

What To Do About Sports

In the middle of every day in elementary school, I was hastily pushed out the back door of the classroom onto the pavement and told to leave the teacher alone for an hour so she could clean-up the mess I had made. We all were. It was called recess. And with a single, five-dollar round of inflated rubber, a dozen of us marched to a baseball diamond two hundred yards from the nearest adult for joyful games of afternoon kickball. Choosing our own teams, making our own rules, resolving our own disputes, cycling through inning after inning until the bell rang and the score was immediately forgotten, one could fairly claim we were "playing". I have not been to an elementary school in the many years since, but something about the overscheduled and overprotective ethos of our current culture suggests I would be unlikely to observe such freedom. It certainly doesn't exist at the high school level where the phrase "playing sports" is about as extreme a misnomer as suggesting twentieth-century coal miners spent twelve hours every day in hellacious pressure cookers "playing with rocks".

Yet warped as they have become, there is a fair amount of evidence for the value of participation in youth sports. Yes, it is largely correlational rather than causal, and, yes, it is unable to justify the undue fascination our society has with throwing and hitting objects with precision, but it is credible enough to seek maintaining all the benefits sports can provide and reducing those harmful effects which increase annually. To do so, one might think that reforming the enormous bureaucracy of athletic departments and sports leagues would be some kind of vast undertaking, but I think a solution can be found in a very simple, three-word prescription: stop making teams. Canceling all organized competition and replacing it with an open structure of pick-up games has some minor costs, but the savings and benefits it would bring are so overwhelming, the value of the transformation can only be denied by entrenched interests and antiquated tribalism.

For those concerned an immediate transition would prove difficult, all they need to do is visit the annual senior class trip to High Meadow's complex and witness how easily and naturally students fall into playing (yes, playing) all sorts of games without guidance. In fact, it has for some time been a curiosity to me why the school pays thousands of dollars to bus students thirty miles to swim and dive and play softball, basketball, volleyball, badminton, ping pong, tennis, bocce, and frisbee when they could transport the same students exactly zero miles and let them play for free.

So why do the vast majority of student athletes dislike after-school practices (and cheer on rainy afternoons when they are canceled) for the sports we know they will gladly play if you just throw some equipment on a field and tell them to go have fun. Probably because they do go have fun. One or two or three hours of drills may slightly improve the situation skills of some players, but will always feel like an interminable grind. One or two or three hours of pick-up games pass in the blink of an eye. Partly this is because games are fun and practice is not. Partly this is because when people are given freedom, they are free to modify what they do to match their momentary inclinations. If, after an hour of soccer practice, you are bored with soccer, too bad. Practice isn't over. If, after ten minutes of pick-up basketball, the game falls apart from disinterest, let it fall apart. Go play tennis. Who cares?

Long practices and long seasons and year-round specialization are bad in the first place. They lead to repetitive-stress injuries, to burn-out, to athletes actually hating the sport they have Concord-fallacied themselves into enduring every day. Letting students just play makes all of these highly unlikely. The natural, variable flow of almost all games prevents the repetitive motions that unduly strain developing muscles and bones. Athletes cannot burn-out and hate what they are free to drop at any moment and those who play many different games and develop comprehensive hand-eye coordination are known to become the best performers if they

eventually do specialize. And games which are played for fun are less likely to create the injuries that arise naturally from a heedless desire to win. A baseball runner who dangerously submarines the short-stop to break-up a double play or a linebacker who slams the opposing quarterback into the ground is praised by coaches and teammates. In pick-up games, they are more likely to be excommunicated for requiring a 911 call and ruining the afternoon.

The absence of adult guidance solves another problem faced perpetually by every athletic director - an inability to recruit coaches and referees willing to face the harassment of disgruntled players and parents. Can one really be surprised that for such little pay coaches are unwilling to endure endless complaints about playing time and play-calling or that referees are hesitant to accept fifty dollars for an hour of absorbing obscenities and threats of physical violence? But there is really no need for all this coaching in the first place. If a player does not genuinely want to get better, no amount of instruction is going to have a significant effect and if a player does want to improve, there is an overabundance of books and online tutorials they can easily access and follow.

Removing the coaches does prevent the development of one commonly-advertised value of athletics, leadership. But let's be honest, the individuals developing the leadership have always been the ones doing the leading, the coaches. Yes, there are captains and "captains practices", but ask any athlete who tells them what to do and how to do it and the answer you're going to get is the coach. Then again, in a democracy, do we really want these kinds of leaders and followers anyway? Isn't it better in a pick-up game, when your team is down, to huddle-together and work-out amongst yourselves what you need to do and how? Isn't that the real essence of America's founding? True, there are governments which serve as a model for many youth sports teams, where one leader dictates commands to the subservient masses, but these governments are the anti-democratic regimes we rightly loathe, not the ones with values we hope to instill.

Pick-up games and intramural leagues are democratic in another important sense: teams must integrate players with a wide range of natural ability. Good. Accepting others as they are, helping them reach that next level of skill, no matter how far below your own, learning to unify disparate talents into one functioning unit, that is democracy. Sorting-out players at the start of a season into a caste system: varsity, junior-varsity, those not good enough to play, those not even good enough to try-out, teaches students the fateful lesson that segregation, not integration, is the natural order of humanity. But coaches really have no choice. A team which accepts all volunteers and gives them equal playing time is doomed to the league basement. To paraphrase Heraclitus, when a team must do everything it can to win, it will do so at the cost of its soul.

Winning is, after all, the real goal of interscholastic sports. We pay lip service to the ideals of teamwork, discipline, and physical fitness, but the first two of these are (or should be) redundant in an academic institution where they can be developed in settings far more similar to the workplace and the third can be better and far more easily accomplished with a daily half-hour of simple circuit training. Yes, winning feels good and there's intrinsic value in that, but winning has costs. Contests with definite winners have definite losers and if the goal is to win, the losers have failed. There is no sidestepping this truth. When sports are played to win, there is also an incentive to make the games uncompetitive, to rack-up a score so asymmetric that the opposing team has no chance of recovering, making these games either boring (if your team is ahead) or demoralizing (if your team is behind). But in pick-up games, players can be traded between sides until just the right balance is found. Games with evenly-matched teams are the most fun and exciting and skill-developing, but are also (by the pure nature of statistical distributions) unlikely in league sports. In pick-up games, they can easily be made the norm.

Furthermore, a focus on winning introduces externalities which have their own costs. Anyone familiar with basic game theory can see immediately that organized athletics generate an

arms-race. Spend more time and money on equipment and practice sessions and private lessons and tournaments and strength training and film analysis and what will follow naturally from your opponents? The same and then slightly more, clicking the ratchet one step higher in a process that can only end when students and coaches and parents are exhausted. And let there be no doubt that the growing demands of youth sports are causing exhaustion in many families. Additionally, after-school sports are perhaps the major factor in the ridiculously early start-times of most high schools. Arranging for students to play pick-up games for one hour after school would allow classes to comfortably run most days between 10am and 4:30pm. Ask one hundred teenagers if they would prefer sleeping until 9:30 every morning and see if you don't get one hundred wide-eyed responses of, "Are you serious?" While you're at it, you can ditch the booster clubs and bus schedules and make-up games and uniform orders and user fees and coaching contracts and everything else an athletic director must oversee and let them do what they actually love to do, walk around the fields in the afternoons and help kids enjoy what they enjoyed so much themselves when they were young.

A vision like this should be compelling to nearly everyone, but there will almost certainly be a minority in opposition. Those who insist upon playing equipment-intensive sports like football and ice hockey will be unhappy at their dissolution. But would they really be entirely unable to enjoy substitutions like flag football and street hockey? For others who hope to use interscholastic achievements in upper-class sports like lacrosse, field hockey, tennis, and rowing as a conduit to selective colleges, they should ask themselves if this kind of sly, affirmative action for the wealthy is morally defensible. And there will likely always be a group of individuals who play only to win, who are so mentally unbalanced that they care about nothing but championships and trophies. I don't know what to do for them beyond suggesting psychotherapy. Perhaps it would be better to redirect them towards the solution for all these discontents: independent travel teams. Are you an elite athlete bound for collegiate and professional glory? Are you unwilling to step on the same field with those of middling talent? Must everyone else play with the same dangerous intensity and abandon? Fine. Take your top-end equipment and protein shakes and hyperbaric sleeping chamber and wild-eyed competitiveness and find a travel team. I'm sure they'll love you.

The rest of us would do better to step-off the gas, to disengage from the mounting burden of organized sports and appreciate games for what they already provide in and of themselves. And who knows, maybe such a transformation will show us that all the arms races we thought we needed for achievement, we don't really need after all - that it's possible in many aspects of life to seek excellence for its own sake and to rise higher without pushing others lower in a lunge for artificial scarcity. To those who view this radical change with apprehension, there's no need to worry. Contests which are zero-sum have always told us what we'll lose when we give them up and move on. It's right there in the name. Nothing.