of our children more.

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