

Notes for Facilitators

Sports: A Window onto American Values Conversation & Cuisine organized by Xenos Christian Fellowship

Introduction

Introduce myself and let people know that I have personally benefited a lot from my active involvement in sports. I talk about how I am involved with my children's sports. So, I value sports. But then I also struggle with the balance in this area. I have a daughter who is a talented athlete and she has told us that she wants to be a professional athlete. How much should we encourage this? How much time and money should we put into this? She told us she wanted to be a professional athlete when she was 9 years old. I bring these issues up to let the participants know that I am struggling with these questions, and that I am not sitting here with all the answers. This discussion is as much to help me think through these issues as it is for anyone else.

The first issue that might help us is to think about WHY we have sports for our children. What are we hoping that our children will gain through sports?

This is when I pass out the handout and ask the participants to read over the quotes that are given under "The Many Faces of Sports." As they are reading these, ask them to think about what these say about our first discussion topic:

What is the purpose of sports?

Discussion Questions

What does the time, attention, money, and fame paid to sports tell us about our values? Which ones are positive and which are negative?

What do we hope our children gain from sports?

On the positive side

Ronald M. Jeziorski is an educational psychologist who consulted with social workers, law enforcement, and educators around the US. “Across the board, they all said that participants in sports earn better grades, behave better in the classroom, have fewer behavior problems outside the classroom, drop out significantly less, and attend school on a regular basis with fewer unexcused absences.” (quoted in APA website)

Tara K. Scanlan is a sports psychology researcher at UCLA who says that sports can teach children to achieve and teach them skills that transfer to other areas of life, such as how to communicate, commit and collaborate. However, the coaches and parents must be supportive of this, and the children must be taught how to transfer these skills. “We need to show them that what they have learned on the field applies in other areas of life. Learning how to work with peers and adults and the joy of mastering skills are just a few of the things that can be learned in that environment, if it’s done right.” (quoted in APA website)

Discussion Questions

What is it about sports that’s leads to its positive effects?

How could coaches and parents help their children make these connections?

Do the children makes these connections whether they are verbally made explicit or not? Does this work with positive and negative traits?

On the negative side

“I’ve discovered that greed, fear, and ego are the three primary factors that influence parental attitudes about and behaviors toward children and youth sports” (Engh, p. 48-49).

Venus and Serena Williams were destined to be tennis stars before they were born. Their Dad saw that the winner’s check for a women’s tennis tournament was double what he made in a year. He was talking to psychologists before they were born. He asked fans to boo his daughters “to toughen them up.”

Todd Marinovich: “America’s first test tube athlete” His father enlisted the help of over a dozen professionals to help raise his son. He was outstanding in high school and led USC to the Rose Bowl as a freshman. Then he got into drugs. Went to the NFL after his sophomore year.

“I think the key happens to be that parents, without being aware of it, are really seeing the child as a reflection of their child-rearing habits,” says Dr. Thomas Tutko, a psychology professor at San Jose State University and author of several books on sports psychology. “So if little Charlie does well, it shows we’re a great family. If little Charlie is a star, that means that we as parents have done a magnificent job. Whether or not they’re aware of it, slowly but surely, they become involved in the performance because it is a reflection on them as individuals” (Engh, p. 57).

The Life of a Select Soccer Family: Practice 3-4 times a week; games 1-2 times a week; weekends away traveling are frequent; cost: \$3,000 per year

Discussion Questions

Which comes first? Do sports teach bad values? Or does sports reflect the deterioration in values in society?

Is the commercialization of sports a good or bad thing? What are some of its effects?

Violence

“At annual meetings of the National Hockey players Association violence has been a major issue, with players asking owners to impose much stiffer penalties (including expulsion). But Club Owners (sponsors and the media) refuse to discourage the violence, because it attracts spectators who come to see “red ice”.”

Marty McSorley of the Boston Bruins was found guilty of assault with a weapon on October 6, 2000 of hitting Vancouver’s Donald Brashear in the head with a two-handed swing of his stick. His defense: he didn’t intend to hit Brashear in the head but instead was trying to hit him in the shoulder to provoke him into fighting: “I used fighting to show I could grow as a player, and I think I did.”

Pattie Ash of Greensboro, NC was convicted of assault for punching the 15-year old referee in the mouth at her 11-year old’s soccer game. The punch was thrown while the two teams were shaking hands.

Thomas Junta killed Michael Costin and was convicted of manslaughter after the two men argued about how their sons were interacting on the ice.

National Association of Sports Officials: each week they receive two or three calls regarding violence to officials. . “The tenor of the type of abuse we’re receiving nowadays has become much more personal, much more physical, and highly violent.” Officials are being punched, their cars have been driven off the road. Fourteen states introduced increased penalties for assaults on sports officials since 1987.

Robert F. Canaby, executive director of the National Federation of State High School Associations in Indianapolis: “Being disrespectful toward your competitor has crept in as an element of the contest. A generation ago it didn’t exist in sport, but it certainly exists now.”

College basketball player: “In sports you can do what you want. In life it is more restricted.” Football player: “The football field is the wrong place to think about ethics.”

Discussion Questions

Have sports become more violent, or does it just seem like it?

All sports are not created alike – are there some sports that are more conducive to violence than others? Why?

What about soccer in Britain?

Why do we hear so much more about parental violence?

What do the kids want?

70% of the 20 million children who play sports will quit by the age of 13 because of negative experiences (Engh, p. 3).

“One research study said that 78 percent of the children interviewed said they would rather play for a losing team than sit on the bench for a winning team” (Engh, p. 143).

“Love based on our children’s performance on the field is a lethal formula that many parents unintentionally apply. This is conditional love, and it is a sure-fire way to create all sorts of emotional problems for the youngsters. Children deserve praise and respect for simply doing their best, regardless of what the scoreboard or the stat sheet says when the game is over” (Engh, p. 66).

“Overall, I think athletics are a great tradition for a number of reasons. A school-age child’s self-worth is influenced a great deal by how he is regarded and valued by his peers. And being average {page} or better than average in athletic skills is one good way to gain the respect of his peers. Sports will teach the child teamwork, enthusiasm, how to compete with others, how to win graciously, and how to accept defeat and frustrations. He will see himself improving with practice, and apply the rules, and he’ll learn the consequences of disobeying rules. It is to be hoped that he will apply these concepts to the “game of life.” Sports can help your child gain self-confidence as his ability increases, and he can use athletic teams to develop close friendships and to learn to relate to others.

But before you decide that athletics is a cure-all, I feel that it is my duty as a Christian psychiatrist to show you the other side of the coin too. Athletics, if misapplied, can be used to destroy a child’s self-worth, or even to teach him sociopathic values. When you play baseball with your children, do you praise them when they do something right, or do you remain silent when they hit or catch the ball and criticize them when they miss it? Are you continually correcting and showing them how they should have done it?: To become good athletes what they really need is your *acceptance*, your *companionship*, *repetition*, *repetition*, and *repetition*, mixed with some genuine praise for what they do right. Then there is the problem of coaches. There are good coaches and there are bad coaches. . . . An intense desire to win is quite healthy, but not if it is at any cost. I want my children to be assertive and competitive, but not sociopathic” (Paul D. Meier, *Christian Child-Rearing and Personality Development*, p. 7-8).

Discussion Questions

Does the emphasis on winning come from the children or the parents/coaches?

Where does a “win at all costs” mentality come from? Why do some people value this?

Money and Sports

In 1999, 31 million children were in youth sports. 1.5 million made it to high school football and basketball teams (about 5%). 14,000 made it to college teams (about 0.05%). Each year 210 rookies make it to the NFL and NBA (about 0.0007% of the youth athletes).

Discussion Questions

Why do we pay professional athletes millions of dollars?

What are the chances of a child making it to the pros?

Drugs in Sports

Blue Cross/Blue Shield Survey:

24% of teenagers personally know someone using performance-enhancing drugs.

54% of teenagers said they know at least some teenagers who are using performance-enhancing drugs.

71% said they would be less likely to watch the Olympics if they knew performance-enhancing drugs were being used.

East German (GDR) athletics: 1989 saw the introduction of out-of-competition doping tests. The gold medal in the women's shot-put at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta would have gotten sixth place at the 1980 Games in Moscow. In 1988, the world record for the women's javelin was set at 80 m by an 18-year-old GDR woman; the best in 1993 was 72 m; the best in 1996 was less than 70 m. Same reductions seen in shot-put and discus.

In 1997, *Sports Illustrated* asked almost 200 current or aspiring U.S. Olympic athletes if they would take a drug that would make it possible for them to be world champions for five years even though the drug would then kill them. More than half said they'd take it! (Bamberger & Yaeger, "Over the Edge," *Sports Illustrated*).

Discussion Questions

Why do you think most sports bodies ban at least some drugs?

What does it tell us about a person's values that they would view five years of fame as more important than their potential to live a long life?

Is there something wrong with using drugs to enhance performance as opposed to good diet or hiring a personal coach?

What does this trend tell us about people's values?

Conclusions

Society shapes our values, but we also shape society's values. So where are the current emphases and values coming from? Not from sports itself, but from society.

There is an underlying world view and set of beliefs that a lot of people have bought into. Out of this come a set of values:

Winning is very important, probably more important than how you win. The means in many cases don't matter as much as the ends. Outcomes are what count.

Image has become everything.

Aggressiveness is valued.

It's okay to boo the opposing team, and even your own team if they "let you down." Where does that come from?

We have to look at our own values and how these are communicated through what we do at sports. As parents, we need to get involved and help direct the values that get promoted through sports. Maybe that means we need to become a coach, or at least an involved parent. We need to address the behaviors we see in our children as athletes. We also need to address the behaviors we see in ourselves as fans.

Like any area of society, we can sit and be critical. Or we can reflect on what our own values are. We need to reflect on what we communicate about our values through our actions. And then we need to take actions to promote the values we hold to.

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