

Youth Sports and Character Development, Part I



by Mike Kayes

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I am pleased to share this inspirational story from author and activist Mike Kayes. Now retired from the investment business, he now dedicates his life to working with young people in a sports ministry to provide positive motivation and spiritual guidance. He has written several books. His websites <https://www.kayesbooks.com> and mikekayes10@outlook.com.

I'm sharing Mike's story in three parts. Here is part one. Please feel free to share it. ~ Tom DeWeese, President

The sixth in in my six-part series – “Six things we can do to make America better.”

Number Six: Integrate sports into the overall education experience

Focus on character development and maximize participation

Youth Sports and Character Development

In many ways, our public schools are failing our kids. That may seem too harsh, but I don't think it is an unfair statement, given our inability to solve the problems of school violence, teen suicide, drug use, and underachievement. What if we tried a new approach, centered around character development and widespread participation in athletics in middle school and high school? In my experience, a student's

attitude, effort, and commitment in the classroom can improve dramatically when they don the jersey of their school team. A sense of belonging to a team, and working toward a goal beyond one's own self-interest, can dramatically improve a student's attitude, motivation, and ability to cope with the challenges they face in their lives every day. The key is for every coach to be committed to character development and to connect participation in athletics with conduct in the classroom. Character development through sports transcends the athletic field, impacting attitudes and behaviors in school, home, and in the community.

The current situation:

- ◆ Low participation rates: No more than 20-25% of students compete in athletics in most large public schools.
- ◆ Inexperienced coaches: Most schools offer coaching positions first to teachers, many of which have never played the sport they are coaching.
- ◆ Resources are allocated primarily, if not solely, to the "elite" teams.
- ◆ Focus on winning in place of character development. In most instances, if a school focuses too much on the former, it will get neither. If a school focuses on the latter, over time, it is likely to achieve both.

What it should look like:

- ◆ Participation rates in athletics should be at least 70%. Virtually all students can be involved in some way – as athletes, cheerleaders, pep band, statisticians, or managers. As athletic participation becomes part of the school culture, participation naturally increases. I've witnessed this firsthand as the volunteer Athletic Director of a nearby Charter School. It is achievable.
- ◆ Coaches should be well-trained and experienced in each particular sport. Importantly, players will tune out a

coach who doesn't know what he or she is doing, thereby eliminating the opportunity to be impactful and to build character.

- ◆ Character development should ALWAYS be at the center of every aspect of the athletic program and experience at the school.

Why Character Development doesn't happen naturally at most schools:

- 1- A winning-at-all-cost mentality is rampant at most schools. Success is too often measured by the final score and the win-loss record. Success should be measured by effort, not by outcome. John Wooden's definition of success should be incorporated in the Athletic Department Handbook: "Success is a peace of mind which is a direct result of knowing that you did your best to become the best you are capable of becoming."

- 2- Parent behavior, as well as coach's behavior falls well short of modeling sportsmanship, compassion, and humility, which are key character traits athletics should teach. It all starts with the coach and the expectations he has for parent and player behavior. Respect for all participants – opponents, officials, and fans, should be demanded and modeled by the coaching staff.

- 3- Lack of a realization that character development isn't taught or learned in a classroom. It is forged under stressful situations. Some examples –

- ◆ Humility is learned by not running up the score, but by substituting for your starters against weaker opponents.
- ◆ Compassion is learned by congratulating your opponents before having a team celebration later in the locker room.
- ◆ Self-control is learned by not screaming at the official when he makes a bad call that penalizes your team in a critical situation.

- ♦ Honor is learned when you bench a star player for a school rules violation or for getting in trouble off the court.
- ♦ Servant leadership is learned when you assign duties and team responsibilities to the captains.
- ♦ Leadership is learned when you designate a player as a team captain who has never led anything in his or her life.
- ♦ Respect is learned when you require that your team leaves every gym or ballfield better than they found it.

Why coaches are so impactful:

I've given talks about sports countless times over the past three decades, and I always begin each conversation this way – *"Raise your hand if you remember the name of your first coach?"* In every talk, every hand goes up. Every hand, every time. Why?

The reason is sports reaches kids on an emotional level not found in virtually any other school-related activity. If, (and this is vitally important), the coach can demonstrate and coach the sport with enthusiasm and passion, the players will remember everything the coach says and does, sometimes for the rest of their lives. This dynamic happens whether the coach is a positive influence, building character and teaching life lessons, or is a negative influence, destroying character and self-confidence. Coaches are impactful, perhaps more impactful than some of them know.

Recommended changes:

Raise the bar of expectations for student athletes.

At my first practice as Head Varsity Basketball Coach, I explain to the kids that it is a privilege, not a right to play on the basketball team, and that part of this privilege means they have to do the right thing on the court, in the classroom, and at home. As basketball players they are now leaders at the school and are expected to act that way. I

explain that the type of leaders I expect are Servant Leaders.

Practical application – I explain to the players that I do not want to see them sitting together at lunchtime, but they should be sitting with students who no one wants to sit with. I've even assigned some kids on the team the responsibility to befriend another student who is struggling to make friends. Kids are amazing, resilient, and naturally compassionate if we set the bar high for this kind of behavior.

Practical application – I have pulled players out of practice and sent them to study hall in lieu of practice when they are underachieving or not giving much effort in the classroom. In all instances, the kids respond and get back on a positive track academically. I “expect” them to get the best grades they have ever gotten in the past, and they often respond. Athletic participation is a privilege, not a right, and one the kids don't want to squander by goofing off in school.

Encourage schools to offer a wide range of sports.

In the vast majority of cases, school administrators do not have a background of playing sports. Most don't understand the power of sports to build character and improve behavior in the classroom and at home. Hence, schools don't offer a full list of sports, they don't recruit and train the best coaching staff, and the focus shifts to winning-at-all-costs. Then they offer the one or two elite teams at the school. Participation drops or remains low.

Practical application – Several sports, including track and field, cross country, and swimming can have nearly unlimited numbers of students. As previously mentioned, virtually every student can participate in the athletic program in some fashion.

Encourage local colleges, professional teams, corporations, and philanthropists to give greater support to scholastic athletics.

Like all worthy causes, there is much work to be done. Even if it only transforms one kid, at one school, it is certainly worth it, isn't it?

[BIO: Meet Mike Kayes: For years writing has been an outlet for me to express my hopes, dreams, and frustrations related to topics I am passionate about. These include coaching youth basketball, character development through sports, education, and spirituality.

In the meantime, my prayer for you is that you will find your passion, if you haven't already, and that you will pursue it with a boldness that will make your journey personally fulfilling and inspiring to others.]

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