

# Which “Character” Should Sport Develop?

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## Abstract

*For years, strong claims have been made that sport builds character. Despite such claims, a “winning at all cost” mentality can frequently be seen within all of sport. The reason for this paradox may relate to confusion around what it means to demonstrate character. The purpose of this article is to show that there are indeed two distinct types of character that are espoused in the sport milieu. One type is related to social values (social character) the other related to moral values (moral character). Following an explication and comparison of these types of character, a recommendation is made for a needed emphasis towards the development of moral character.*

## Introduction

In his *A Way Out of Ethical Confusion*, Zeigler (2004) asks the question: “What character do we seek for people? He refers to Commager’s 1966 list of 12 traits—i.e., “common denominators”—that can be attributed to Americans. In this list are many traits, some of which apply directly to the topic of sport’s relationship to character. These are self-confidence; materialism; complacency bordering occasionally on arrogance; cultivation of the competitive spirit; and indifference to, and exasperation with laws, rules, and regulations” (p. 7). Zeigler believes that the situation deteriorated further by the end of the 20th century. In the dedication to this work, he states: “I believe there is an urgent need to challenge the underlying human values and norms that have determined the direction the United States is heading in the 21st century” (p. iii). This comment, if true, has significance in a search for an answer to the topic at hand. Which “character” should sport develop?

Typically when an athlete or team at any level of sport is considered to have displayed character, the word “character” is associated with a host of values such as teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, perseverance, work ethic, and mental toughness. As a specific example, a high school athletic director defined an athlete’s character as “a willingness to try no matter what the situation. An attempt to continually improve; a willingness to give all up for the cause; and sacrificing without expectations.” In another example, a high school coach asserted: “Character is the belief in self-worth and your own work ethic. . . .” (Rudd, 1999).

In professional sport, character has been defined similarly. For instance, consider a newspaper article that headlined, “The Arizona Diamondbacks Attribute Their Success to Character.” Specifically, the article highlighted the Diamondbacks as players who work hard and don’t complain about salaries (Heyman, 2000). Consider also an issue of *Sports Illustrated* in which New England Patriots’, Troy Brown, commented on former teammate Drew Bledsoe’s ability to play with a broken finger and lead his team to victory. Brown stated, “It showed a lot of character” (Zimmerman, 2001, p. 162).

However, in contrast to the notion that an athlete of character is one who displays values such as teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, perseverance, work ethic, and mental toughness, sport scholars in the area of character development have defined character with a different set of values. Sport scholars, including sport philosophers and sport psychologists more commonly define an athlete of character as one who is honest, fair, responsible, respectful, and compassionate (Arnold, 1999; Beller & Stoll, 1995;

Gough, 1998; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). For example, Arnold (1999) states, "In terms of moral goodness, or what I refer to as moral character, it involves a life that complies with such virtues as justice, honesty, and compassion" (p. 42).

It does indeed seem, therefore, that there are two distinct definitions of character maintained by two camps. The first camp consists of coaches, administrators, and players who may typically define character with social values such as teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and perseverance. This could be designated as "social character." The second camp consists of sport scholars, and people of earlier generations still alive, who typically define character with moral values such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, compassion, and respect. This is commonly referred to by many of them as "moral character." The existence of these two camps, each with their respective definitions of character, suggests that there is confusion and disagreement concerning the definition of character in sport. (Of course, there may be some "in the middle" who accept an overlapping, possibly conflicting set of values to describe the term "character.")

As a result of the above, the differences in the way character is defined may provide strong evidence why many feel there is a lack of sportsmanship in competitive sport today. Similarly, these same people decry the "winning-at-all-cost" mentality that seems to prevail athletics (see, for example, "A Purpose," 1999; Hawes, 1998; Spencer, 1996). Many coaches, athletic administrators, and parents may indeed place such a premium on *social* values such as teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and work ethic that they forget, or at least downplay, any emphasis on the time-honored moral values such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect.

The purpose of this paper is to define and discuss in detail two types of character (moral and social) that are espoused by two distinct groups in the sport milieu. The ramifications of the "social character view" in sport are explained below. At the same time, what the author feels is the need

for greater emphasis on the development of moral character in sport and physical education will also be discussed.

### *Social Character*

If we consult our dictionaries for a definition of character, we will find descriptors such as "honesty, integrity, morals, and ethics." These descriptors are consistent with the term moral character, a way in which many sport scholars define character. One would be hard pressed in this quarter to find mention of social values such as self-sacrifice, teamwork, loyalty, and perseverance. Yet, contrary to the classic dictionary definition and what many sport scholars have proposed, the bulk of coaches, sport administrators, and parents in North American society now seem to associate character more with social values rather than *moral* values.

As one means of verifying how coaches define character, a sampling of high school physical educator/coaches were asked to define the term "character." Of the 38 coaches who responded, twenty-three primarily defined character in terms of work ethic, perseverance, teamwork, and commitment (Rudd, 1999). For example, one coach stated, "Character is the belief in self-worth and your own work ethic. Understanding commitment and how that relates to long-term goals is strengthened by athletics" (Rudd, 1999).

Another coach defined character in terms of mental toughness by stating:

"Character is a person's ability to deal with in a productive manner, situations that arise during competition that involve a certain emotional intensity. A certain grace and strength are involved in dealing with what I refer to as artificial life/death situations: making the play to win the game, wanting to take the last shot" (Rudd, 1999).

In addition to coaches defining character largely with social values, a newspaper article contained the headline: "Character Paves Way for L-C." This headline was referring to the

Lewis-Clark State College baseball team after the team won the National Association for Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) World Series. There was no mention of whether the team played honestly and fairly. Rather, the article highlighted the team's ability to come from behind to win, and stressed how all team members contributed to the winning of the NAIA World Series (Browit, 1999).

Sport sociologists have also helped to explain why many may define character with social values like teamwork, work ethic, or loyalty as opposed to moral values such as honesty, fairness and responsibility. They maintain that there is a strong connection between the types of values that are cultivated in sport and what is valued in American culture (Coakley, 1998; Edwards, 1973; Eitzen, 1999; Nixon, 1984; Sage 1988, 1998). Therefore, when considering the popular "sport builds character" creed, one must now comprehend the prevailing sport-context definition of character in relationship to the current ideology of American culture. This is an ideology that is heavily based on a capitalistic economy and "mentality." Within such a doctrine, values such as teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and perseverance are the ones believed to be instrumental in maintaining the strong corporate and capitalistic nature of the United States of America. Sport sociologists such as Berlage (1982), Coakley (1998), and Sage (1988, 1998) concur that sport is now used as a vehicle to foster corporate values among youth athlete participants. As a result, coaches, parents, and the general populace have come to view character in terms of values such as teamwork, loyalty, and self-sacrifice more than with moral values such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility.

#### *Moral Character*

Conversely, what is moral character? Primarily originating from the ancient philosopher, Aristotle, more than 2000 years ago, the concept of moral character is rooted in a morally idealistic

perspective. A person of moral character is one who—when choosing right from wrong—can apply a variety of moral values such as justice, honesty, compassion, respect, and responsibility (Arnold, 1994, 1999; Gough, 1998; Lickona, 1991; Stoll & Beller, 1998b). Further, to be a person of moral character means that an individual is able to apply these moral values willingly, sincerely, and with understanding (Arnold, 1994, 1999; Lickona, 1991; Stoll & Beller, 1998b).

In other words, one must not simply have the ability to recognize dishonesty, or to know what it means to be dishonest, one must first understand and sincerely value the concept of honesty. Perhaps more importantly, this person must have the ability to *act* honestly when his or her peers are acting dishonestly (Arnold, 1994, 1999; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995; Stoll & Beller, 1998b). Stoll and Beller (1998b) have also posited that moral character involves the ability to practice the moral values of honesty, justice, responsibility, and respect *when no one is watching*. This definition strongly supports the notion that a person who truly has moral character can apply a set of moral values with a strong understanding of its worth despite any surrounding peer pressures or societal pressures. The reason why sport scholars define character from a moral perspective may be related to their field of study. For example, many sport philosophers relate particularly to moral philosophy. Therefore, when defining character in the sport context, they are apt to apply an Aristotelian approach that relates sport to a moral ideal. (See, for example, Arnold, 1999; Beller & Stoll, 1995; Clifford & Feezell, 1997; Gough, 1998; Stoll & Beller, 1998a, 1998b).

Other sport scholars who have written about character development from a moral perspective are sport *psychologists* who often define character from a moral position because of their background in moral psychology as it relates to moral development. For example, in their book titled: *Character development and physical activity*, Shields and Bredemeier (1995) defined character

in terms of four virtues or values: (1) compassion, (2) fairness, (3) sportspersonship, and (4) integrity.

*Moral Character Versus Social Character: Assessing the Respective Values*

As explained above, moral character is defined in terms of moral values such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, compassion, and respect. Social character on the other hand is defined here by such social values such as teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, perseverance, and work ethic. A key point, then, to understanding the difference between moral character versus social character is to seek to clarify still further the difference between moral values and social values.

According to Rokeach (1973), moral values can be distinguished from other types of values in that moral values are related to modes of behavior between people (i.e., an interpersonal focus). When these are violated this may cause feelings of guilt and deep concern on the part of the individual who violated the particular moral value. Being dishonest rather than honest, or irresponsible rather than responsible are examples.

Additionally, Lumpkin, Stoll and Beller (1999) argue also that moral values are distinctive because they are the values that are critical to human relationships and to the upholding of morality. For example, a relationship in which person A is continually dishonest to person B will most likely lead to an unhealthy and dysfunctional relationship. Similarly, in a sport context, the maintaining of moral values such as honesty, fairness, and respect are vital to a fair and safe competition between opponents. If opponents intentionally cheat one another, the particular sport being played no longer exists as a fair competition.

Similar to moral values, social values such as teamwork, loyalty, and self-sacrifice are also often involved in interpersonal relationships. However, the lack of upholding a particular social value such as self-sacrifice may not have what have been called "moral ramifications." For

example, it is difficult to consider an employee of a company immoral for being unwilling to continually work extensively long hours. Nevertheless, a willingness to work beyond normal business hours may be considered by the company as an indication of self-sacrifice and a general benefit to the company. In a similar vein, a baseball player who is commanded by his coach to purposely lean into a pitch to reach first base by being hit with the ball, has not immorally violated the rules of the game of baseball or brought harm to his teammates or opponents by refusing to do so. Conversely, agreeing to be purposely hit by a pitch so as to get on first base would be considered by the player's teammates to be a display of self-sacrifice.

Social values may be defined as values that have been deemed by a society or culture as being vital in reaching a desired end state. As it has developed in the American culture, it appears that values such as teamwork, work ethic, and self-sacrifice are important in maintaining capitalistic values in an accompanying democratic state. These same values are also believed to contribute to development of the ability to win in sport (Coakley, 1998; Sage, 1998; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). In contrast, moral values are not fostered to achieve a specific goal in a particular context. Rather, the application of moral values such as honesty, fairness, and responsibility are vital to human relationships in any context or culture (Lumpkin, Stoll, & Beller, 1999).

In addition to distinguishing moral and social character by their respective values, moral and social character may also be differentiated by the reasoning process that is used when one displays moral character versus social character. Thomas Lickona (1991), an educator, and sport scholars such as Arnold (1999) and Stoll and Beller (1998b) maintain that there is a thoughtful reasoning process that is linked to the notion of moral character. In brief this reasoning process involves three parts: knowing, valuing, and doing. A person who acts with moral character does so because he or she knows what is morally right, he

values what is morally right, and he is able to act on what he know and values. Thus, in a sport context, an athlete is considered to have moral character if he or she understands the meaning of fair play, values fair play, and is able to play fairly when perhaps others around him or her are playing unfairly.

Acting with moral character also means that the individual is able to identify a moral situation and has the desire to act morally against other competing values and temptations that may be immoral—and then does just that in an actual situation (Arnold, 1999). As a specific example, consider a football player who appears to make a diving winning touchdown catch in a championship game. The referee signals for a touchdown, but the player then tells the referee that he did not catch the ball legally (i.e., that the ball hit the ground first). An action such as this should be considered as a display of moral character. (Unfortunately, in today's world, many of his team members *and* opponents would think he was "crazy" for having called the matter to the attention of the referee.)

In contrast to the reasoning process that is associated with moral character, acting with what has been called social character does not necessarily involve a reasoning process in which there has to be a knowing, valuing, and doing. Instead, the display of social character may be out of a desire to conform, or as the result of a planned socialization process. In other words, an athlete may be socialized into displaying social character and more specifically self-sacrifice or teamwork because those are the types of values that are emphasized by coaches, parents, and society in order to win the game or be successful out in the corporate world (Arnold, 1999; Sage, 1998, 1988; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). An athlete may be said to act with social character then in response to the ethos of the team (and society too) rather than first considering thoughtfully what is morally right or wrong and without influence from teammates, coaches, parents, and others.

### *Social Character Versus Moral Character: Does an Imbalance Exist?*

Judging by the continual occurrences of cheating and violence in sport by coaches, players, and parents, it may be reasonable to infer that the development of moral character is not receiving the needed attention (see, for example, "A Purpose" 1999; Dreyfuss, 2001; Eitzen, 1999; Hawes, 1998). Yet, despite the existing problems, many continue to assert that, "sport builds character" (Docheff, 1998; Eitzen, 1999; Sage, 1988, 1998). The continuance of such claims may be the result of how character is defined along with the type of character that is valued by the average coach, parent, sport administrator or sports fan. As previously mentioned, those such as Sage (1998) and Coakley (1998) have maintained that sport has historically been viewed as a vehicle for developing values such as teamwork, self-sacrifice, loyalty, and work ethic which are believed to be instrumental in maintaining corporate America. This suggests that, through the decades of the 20th century, our general society gradually determined that values or traits such as teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and work ethic are not only helpful in the "working world," but they are also effective for winning in sport (O'Hanlon, 1980). It was inevitable that athletes, coaches, and administrators would understand the implications of this gradual acceptance of the superiority and importance of such values.

As a result of the similarity between prevailing societal values and what appears to be valued highest in sport now by the majority, it makes sense that the notion of character would be increasingly defined by many in relationship to social values. Additionally, in a sport culture where present skill and competency give evidence of the potential future achievement of "gold, silver, and bronze," athletes with such potential are increasingly provided with financial and moral support. Many may recognize that moral values such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, and overall sportsmanship are admirable. How-

ever, if choices must be made, employing moral values will not be as helpful towards winning and being successful. Accordingly they “finish second” in people’s minds and eventually in actuality. As a result, social character takes precedent over moral character.

Coaches, sport administrators, and parents possibly lacking an awareness, understanding, and true appreciation of moral character may provide a second reason why social character is emphasized over moral character. Considering the fact that sport scholars such as sport philosophers, sport psychologists, and sport sociologists tend to publish articles in their respective journals (e.g., sport philosophers publishing in the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*), it is logical to assume that most people simply do not read journals such as these. Therefore, they would not be up-to-date on what has been written in recent decades about the development of moral character in sport.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explain that, at the beginning of the 21st century, there are two quite distinct types of character traits that are espoused. These are traits that lead the possessor to different sport experiences. Granted there is some overlap, nevertheless as a result there is now both confusion and disagreement about what constitutes desirable traits or character in sport. Many coaches, parents, sport administrators, and parents define character with values such as teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and perseverance, which may be considered “social character.” Sport scholars, on the other hand, tend to define moral character with values such as honesty, fairness, responsibility, respect, and compassion.

Although values such as teamwork, loyalty, and self-sacrifice may be helpful towards winning, these values may not be enough towards helping athletes compete fairly, honestly, responsibly, and respectfully. For example, former Wichita State pitcher Ben Christensen purposely

threw at Anthony Molina who was 30 feet away from the plate (waiting on deck) because he felt Molina was trying to time his pitches. Christensen hit Molina and severely injured his eye. As part of Christensen’s response to the injury, he told reporters that the pitching coach taught him this tactic (“A Purpose,” 1999). Christensen may be an athlete who is loyal to the team or cause (i.e., one who possesses social character), but it is argued here that he has a most inadequate conception of moral character.

Examples, such as the one with Christensen, suggest that developing social character and a fierce desire to win is helpful to a point. But, in the final analysis, coaches, sport administrators, and parents need to consider character from a moral perspective as well. To do this means that more time and energy must be devoted to a more balanced approach, one that stresses the development of honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect for opponents as well.

This means that the concept of “character” must be more clearly defined and “targeted” pedagogically throughout the entire educational system. A first step in developing moral character in sport may be simply to educate coaches, sport administrators, and parents about the difference between moral character and social character. Concurrently, many coaches, sport administrators, and parents need to understand that a more balanced emphasis between the two needs to be encouraged as part of the actual competitive-sport experience. However, the prevailing ethical confusion in America needs to be resolved before leaders in physical education and educational sport can look forward to substantive progress on this important topic.

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