

Journal of Coaching Education

Sports Teams as Moral Communities

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Summary of Presentation

What does it mean to speak of teams as moral communities and why are moral communities an ideal context for promoting moral development in youth and high school sports? Over and above achieving a sense of cohesiveness and togetherness, moral communities demand and elicit a commitment to shared ideals of fair play, respect, benevolence, trust, participation, and group responsibility. Sports teams embody and display these ideals when they practice and when they play. Living up to these ideals requires discipline and sacrifice.

Accepting discipline and learning to sacrifice are, according to the great French Sociologist, Emil Durkheim (1925/1973), at the heart of moral education which he equated with civic education. Durkheim argued that we readily accept discipline and make sacrifices out of respect for and attachment to the community. Why would anyone be willing to devote him or herself to a community of others? In community, we discover that we are “not alone.” The attachment to a community meets deep human longing to belong and to unite with others with a shared purpose. It is in community that one experiences the truth of the saying “that in giving to each other, we receive.” It is in community that we discover that we become so much a part of each other that we feel whatever happens to one, happens to us all.

Being a part of a whole helps players take an interest in the common good and to accept the discipline that comes with membership in a group. The willingness to abide by shared norms, which include formal rules and informal expectations, distinguishes a moral community from a group whose experience of unity is limited to a sense of camaraderie or fleeting sense of togetherness after a great win (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Coaches need to harness the power and intensity of team experiences in sports to transform their teams into true moral communities.

The first step toward becoming a coach or moral educator is to think of teams as transitional societies where players can discover the value of community and the necessity of discipline and responsibility. The next step is for coaches to give players a sense of ownership of the team. Coaches who take a “my way or the highway” approach to coaching simply misunderstand their role as moral educators (Power, Sheehan, Recker, & LaVoi, 2012). The team belongs to the players as well as the coach. Coaches develop ownership through team meetings in which players participate in setting team goals and in making team rules. The final step is for coaches to help players deliberate about their goals and rules. Coaches should lead moral discussions by acting as facilitators, and ask probing questions that challenge players’ thinking about right and



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wrong and the common good. Coaches need to resist the temptation of telling players what to do and instead help them to engage each others' reasoning and to develop shared norms and values. Teams may be the best context for teaching players how to function in a democratic society.



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Resources

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Power, F.C., Sheehan, K., Recker, B., & LaVoi, N. (2012). *Play like a champion today: Coaching manual*. Notre Dame, IN: Play Like a Champion Today.



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Authors Bios

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