

Building character through sport: Why, when and how?

Vidar Halldorsson
University of Iceland

Abstract

Formal sports (within sport clubs) have two main functions in society. One is to enhance the positive development of its participants – and the wider society - and the other to build successful athletes. In some cultures youth sports are seen as an ideal setting for the socialization of children and adolescent into society and further for building the character of its participants. This is achieved by teaching young participants good values and providing them with the opportunity to learn and experiment through trial-and-error in a supportive and challenging social environment. The goal is that the young sport participants can use what they learn in sports in other settings outside of sports. Thus, sports can be seen as an ideal setting to develop “good character.” Successful athletes also have to possess “good character” in order to do well in sports competition. They have to be mentally strong, good in adversity and be able to work with others. However, formal sports tend to organize and focus on physical and tactical skills of sports, largely ignoring the socio-, and psychological skills which relate to character development. Scholars in Iceland, in collaboration with the Icelandic Youth Association and the National Olympic and Sport Association, have developed guidelines of how to build character through sports in a more structured and systematic way - where the ideology is that socio- and psychological skills can be taught and enhanced just like physical skills.

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