BOOK REVIEW

True Competition: A Guide to Pursuing Excellence in Sport and Society

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Reviewed by K. Paul Nesselroade, Jr., Professor of Psychology, Asbury University.

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The central thesis of True Competition concerns identifying and then systematically examining the implications of a very important distinction in the world of human interactions: disentangling the concept of “competition” from what the authors refer to as “decompetition.” Both terms describe an individual’s approach to situations of “contest,” that is, where individuals are engaged in a test of some sort. The authors note that one can approach these contests from two very different perspectives: one of striving “with” others involved and the other of striving “against” others involved. This distinction, the authors carefully note, is often masked colloquially by a blanket use of the word “competition,” but they argue that a proper understanding of the difference between the two will have dramatic and wide-ranging implications regarding how the contest is approached and experienced.

The authors do an excellent job of not simply dismissing the classic critiques against competition. They adequately, albeit briefly, describe Sherif’s seminal work in the “Robbers Cave Experiments,” Deutsch’s “Social Interdependence Theory,” Kohn’s “No Contest: The Case Against Competition,” as well as a few others. The authors affirm the basic conclusions drawn by these time-honored investigations, but then provide further analysis that helps sharpen in the reader’s mind the critical difference between decompetition and true competition, thus rightly salvaging the good and noble aspects of sport and struggle.

After this etymological and philosophical work is done, the authors spend the rest of the book making careful and systematic distinctions between how a true competitor, as compared to a decompetitor, would approach various topics. The work done in these chapters is not simplistic, trite, or folksy. Real concepts are presented, real issues are addressed, and real counterarguments are weighed. For instance, the chapter on “motivation” makes a considerable effort to clearly distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, elaborate on various types of these motivations, and then discuss the importance of enjoyment and fun while also noting the need for the contest to be about more than mere pleasure. The chapter goes on to discuss the threat of external rewards and the relationship between various leadership styles and particular likely outcomes. Throughout the chapter the authors accurately and carefully draw on the work of numerous psychologists and other researchers in the social sciences. Following the chapter on motivation, the authors go on to address several other aspects of a typical contest in similar fashion and with similar quality and precision (every chapter is concluded with a complete set of
references for the reader’s benefit). These topics include the goals of the game (Goals), a proper perception of opponents (Opponents), the role of and attitude toward regulations (Regulations), and the pursuit of victory (Winning and Losing). The final chapter then summarizes the work by describing the features of the “ideal contest,” mostly written from a leader’s perspective.

Shields and Bredemeier have performed a tremendous service to anyone who aspires to lead a team; athletic or otherwise. Although the work done is careful and thorough, it is not overly technical or theoretical and should prove to be very accessible to the typical coach. For instance, the application of the general principles espoused in the book is aided by numerous examples and recognizable sports references. A critical eye might find some parts of the manuscript to be a bit slow and tedious. Furthermore, there are a few unfortunate and dated references (e.g., Penn State and Joe Paterno), which could superficially detract from the book. However, taken as a whole, it should prove to be well worth the time any coach or leader of a team would devote to it.

Being that the book is best categorized as one addressing moral values (i.e., what does it mean to be a good and “true competitor”), this would be an ideal resource for any coach who wanted to systematically lead his athletes through an exercise in individual or team introspection, perhaps for the purposes of developing a mission statement or other kinds of core team principles. For instance, coaches would be well served to make this an off-season or preseason reading requirement for their athletes. It may also be an excellent resource for athletic directors to use for the development of their coaches. More generally, this resource would be an excellent tool for anyone who wishes to bring to light the robust relationship between good sportsmanship and good living.