

Are Competitive Sports Becoming Too Competitive?

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In a meeting I recently attended, I heard a member of the Harvard Varsity Club talk about the changes that have occurred in sports at Harvard over the last 15 to 20 years. I was an undergraduate student there and many athletes, including my roommates and me, all played multiple sports. That is no longer possible. Every sport has become a year-round participatory activity. If students want to be successful in a specific sport, they need to participate during the off-season activities as well. I was sad to hear that Harvard had succumbed to the “win at all costs” attitude—that it had not only accepted this position but also lost the balanced approach that I thought was unique to being a student athlete at Harvard. The Ivy League has been the last bastion of the student athlete at the division I level. Now, to my disappointment, even my alma mater has succumbed to the attitude of “winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.”¹ (Although Vince Lombardi is often credited with this quotation [even though it was UCLA Coach Red Sanders who first said it¹], he was later quoted as stressing that, “Winning isn’t everything. The will to win is the only thing.”²) My approach may be old-fashioned, but I believe it is important to maintain a balance in the college experience that includes academics, sports, social relationships, fine arts, and a myriad number of other interests that are unique to the individual student.

Robert Fulghum, the author of *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, says, “Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.”³ That would be an important thing to tell our children as we send them off to college or high school or to Little League sports.



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The year-round sports participation we see now at the division I level has led to an increased occurrence of injury and a “survival of the fittest” mentality among coaches when they recruit athletes for participation on a team. Not only that, but athletes are also continually encouraged to play despite health problems, and off-season activities do not warrant on-site coverage by the medical staff. Year-round participation is frequently supervised by the more senior players on the team or by the “strength and conditioning coaches.” If individuals do not coordinate their activities with the medical team, it truly does become a survival of the fittest. The ones who are able to continue to participate are the ones who do not get an injury, either by chance or by virtue of some unique physical qualities.

Michael Phelps’ accomplishments are remarkable, but the load he placed on himself is troubling, and this is not the appropriate course for every person. My fear is that with the promotion of stories like his, too many athletes will attempt the super-rigorous course he chose to become an Olympic champion. Most coaches in individual sports will tell you there is a stepwise progression of skills needed for success and that any interruption in that progression, such as an injury or time off for a balanced life, means the end of the athlete’s progression to the highest level.

I clearly recall a gymnast who sustained an injury and was told by three physicians that something should be done about the problem. A meeting was held with the athlete, the coach, and the physician, and the coach agreed that the problem be treated. However, nothing was ever done and subsequently, the athlete’s skills markedly diminished, with a failure to make the top six on the national team. The following year, the athlete was out of competitive gymnastics. That kind of disregard for the welfare of the athlete can only

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be condemned but unfortunately occurs too often in individual sports.

In colleges now, we find that high school seniors are forgoing their spring semester by completing their high school courses early and then enrolling in college so that they can participate in spring practice to be ready to play in the fall—without having the spring practice counted against their college years. Even in the Ivy League schools, freshmen are arriving in June, before other students begin classes, to participate

in unofficial workouts so they can have a step up in the fall.

It is important that coaches, the strength and conditioning staff, and the medical team, particularly the physicians, understand that athletes will encounter injuries and obstacles, and we need to be supportive because it can be an enormous stress in the athlete's life. It is our job to try to help athletes to recuperate and to revitalize themselves when they get in these situations. The year-round aspects of training are not conducive to

avoiding the effects of failure, and the concept of progressive levels of skill is questionable as a means to achieving a balanced life.

References

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