New Roles for Sport Psychologists: Teaching Life Skills Through Sport to At-Risk Youth

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Following a discussion of the need to expand the definition of sport psychology to include the use of sport to enhance both sport and life skills, two sport-related programs designed to enhance life skills are described. The focus of these programs is to promote both life and sport skills for adolescents, especially for those who are underserved. The conceptual framework for these programs is described as is the contents of the programs. The procedures for implementing the programs are delineated. Additionally, the roles played by sport psychologists, including a review of the necessary training to implement such programs, are detailed. Finally, a brief summary of the evaluation data and its connection to similar physical education programs is presented.

As increasing numbers of elite athletes have recognized the relationship between their mental state and their physical performance, sport psychology has enjoyed rising popularity. Many of these athletes have even begun to realize the value of using sport psychology strategies and techniques to enhance their nonathletic life. While such changes within the field are gratifying to sport psychologists, growth in career opportunities within the field is still frustratingly slow. This is at odds with student interest in the field, which is burgeoning.

Most of the students entering the field are excited about the possibility of working with elite athletes on performance-enhancement techniques and strategies. Unfortunately, few such opportunities are available. Career opportunities in sport psychology are likely to remain stagnant until we rid ourselves of the restrictive perspective we have adopted about what constitutes sport psychology and recognize its potential to affect athletes of all ages and skill levels.

Danish and his colleagues have defined sport psychology very broadly (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1995). As they see it, sport psychology involves the use of sport to enhance competence and promote human development throughout the life span. Given this definition, sport psychologists are as concerned about “life” development as they are athletic development. Moreover, because

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sport attracts such a broad participation level, it fits well within the context of our society’s concerns with promoting health. The Healthy Goals 2000 initiative (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1990) has identified many goals related to exercise and fitness, most of which could be attained by individuals employing behavior change strategies taught by sport psychologists. In other words, while the strategies and techniques of sport psychology may be valuable for improving athletic performance, sport is so closely tied to other life domains that its value extends well beyond sport to other life areas. Therefore, sport psychologists must prepare themselves to work with individuals of all ages and at all skill levels who are committed to improving their sport performance as well as their life skills.

Our goal is to expand the definition of sport psychology in a way that clearly demonstrates how to enhance the use of nonathletic life skills. In addition to expanding the definition of what we do, sport psychologists and physical educators also need to adopt a broader set of professional values. These values include an emphasis on the development of individual and group competencies, a focus on helping each person reach his/her potential, and on an understanding of the environment within which individuals and groups function. These values are consistent with those emphasized in other areas of psychology—most notably, community and counseling psychology.

As part of our goal, we want sport psychologists to recognize the importance that sport has to inner-city youth and how, by adopting a broader set of values, we can use sport to make a positive difference in the lives of these youth. To date, sport has often seemed like a barrier to helping inner-city youth attain higher levels of competence. With the exception of the handful of youth who have used sport as a vehicle to escape their situation by becoming professional athletes, sport has too often been an unrealistic career dream for many inner-city youth and their families. As a result, there are many critics of the value of sport. What has been overlooked by these critics is how sport can provide a setting where life skills are learned.

In this article, we will describe two sport-related programs designed to enhance life skills. We will concentrate on how these programs have been used to promote both life and sport skills for underserved urban youth. Following a discussion of the conceptual framework for these programs, the contents of the programs themselves will be described and the procedures for implementing the programs will be delineated. Additionally, the roles played by sport psychologists—including a review of the necessary training to implement such programs—will be detailed. Finally, a brief summary of the evaluation data and its connection to similar programs, such as Hellison’s (1995) teaching responsibility through physical education, will be presented.

The Philosophical and Conceptual Basis for Life Skills, Sport-Based Programs

The staff at the Life Skills Center had as one of its initial goals the implementation of sport psychological interventions with elite athletes. Prior to starting the Center, the first author had worked as a sport psychologist with professional, Olympic-level and collegiate athletes for more than a decade. Trained as a counseling psychologist, his interest was in working with populations that had goals
related to optimizing their performance rather than remediating problems. Through his experiences and the experiences of colleagues, he realized that the strategies used by sport psychologists had value in other life domains, especially with individuals for whom sport was a major influence in forming their identity. Moreover, he began to realize that the intervention approaches paralleled the psychoeducational approaches adopted by some counseling psychologists (Authier et al., 1975) and his own Life Development Intervention framework (Danish et al., 1993). As a result of these experiences, the Center began to use sport as a model for understanding how to teach life skills. However, because of the success of some of the life skills programs directed at youth, the focus of the Center’s activities soon became teaching life skills to this population, particularly disadvantaged youth. This group was chosen because of their involvement in sport and because of their long-held belief that sport often provides an avenue of escape from the poverty and risks that many endure.

Thus, we began to use sport as a model for promoting personal growth. However, in adopting this perspective, we first needed to recognize that while sport provides a model for enhancing competence, sport by itself does not enhance competence. In other words, the lasting value of the sport experience lies in the application of the principles learned through participation to other areas. Of the millions of children who play sports, only a tiny fraction will parlay those activities directly into a career in sport. For the rest, growing up means further defining their identity, discovering other skills and interests, and, it is our hope, applying some of the valuable principles learned during sport participation to their adult pursuits. These transferable behaviors and attitudes are what we call life skills (Danish, Nellen, & Owens, 1996).

Life skills are those skills that enable us to succeed in the environments in which we live (Danish, 1994; Danish & Donohue, 1995). These skills can be physical (e.g., throwing a ball), behavioral (e.g., effective communication with peers and adults), or cognitive (e.g., effective decision-making). Some of the environments in which we live are families, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and communities. Most individuals must succeed in more than one environment. As one becomes older, the number of environments in which one must be successful increases. For example, a child need only succeed within the family; an adolescent must succeed within the family, at school, and in the neighborhood; adults need to succeed in the family, workplace, neighborhood, and in the community. Environments will vary from individual to individual, thus the definition of what it means to succeed will differ across individuals as well as across environments. However, even among different individuals there are some basic skills needed to achieve success.

Individuals in the same environment are likely to be dissimilar from each other as a result of the life skills they have already mastered, their other resources, and their opportunities, real or perceived. For this reason, programs to teach life skills must be sensitive to developmental, environmental, and individual differences and the possibility that the needed life skills may not be the same for individuals of different ages, ethnic and/or racial groups, or economic status. While it is necessary to be sensitive to these differences, it also is important to recognize that individuals can often effectively apply life skills learned in one environment to other environments as appropriate.
Life skills and sport skills have several similarities. First, both are learned in the same way—through demonstration, modeling, and practice (Danish & Hale, 1981). Second, the skills learned in one domain are transferable to other areas (Danish, 1995a). Some of these skills are the abilities to perform under pressure, solve problems, meet deadlines and challenges, set goals, communicate, handle both success and failure, work with a group and within a system, and receive feedback and benefit from it. Sport can provide a valuable vehicle for teaching life skills when these lessons are learned and transferred.

For sport to serve as an effective model for learning life skills, the sport experience must be designed with this goal in mind. Promoting competence is not an unplanned outcome of sports participation. It occurs when athletes compete against themselves—more specifically, when that competition is focused on maximizing their own potential and achieving their goals (Danish, 1995b). As Danish noted in the Athletic Footwear Association report (AFA, 1990), “When knowing oneself becomes as important as proving oneself, sport becomes an essential element in personal growth and self expression” (p. 6).

In other words, there is nothing magical about a ball, or for that matter, any sport object or sport venue. It is not sport per se that teaches life skills; it is a sport experience that is designed in such a fashion that its participants can transfer what is learned to other domains such as school, home, and/or the workplace (Danish, Petipas, & Hale, 1990).

For such a transfer to take place, it is necessary to help children and adolescents recognize and use skills that they have acquired through sport in other life areas. Understanding what is necessary for skills to be transferred, and the means by which this can be done, is critical for sport psychologists and physical educators alike. It was with this goal in mind that we developed our first life skills program, the Going for the Goal (GOAL) Program (Danish et al., 1992a, b).

The GOAL Program

GOAL, the 1996 winner of the National Mental Health Association’s Lela Rowland Prevention Award, is designed to teach adolescents a sense of personal control and confidence about their future so that they can make better decisions and ultimately become better citizens. To be successful in life, it is not enough to know what to avoid; one must also know how to succeed. For this reason, our focus is on teaching “what to say yes to” as opposed to “just say no.”

A major assumption underlying the development of GOAL is that the future is important to youth. Erikson (1968), for example, believed that the adolescent “identity crisis” propels youth to look ahead to their projected future. In order to form a healthy identity, adolescents must integrate their appraisal of their past, present, and future into a coherent self-concept. However, for youth to care enough to learn “what to say yes to” requires the belief that they have a future worth caring about. Gullotta (1990) believes that youth who have developed negative future expectations are more likely to engage in behaviors that compromise their health and future (Mash, Danish, & Farrell, 1992; Perry & Jessor, 1985). Involvement in behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, violent and delinquent behaviors, premature and unsafe sexual activity that may result in pregnancy or diseases such as AIDS, and dropping out of school may occur when adolescents do not feel valued...
by society. Until they feel valued and have opportunities to contribute to society, the operative response of these adolescents with regard to their involvement in health and future-compromising behaviors may be “Why not?” A need to feel valued may be one of the reasons why young people choose sport as an avenue for seeking recognition. If they are able to achieve status as an “elite athlete,” they will become role models, be rich and famous, and be idolized by others.

As a result of our interest in helping young people focus on making their futures positive, we designed an intervention to simultaneously increase health and future-enhancing behaviors as well as decrease health and future-compromising behaviors. However, because of the goals of the program, there is little discussion about how to avoid health-compromising behaviors. Some research conducted on social competence programs has suggested that to change behavior in specific areas, such as a particular health-compromising behavior, these areas must be specifically addressed by the intervention (Caplan et. al, 1992). Although our own research seems to be coming to a different conclusion, we recognize that the GOAL may not be a stand-alone intervention and may be even more effective when complemented by other interventions targeting specific health-compromising behaviors.

The GOAL Program is a 10-hour, 10-session program taught by carefully selected and well-trained high school students to middle school or junior high school students. The program is generally taught in school but also has been taught after school or at special venues.

In the first workshop, Dare to Dream, the program and the leaders are introduced. The students discuss the importance of dreams and practice dreaming about their future. In the second workshop, Setting Goals, they learn that a goal is a dream they work hard to reach. They learn the value of goal-setting and practice recognizing reachable goals. The four characteristics of a reachable goal are that it is stated positively, is specific, is important to the goal-setter, and is under the goal-setter’s control. In workshop three, Making Your Goal Reachable, the students apply what they learned in the second workshop. They write a reachable goal to be attained within the next two months that meets the characteristics learned in workshop three. We have found that developing such goals is difficult for adolescents and adults alike and learning and applying this process is a key aspect of the program. In the fourth workshop, Making a Goal Ladder, they learn how to make a plan to reach their goal by identifying all of the steps needed to reach their goal and then placing the steps in order on the rungs of the ladder.

In the fifth workshop, Roadblocks to Reaching Goals, the students learn how various roadblocks such as drug abuse, teen pregnancy, violence, dropping out of school, and/or lack of self-confidence can prevent them from reaching their goals in life. In the sixth workshop, Overcoming Roadblocks, they learn and practice a problem-solving strategy called STAR (Stop and chill out; Think of all your choices; Anticipate the consequences of each choice; and Respond with the best choice). In the seventh workshop, Seeking Help From Others, the students learn the importance of seeking social support in order to achieve goals. As part of the activities, they identify a “dream team” of 10 individuals (family members, very close friends, good friends and older friends, and role models) who can help them reach their goals. In the eighth workshop, Rebounds and Rewards, they learn how to rebound when a goal or a step on the goal ladder becomes too difficult to reach. They also develop a plan to reward themselves for these accomplishments. In the
ninth workshop, *Identifying and Building on Your Strengths*, the students identify their personal strengths and how to further develop these strengths. They also are asked to identify an area in which they want to improve and a plan for how they can work toward improvement. In the tenth and final workshop, *Going for Your Goal*, the students play a game, “Know-It-All-Baseball,” which provides an opportunity for them to integrate and apply the information covered in the nine other workshops (Danish, 1996a).

Ten one-hour, skill-based workshops are provided to teach the skills outlined above. After the first workshop, each subsequent session begins with a review of what has been taught in the previous workshop followed by a brief skit to introduce new material. Skits feature “Goal Seeker,” “Goal Buster,” “Goal Keeper,” and “Goal Shooter.” The participants assume the roles of the characters during the skits. The skits in the GOAL Program tell a story of a young person who has a goal to become a computer programmer. In each workshop, this protagonist faces some sort of obstacle to goal attainment. However, by using the skill taught in the workshop that day, goal attainment becomes more certain. Following the skits, the skills are taught and practiced.

The high school student leaders who teach the program are chosen by their schools for their academic performance, leadership qualities, and extracurricular involvement. They receive special training on how to teach the program and also are taught the program in its entirety. The ratio is approximately 2 leaders to 15 participants. Successful high school students serve as concrete images of what early adolescents can become. Because these high school students have grown up in the same neighborhoods, attended the same schools, and confronted similar roadblocks, they serve as important role models and, thus, are in an ideal position to be effective teachers.

Since GOAL’s inception in 1987, it has received more than $5 million in grant-funding from such agencies as the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, the Virginia Governor’s Council for Drug and Alcohol Prevention, the U.S. Department of Education, and most recently, the National Cancer Institute (NCI). Originally, the grants were to further develop the program and assess its effectiveness in Richmond. However, as a result of grants from the Athletic Footwear Association, the Sporting Goods Manufacturing Association, the U.S. Olympic Training Center, and the U.S. Diving Federation, the program began national dissemination in 1992.

The Athletic Footwear Association (AFA) and the Sporting Goods Manufacturing Association (SGMA) funded the Life Skills Center to disseminate GOAL to a number of cities nationally and make it as transportable as possible. To facilitate dissemination, a leader manual (Danish et al, 1992a), a student activity guide (Danish et al, 1992b), and an operations manual (Nellen & Goff, 1996) were developed. We also decided not to give or sell the program to communities outright but to work with the communities to implement it. In this way, we are better able to maintain a level of quality control over how the program is disseminated.

As a result of the initial support that we received from the AFA and SGMA, we have implemented and/or are teaching GOAL in Atlanta, Boston, Houston, Lansing (Michigan), several school districts in Los Angeles, New London (Connecticut), New York City, and Virginia Beach (Virginia), and at 18 U.S. Diving Federation sites. By the end of 1996, we will have taught the program to almost
20,000 students. Recently, we have developed a partnership with the National Mental Health Association to offer GOAL to their 325 national affiliates. We also will be starting the program in New Zealand in 1997.

With the grant from NCI, GOAL will become a major component of a health promotion and disease prevention program in as many as 25 rural counties in Virginia and New York. In most of the sites where the program has been taught, the majority of the students have been inner-city, at-risk youth. In each setting where GOAL is taught, the Life Skills Center has involved colleges and universities to help in the training and supervision of the high school students. Many of the staff from the higher education institutions have been sport psychologists and physical educators and they, in turn, have involved both undergraduate and graduate students to serve as trainers and supervisors.

Some of the major findings of the research conducted on the program are: participants learned the information the program teaches; participants were able to achieve the goals they set, found the process easier than they expected, and thought they had learned quite a bit about how to set goals; participants had better school attendance (as compared to a control group); male participants did not report the same increase in health-compromising behaviors such as getting drunk, smoking cigarettes, and drinking beer and liquor as was found in the control group; male participants reported a decrease in violent and other problem behavior as compared to a control group who reported an increase in these behaviors; and participants thought the GOAL program was fun, useful, important, and something that would be helpful for their friends (Meyer, Burgess, & Danish, 1996; Meyer & Danish, 1996). Other studies are ongoing. In sum, the GOAL program has been well-received in the cities where it has been taught and evaluated.

**Developing a Sports-Based Life Skills Program**

For the most part, GOAL has been taught in schools. However, in 1992, the Life Skills Center was asked by the city of Richmond and an organization called Richmond Soccer Start to join them in piloting a Saturday morning program that combined soccer and life skills. The program was designed to provide opportunities for inner-city youth to take part in a soccer clinic and learn life skills. Developed as a sports clinic, there were three components: demonstration of soccer skills, instruction, and life skills. Forty-five 6th and 7th grade boys and girls from two middle schools participated in the pilot which was funded by NationsBank. We used high school students, who were varsity athletes, as trainers but found that they were not sufficiently skilled in teaching soccer to be effective.

Center staff then were asked to collaborate with the NCAA's YES (Youth Education through Sports) Program to develop an enrichment (life skills) component. In this program, we had college student-athletes serve as the role models by teaching the enrichment component and demonstrating and assisting in teaching sport skills.

In 1993-94, the Center received a grant from the U.S. Diving Federation to offer GOAL to junior-level divers nationally. The U.S. Diving GOAL program involved 55 Junior Olympic (JO) Zone Championship qualifiers being trained to teach GOAL following the championships and then teaching it to younger divers during regional clinics. Rather than conducting the program one-hour per day, six
of the sessions were conducted as part of a one-day workshop. The program was taught in 18 diving clubs around the country. The specifics of how this program was implemented and the results of the program are presented elsewhere (Lindstrom & Meyer, 1994). Although the focus of the program was to learn life skills as opposed to sport-specific skills, the setting was a sport setting and as with our other life-skills programs, the transferability of the skills from the sport to the nonsport domain was stressed.

In 1994, the Center was asked to train staff for a Mentoring Clinic in Golf and Tennis sponsored by the Black Women in Sports Foundation. In each of the 10 cities in which the clinics were implemented, 50 to 75 African American mentors and an equal number of mentees were identified. As part of the program, four individual clinics were held in which mentors and mentees learned beginning golf and tennis skills and some segments of the GOAL Program, especially how to set a goal and how to develop a plan to reach the goal. These goal-setting and attainment activities were applied to both the sport skills and to life skills. These sport activities where GOAL was taught became the precursor to the development of the SUPER Program (Danish, Nellen, & Owens, 1996).

**SUPER: Sports United to Promote Education and Recreation**

The goals of the SUPER Program are for each participant to leave the program with the understanding that: (a) there are effective and accessible student-athlete role models; (b) physical and mental skills are important for both sport and life; (c) it is important to set and attain goals in sport; (d) it is important to set and attain goals in life; and (e) roadblocks to goals can be overcome.

In SUPER, well-trained, college-level student-athletes are chosen to teach the program to younger adolescents. As with GOAL, we have chosen a model where peers teach other peers—an educational pyramid (Seidman & Rappaport, 1974). The structural premise of the model we use is that if life skills are taught at all levels of participation, it will maximize the positive effect that these skills can have for all the levels of participants involved in the program. This pyramid starts with the Life Skills Center staff, who develop the intervention and then teach the SUPER student-athlete leaders how to implement the intervention. The SUPER leaders then teach SUPER to the target audience, the younger peers.

The training for the leaders ranges between 10 and 20 hours. Leaders participate in sessions on how to speak to groups; how to organize a clinic; how to teach a sport and life skill, their similarities and differences; how to be a good listener; how to transfer skills between different but similar areas (thus increasing the leaders' awareness of their competence in many dimensions); and how to work effectively with teams comprising both peers and adults. The content of the training is skills-oriented. Our ultimate goal is to extend the pyramid by training on-site, community professionals how to select and train SUPER leaders as we have done with GOAL.

There are a number of advantages to this implementation strategy. First, by using older peers, there is a potential for choosing natural, indigenous leaders to serve as role models. Second, there has been an increasing awareness of the mutual benefits to the peer leaders and the younger students. Riessman (1976) identified what he called the “helper therapy principle.” He noted that the “helper”
gained a sense of power, control, and being needed through the helping process. More recently, Lindstrom and Meyer (1994) found similar benefits among senior-level U.S. Diving Federation high school divers. By teaching others how to succeed, the peer teacher’s ability to succeed is enhanced and new leadership skills are developed.

We believe it is critical to prepare a new generation of leaders from today’s college and high school students. Our perspective on leadership is based on DePree’s (1989) definition. Leaders are people who facilitate others (individuals, families, organizations, and/or communities) in reaching their potential. This process involves: (a) helping others identify goals related to their potential, (b) instilling in them the confidence to reach these goals, (c) teaching them to develop and implement a plan to attain these goals, and (d) encouraging them to share with others in their community what they have learned. In other words, leaders have the life skills that are necessary for success as well as the commitment and vision required to use their skills and knowledge to help others succeed.

SUPER leaders are involved in three sets of activities with their younger peers. They teach sport skills related to specific sports, coach the students to improve their sport performance, and teach them life skills related to sports. Sometimes the life skills are the skills of the GOAL Program. If the participants have already been taught GOAL, other life skills are taught.

The student-athlete leaders are taught how skills are learned, how to teach sport skills to athletes who are less able and experienced, and how to use sport observation strategies. They are told that when they instruct, demonstrate, and conduct practices, they need to focus on how the students are participating as opposed to just how well they are performing and participating. Understanding “how” provides information on the mental skills that the youth employ in dealing with coaching/teaching and may be indicative of how they will respond to other forms of instruction, such as school and job training. Observing “how” participants react gives the leader the answers to such questions as: (a) Are the students attentive when given instructions or observing demonstration? (b) Do they become frustrated with themselves when they cannot perform the activity to their expectations and does this frustration impede or enhance later efforts? (c) Are they first to initiate questions when they do not understand something being taught or do they wait quietly for someone else to talk first? (d) Are they first to initiate conversation with group members or do they wait for someone else to talk to them first? (e) How do they react when they have a good performance; a bad performance? (f) How do they react when others have a good performance; a bad performance? (g) How do they react when someone gives them praise; criticism? (h) Do they give up when they can’t do as well as they would like, or as well as others, or do they continue to practice in a determined manner to learn the skill? (i) Do they compete or cooperate with the other youth?

We ask the SUPER leaders to speak to the students about what they have observed. They are asked to explain what they have learned by observing the students’ activities and help them explore what this means to them. We expect that the leaders will spend at least one minute with each individual to discuss the “hows” of their performance (separate from the “how wells”) during each session of the sport clinics.
In addition to our pilot efforts described previously, SUPER has served as the basis for a summer camp conducted in conjunction with a school system and also has been implemented at a neighborhood youth center during the summer.

One of the life skills we teach in SUPER is what it means to be competitive and successful in sport and life. We believe that competition is best when individuals learn to compete against themselves and their potential. It is our belief that sport has become a setting where violence is commonplace because athletes lack a realistic yardstick with which to measure their success and, as a result, do not develop respect for themselves. If, and this is often the case, these athletes either don’t respect themselves or have an inflated sense of their own importance, life becomes a competition against others, and the nature of interactions with others, both friend and foe, almost parallels the sport environment. Young people who adopt this win-lose perspective then find it a small step to begin trash-talking, “dissing,” or “in-your-face” actions. The result of this interaction is usually lose-lose, either because they do not do (or are unable to do) consequence analysis thinking or because they do not think “losing” matters given their sense of hopelessness and lack of positive future expectations.

An alternative is to develop a win-win environment. However, approaches such as peer mediation may not be the answer because the individuals may not have had any previous “life wins” nor know-how to win while others win. To learn how to “win” while others “win,” adolescents first must be taught to change the nature of how they compete. They must learn to compete against themselves and their own potential rather than against other people. While no one actually beats their potential, such an orientation teaches youth to focus on their performance rather than on others. The result is that they see changes in their competence, experience some “life wins,” and feel less inclined to need others to fail for them to feel successful (Danish, 1996b). By adopting this perspective, score becomes less important and the quality of play and execution level becomes the focus. Instead of celebrating others’ failures, the focus changes to experiencing successes (Danish, 1995b).

Using a procedure based on imagery, Center staff have developed an activity that participants can use to shift the focus to competing against their potential (Danish, Brunelle, & Green, 1996). Additionally, because competition often leads to anger, Brunelle, Green, and Danish (1996) are developing an anger-management life-skill activity based on Brunelle’s thesis (1996).

**How Skills Learned in Sport Become Transferable**

SUPER is predicated on the assumption that the sport skills learned in the program can and do become used in other settings, and that the life skills learned by extension also can and do become used in sport. The process of transferability is not a natural one and must become part of the procedures used in teaching SUPER and any other sports-based program that is intended to have lasting effects.

For transferability to take place, participants first must believe that they have skills and qualities that are of value in other settings. Most young athletes do not recognize that many of the skills that they have acquired in order to play sports, or for that matter, survive in their neighborhoods, are transferable to other life areas. They must learn that they possess both physical and psychological skills. Too of-
ten, adolescents believe that excelling in sport only requires “the use of the body from the neck down.” There is a lot more to sports than just throwing a ball or moving quickly. As noted earlier, athletes must plan, set goals, make decisions, seek out instruction, and manage their arousal levels as a routine part of their athletic participation. Some of these same skills are necessary for success in other domains. Without mental skills, it is unlikely that an individual can succeed in any domain. When young athletes recognize that the mental skills they possess are critical to their success in sport, they not only improve their athletic performance but are in a position to transfer the skills to other areas.

However, it is not enough for individuals just to know that they possess physical and mental skills. They also must know how the skills were learned and in what context they were learned. Both types of skills are learned in the same fashion. Skills can be acquired through formal instruction or learned by trial and error. It is important for athletes to remember why they wanted to learn the skill and whether they have tried to use the skill in different contexts or settings. If they have tried to use the skill in other settings, it is helpful to explore their level of success; if they have not attempted to use the skill in other settings, it may be helpful to explore what has prevented them.

Individuals may lack confidence in their ability to learn new skills and apply them in different settings. They may fear failure or “looking bad.” If they lack an understanding of the new setting, the fear of the unknown may add to their hesitancy in attempting the skill. It may be necessary to provide information about the new setting and “coach” the student through the process of preparing for and implementing the skill. Some youth have so much of their personal identity tied up in one domain, such as sport, that they have little motivation to explore nonsport roles. They view themselves as successful athletes rather than successful people. This mindset can rob them of their confidence and prevent them from exploring nonsport roles. If they do not think they can be successful in other settings, they may choose not to explore other options.

GOAL or SUPER leaders need to help their younger peers understand that they possess valuable, transferable skills. If the participant is unwilling to take a risk and try to apply the skill in another setting, the leaders may teach the youth how to take the necessary risk. The leaders also may provide the social support necessary to help them transfer a skill.

Finally, not all skills are successfully transferred during the initial attempt. The initial failure may be due to a lack of information or experience necessary to adapt the skill to a new setting. Leaders may be able to provide the necessary domain-specific knowledge. Also, the material on rebounding in the GOAL Program may be helpful to review.

The Role of Sport Psychologists and Physical Educators in Teaching Life Skills

As with all skills, life skills are taught not caught (Hodge, 1988). Much of the education and training sport psychologists and physical educators have had will prove valuable in teaching life skills to youth. Key to their work in teaching life skills is the ability to assist adolescents in setting and attaining goals; a proficiency in identifying and transferring acquired physical and mental skills from one
domain to another domain; an understanding of adolescence and the physical, cognitive, affective, and social/interpersonal changes taking place during this period; designing or redesigning the life skill(s) to be learned; the ability to supervise and train peer leaders; and some training in counseling skills.

With the exception of counseling skills, sport psychologists and physical educators often already have the other skills. Training in counseling can be very helpful for life-skill educators. It helps them to better understand the specific developmental issues being experienced by the adolescent and assist in designing or reconfiguring the life skill to be taught. Listening to, and understanding, the adolescent is the first step. Effective listening involves not only understanding knowing how to reflect feeling and paraphrase but understanding how to give feedback, adopt the perspective of others, build rapport, help generate alternatives, and gain a commitment to action. There are a number of effective listening skills programs through which one can be taught these skills. These programs include: Helping Skills: A Basic Training Program (Danish, D’Augelli, & Hauer, 1980), The Skilled Helper (Egan, 1986), and Intentional Interviewing and Counseling (Ivey, 1983). However, to gain a working knowledge of basic counseling strategies, an individual would need to study and practice these strategies with extensive feedback and continued supervision.

The process of goal-setting is a critical one for both the GOAL and SUPER Programs, and counseling skills prove valuable during this activity. Several points about teaching goal-setting need to be emphasized. First, we are defining goals as task behaviors rather than outcome behaviors. In other words, goals are actions undertaken to reach some desired end not the end itself. Second, having participants “set goals for themselves” is critical. If the goal is more important to others than it is to the individual, it is unlikely it will be achieved. Unimportant goals are rarely accomplished. Therefore, to increase the likelihood that energy will be invested in goal attainment, it is important to help participants ascertain that the goal is important to them. Third, when goals are identified but not achieved, there are several better explanations other than “lack of motivation” for why the goal has not been attained. Reviewing the goal ladder and the rebounding workshops are important places to begin. To be an effective life-skills educator, developing some counseling skills will assist in implementing these programs effectively.

Conclusion

Adolescents today are taking more risks with their health, lives, and future than ever before. The number of illegitimate births to teenage girls has risen by more than half since 1980; marijuana use among 8th graders has doubled in just the past three years; arrests of young people for murder and manslaughter has gone up 60% since 1980; and better than 25% of youth 19 or older have not completed high school. Those who have become involved in these activities usually are involved in more than one of them, and there seems to be a common core of causes (Danish, 1996c). There is a lot of concern about what to do but few answers and even fewer efforts to find a solution. Using sport to teach life skills is not the answer; nothing is. However, reaching adolescents where they are and want to be (on the playgrounds and gymnasiums) and having peers they respect teach them how to succeed is one small, but important step.
Although less exciting, the future of our country is much more dependent on helping our youth reach their goals than it is on helping elite athletes win gold. Sport psychologists and physical educators, in general, are in an ideal place to make a difference. The proverbial ball is in our court.

References


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