

## **Sports and Virtue**

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Like many Americans, I've been following the Olympics whenever I get a chance. The excitement and drama are addictive and fascinating. There have been thrilling moments, like when American swimmer, Jason Lezak miraculously shot past the competition to capture the win in the 400-meter relay. There have also been inspiring stories about athletes who are not medal contenders. For example, the Missoulian ran an article this week on competitors from embattled countries like Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan. These athletes overcame all manner of obstacles to compete in Beijing and do their best. My favorite stories are about the fortitude of older competitors. They provide aging athletes with hope that we can strive for excellence much longer than we thought.

The Olympic spectacle is the tip of the iceberg for the human obsession with sports. Everywhere in the world we're running, swimming and jumping; we're kicking balls into nets, hitting them over nets, and shooting them through nets, in vast numbers. For the most part, we're just having fun. But it's commonly believed that all this activity makes us morally better—sports is said to build character. This belief is part of the Olympic spirit. The founder of the modern games, Pierre de Coubertin, used moral language in describing the Olympic spirit. He roughly said that the Olympic spirit is to inspire everybody to be better people. It's about understanding how to win *and* how to lose. It's about learning to respect other people. It's about how to set goals and to live a good life. But is high-minded talk true?

One could easily be cynical about the Olympic spirit and a connection between ethics and athletics. In the Olympic spectacle we see a mixture of honorable and dishonorable behaviors—not to mention the ever present taint of drugs and politics. There are winners who are poor examples of human beings. But on the other side of the ledger there are athletes and coaches who are exemplars of what it means to be a good person. So, with all these examples and counter-examples, does sport build character? The answer is it all depends.

Theories about character development generally hold that culture plays a major role in determining character. There is probably nothing special about the connection between sports culture and moral development, other than we spend a lot of time playing sports. It's fun. This is particularly true for young people. Given this, it makes a lot of sense to try to shape sports culture in a way that promotes the development of positive character traits, for example, to promote honesty over cheating.

Researchers have been very busy looking into the possible connection between moral development and sports. In a recent article, The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports summarized the current state of research. The most interesting aspect of this

report is the discussion on motivation. It talks about how coaches and parents can create what they call a motivational environment that might promote moral development.

There are at least two broad types of motivation in sports. One is the desire to master a skill or task. Another is to display our natural abilities and talents before others. On the one hand, the mastery-oriented person measures success by comparing their current performance either with their previous best or to an objective standard. On the other, the ego-oriented athlete enters a competition to display their superior abilities by outperforming others. It seems that mastery-motivation tends to promote character development and ego-motivation does the opposite.

In real life, both of these types of motivations are at work in most people. Parents and coaches can push athletics in a more ethical direction by emphasizing effort and task mastery rather than ability and competitive outcome. Perhaps the most notable model for this approach was UCLA's great basketball coach John Wooden, who remarked that "ability may get you to the top, but character keeps you there."

Mastery-motivation also seems to make good common sense. The comedian Jerry Seinfeld makes fun of the absurdity of being motivated exclusively by performance. He moves his head just slightly forward to show the difference between the greatest runner in the world and the guy you never heard of. It's about half the length of his nose. If one is motivated by mastery, there is always the satisfaction of being the best athlete one could become. If one focuses on showcasing one's talents then performance is everything, the slightest bit of bad luck in a major event can be final and crushing.

It is best to be realistic about the Olympic spirit. It represents what we should strive for in sports culture. There is no natural connection between sports and building character. But we can push athletics in a more ethical direction by being careful about what motivates us.