

The Development of Character Through Athletics

Dr. James A. Naismith

In looking back over the years we may very truthfully say that athletics have had a stormy career, and this has been especially true in educational institutions. In 1876 football became an intercollegiate sport in the United States though it had been accepted as such for many years in Canada and England. At first it was considered as a necessary evil, to be endured because of a desire of the students to compete against other institutions. The faculty refused to supervise or assist in the sports, and it was necessary for the students to carry on of their own volition. Somewhat later athletics became recognized as a means to develop brawn, and as the faculties were mainly concerned with the desire to develop mentality, sports received little encouragement from them. At this time the game had little interest for the spectators, and even though no admission was charged, the crowds were small. The players bought their own equipment, paid their own railway fares all for the fun of playing.

In the fall of 1890, six young men met in Springfield, Massachusetts at the Training School for Physical Directors. Without any correspondence or intercommunication these men from widely separated areas had come to the conclusion that athletics had a moral value, under certain circumstances. Most of these young men were preparing for the ministry as a life work. One had graduated from a seminary, another was a junior in another seminary, two were graduated from college in preparation, and one had been a Y.M.C.A. (YMCA) worker for some years. Each of these felt that there was a possibility of using athletics for the betterment of young men. One of these six was A. A. Stagg of Chicago University whose influence in Yale had been felt in his college life on the athletic field as well as off the field. He felt that the field of athletics was a better instrument in his hands for the building of character than preaching. A few years ago a newspaper said that A.A. Stagg was leaving athletics to take up the ministry. However, meeting him soon after this, I asked him how much truth there was in the statement. He made this answer, "If I could do nothing else, but to put out good athletic teams and to make fine athletes I would leave my work tomorrow. But so long as I can use athletics to make finer and better men, I will stick to my present work."

This had been his attitude before he came to Springfield and it has become deeper and more impressive as the years go by. Today he is called the dean of coaches and has been such for many years, due largely to his splendid influence in athletics.

Many think that there has been little or no progress made in this respect, but those who have been associated with athletics for years know the wonderful change that has taken place.

The student of today knows athletics only as they have been during the last six years, but to get a view of the progress that has been made we must go back at least four decades. Acts of sportsmanship that to us old times appear wonderful are accepted as commonplace. Only last year in a very closely contested race where either might have felt that he had won, while the judges were discussing the case the contestants were walking off the field with their arms around each other. Forty years ago the coaches would have been arguing with the officials while the contestants would have probably been indulging in a fist fight.

In a dual meet I was appointed head inspector. Knowing that one of the coaches was a superlative fighter for his team, I thought to forestall any trouble and asked how closely he wished us to rule on fouls. He said, "Don't worry; there won't be any fouls. Your men will be so far ahead that our men will not have a chance to make a foul, and I was properly taken aback at the change in his attitude.

Athletics may very definitely be used as an aid to develop good character but this is accomplished not by the individuals themselves, but by the officials who are responsible for their actions during the contest. If an official demands the respect of the teams through his fairness and good judgment, he may be exceedingly strict without complaint from the individuals. A team will very soon find that they are only defeating their own purpose by trying to infringe on the rules, and a coach soon recognizes the fact that he must train his men to strictly observe the rules. This fact is easily impressed on the spectators, and through the observance of the rules by the individuals on the team we may have a direct reaction upon a large group of people, as well as upon the players themselves.

There are some games that are played so close to the spectators that they can see when a player makes a foul. Under these conditions the official is compelled to enforce the rules. The team has been coached under the same set of rules that the official uses, and the spectators enjoy the game. While we may say that athletics affect the character of ~~the~~ the player it is in reality the regulation of the game that develops good character in the individual.

We often hear the statement that an activity does us no good unless we like it. But this is not true, as we may form a reflex even against our will and yet this reflex becomes a part of our equipment as truly as those that we acquire when we enjoy the activity. I have asked a great many young men who play the piano and enjoy it, if they have always enjoyed the activity. I usually get the answer that it was one of the hardships of their life but that their parents compelled them to practice a certain number of hours, and soon they began to enjoy it. Thus a reflex that is developed even against our will becomes a part of our character because it is a part of the combination.

The question may well be raised. What has brought this change? Some attribute it to the changed attitude of man to man in the business world carried over into the field of athletics. Others that the attitude has been carried over from athletics to business.

The late exposures of crooked business, racketeering, and wholesale corruption of officials would indicate that some of the bigger business is not leading in the purification of ethical standards.

On the other hand a few years ago there was an astute business man who enticed some professional ball players to desert the straight and narrow. Such a storm of protest went up about their conduct that we have a pretty good guarantee that the Profession of baseball, at least, is on the square. This, not so much because human nature is different in baseball players, and the general public, but in the one case they are before the public eye and in the other they are purposely under cover.

Many of our big business men were participants in athletics as players, managers, or fans. But who ever heard of men of the Capone, of Guzie type making a team--much less a conference of All American place in athletics. The present hero of America is a football coach who is lauded not only for his success, but also for his wholesome influence on the men under his care.

No process of deductive reasoning can settle the matter as to whether we can influence through the medium of athletics the character of the individual. The only method that will give us a correct conclusion is the inductive. By the multiplying of individual instances. The question may well be asked, have any players been so influenced? I could give instance after instance to show that athletics have been used to develop the best traits of character.

Tom (Cussing Tom) Smith was a splendid player, but he could not restrain his temper and would fight in every game and be ruled out. In his last year of competition, at the opening of the season, he came to me and told me that he would not fight once, and would not be put out of a single game. He kept his word, played the best game of his competition, and the team was ever victorious.

John Williams, a red-headed basketball player spent a good part of his time on the side lines because of his personal encounters during the game. He awoke one day to the fact that he was a hindrance to the team instead of a real help. He determined to control his temper and he did so. It was not long until he was captain of his team, and the last time I saw him he was a State Senator in Colorado.

Albert Hicks was brought up on a farm among mules, and understood how to talk to them, or any other party in very forceful language. His coachx cussed him out one evening and that night he turned in his suit, but later he was persuaded to return to the game. Next year he was made captain of the team and he confided to me his purpose, that while he was Captain of the team, he would never use that kind of language to his men and he kept his word.

The ideal has not yet been reached, but the progress that has been made in the last 40 years is an earnest example of the advance that will be made in the future.