

## **Thinking *both* critically and positively about development through sport**

By: Andrew M. Guest, PhD  
The University of Portland

The idea of using sport as a tool for the general betterment of individuals and communities seems, based on the growing number of programs and organizations promoting development through sport, to have worldwide appeal. I find this fact both intellectually fascinating and full of practical potential. As such, I have devoted the last ten years of my life to both working with and studying a variety of development through sport endeavors. After earning a master's degree in sport studies I spent two years in the Republic of Malawi working through the United States Peace Corps as a physical education and school sport specialist for the national institute of education, I have worked with soccer and sport programs targeting at-risk youth in public housing projects in both Detroit and Chicago- two American cities renowned for their blighted and poverty stricken inner-cities, I was a project coordinator for a program using sport to facilitate child development for refugees in the Republic of Angola, and recently completed a PhD in human development at the University of Chicago during which I reflected upon development through sport programs with all the available means of social science.

Somewhat ironically, however, my experiences and belief in the potential of development through sport have led me towards a more critical perspective: I find myself resisting the grand claims made from the genuine enthusiasm and good intentions of people promoting the idea of development through sport. In casually looking through the promotional rhetoric of development through sport programs I find ambitious organizations arguing that sport teaches people how to live a "positive life," that sport puts children on a path to "healthy development," that sport teaches "life-skills," that sport improves health, education, economies, that sport offers values of justice, peace, and honesty, and much more. Sport is presented as a panacea; the ultimate tool for improving lives. In this editorial I want to suggest these claims go too far. I am a sport fan, and I believe in the underlying endeavor of development through sport programs. But there is no panacea for development. Presenting sport as such may, in fact, be counter-productive. Presenting sport as a perfect tool for development has the potential to both establish unrealistic expectations and blind people to the intense challenge of really using sport well.

### *What exactly does sport do?*

In the popular imagination sport is a polarizing topic. On one pole are people who love sport, who view sport as the type of panacea outlined above. People such as the teacher at the mud and tin refugee school in Angola who believes so deeply and inspiringly in sport he spends all his precious free time volunteering to organize sport programs for children in the camp. People such as the enthusiastic administrators in American cities who train, recruit, and encourage others to get involved with their development through sport programs. On the other pole, however, are people who think of sport as the ultimate in frivolity. People such as the inner-city mother who despises the time her son spends messing around with basketball, believing it is keeping him from activities (such as school) that are likely to actually matter for his future. People such as the founders of the "International I Hate Sports Club," who claim on their web-site (<http://web.tampabay.rr.com/ssuck/index.htm>) that, among many other things, "sports fans have mush for brains." Encountering these polarities raises an interesting question: How can it be that there are such dichotomous understandings of what is fundamentally the same thing?

The answer that makes most sense to me, borrowing from the Olympic anthropologist John MacAloon, is to understand sport as an empty cultural form. While popular representations of sport often implicitly assume it has some intrinsic nature (either good or bad), sport itself is actually a neutral, or empty, practice that is filled in with meanings, values, and ideas by the culture in which it takes place and the individuals who take part. There are at least two significant implications of this idea for development through sport programs. One, the usefulness of sport for development depends entirely upon the manner in which sport is employed. Two, the understandings of sport employed by those using sport for developmental ends may be very different from the meaning of sport for those targeted for development.

It thus becomes essential, if development through sport is to actually occur, to critically evaluate the specific ways development through sport programs understand their endeavor. In my experiences and studies I most frequently run across four relevant understandings: the notion that “sport builds character” (in other words, sport develops particular psychosocial characteristics such as confidence, teamwork, leadership, etc.), the idea that sport provides instrumental distraction from deviant or detrimental activities, the promise of sport as a hook to get people involved in other productive developmental activities, and the vision of sport as building community and positive social relations that will enhance development (note: the first three of these rationales are borrowed from sociologist Douglas Hartman’s insightful sociological analysis of midnight basketball programs and what he calls the “sport as social service industry” in the United States). While I’m sure there are other rationales (including the idea that sport improves physical health) it seems to me these four are the most relevant in regard to the basic idea of development through sport. Granting that this is the case, it makes sense to consider each in turn.

#### *Does sport build character?*

In recent years the United Nations has rated Angola as statistically the worst place in the world to be a child. In working with a development through sport program in refugee camps in Angola, assuming it does not get much worse than having to take refuge in the worst place in the world to be child, a common conclusion is that children should be in terrible psychological condition. It is thus surprising to some people when I tell them that the children I worked with, mostly between the ages of five and twelve, mostly seemed to have remarkably positive psychological perspectives. I will never forget the spirit, enthusiasm, and vigor with which children who lived in splintering stick and tarp houses on a hard dirt field stretching between a rural school and a small electricity station took to ultimate Frisbee, an activity I initially felt almost embarrassed for introducing due to the seeming bizarre incongruity. Generally, in both formal surveys and informal observations the refugee children I worked with indicated reasonable levels of psychosocial competence within their environments; children in all communities have a remarkable ability to adapt.

Admittedly, most of the children I worked with had not directly experienced the trauma of combat (for the most part their families had simply lived in a dangerous area and been forced to move) and the people were justifiably unhappy with the circumstances of their lives. There is no question that global inequality is an urgent problem, and transient living amidst poverty creates massive psychological challenges. But my experiences have suggested that assuming structural poverty automatically equates with psychosocial dysfunction is at best unfair and at worst unjust. When development through sport programs assume that they have a set of psychosocial characteristics, qualities such as self-esteem, teamwork, resilience, and leadership, that they need to provide for children, those programs implicitly deny several important facts. They deny that children, even without sport, engage in their everyday life in ways that regularly craft adaptive psychosocial

characteristics within the context of their lives. And they deny that sport, as an empty cultural form, does not have a special or unique ability to craft psychosocial character.

The idea that sport directly socializes particular characteristics, historically discussed as “building character” and currently discussed as “developing life skills,” is both very popular and very difficult to support empirically. A large body of research makes clear that sport participation alone does not lead to any particular personality or set of psychosocial characteristics. Even casual observation of high level athletes makes clear that the characters of sportspeople are as diverse as the characters of the general population. For every sportsperson with high self-esteem, good cooperative skills, and the character of a leader, there is another sportsperson experiencing depression, dealing with accusations of selfishness, and engaging in drug use or cheating as a way of getting ahead.

Assuming that sport builds character automatically, regardless of a child’s personal experience, creates a risk of sport activities that actually offer children no direction whatsoever. Any characteristics that are developed through sport come through the process of interacting with coaches, leaders, teammates, parents, friends, and organizations. All of these can be either positive or negative influences, and all of these are present throughout the lives of children. For development through sport to occur, all of these thus need to be aware that they- not sport itself- are always building character and life-skills by interacting with and allowing children to express and engage with the reality of their daily experience.

#### *Does sport provide positive distraction?*

The idea that sport provides an opportunity for people to do something positive with time that would otherwise be spent in negative ways is easy to understand and strikingly popular. Particularly in my experiences with American inner-city communities, program coordinators and the general population perceive the threat of drugs and violence to be so pervasive that almost any distraction is considered healthy and useful. I have also found this rationale surprisingly popular amongst inner-city dwellers themselves. In my work in Chicago and Detroit I had innumerable parents and youth tell me that sport kept them busy. Even outside the United States, in one memorable interview a very successful soccer player in Malawi told me that sport kept him away from “so many dirty things.” This idea has even been included in public policy, most prominently in a past wave of support for “midnight basketball” programs as a way to get people off the streets at high crime hours.

Statistically, some data suggest these programs work; crime does seem to go down when individuals are otherwise engaged. But there are at least two relevant critiques: that simply distracting people provides only a temporary band-aid- it doesn’t really lead to development at all; and that promoting the need to distract “at-risk youth” creates an identity for these youth as dangerous and impulsive- it leads to the implicit assumption that those targeted for help would otherwise not be able to help themselves from being deviant.

Emphasizing the *usefulness* of sport as a distraction again requires the assumption that sport has a direct socialization effect. As noted above, this assumption seems unwarranted. In my experience, when sport is framed as a distraction people are more apt to recognize the flaws of assuming it automatically produces gains. When my Malawian friend discussed sport as keeping him away from “dirty things,” he did not simultaneously see sport producing positive developmental outcomes. It is as if one has a conception of sport as producing five units of developmental good, and depending on the framing those five units can either take a person from zero to plus five (as in

the notion that sport builds character), or from negative five to zero (as in the notion that sport is an instrumental distraction). As noted earlier, however, sport does not intrinsically create something positive. We all know cases of people who develop in the wrong direction- towards cheating, drug use, violence, arrogance, and possibly worse.

Emphasizing the usefulness of sport as a *distraction* requires the assumption that people targeted by development through sport programs need external help to be dissuaded from trouble. In other words, it re-enforces stereotypes and identities of people living in marginalized communities as dangerous and damned. Research psychologists regularly discuss such identities as producing “self-fulfilling prophecies” and creating “stereotype threat” in a way that causes people to live down to negative stereotypes. When a child in public housing developments, who already derogatively recognizes him or herself as a “ghetto kid,” learns that they need to be distracted so as not to commit crime, the child develops a conception of him or herself as a threat. Development through sport ideas often unintentionally, and unnecessarily, reinforce that self-concept.

#### *Is sport an attractive hook?*

No analytic perspective on sport can deny that it is immensely popular in all corners of the globe. Moving from that fact to the idea that sport provides an enticing hook with which to offer other opportunities and messages is an easy logical leap. Groups from religious missionaries to political parties regularly use sport as a vehicle for their messages, programs, and popularity. Likewise, many development through sport endeavors identify sport merely as an opportunity to draw attention to non-sport related developmental goals.

I’ve met many children that are quite aware of this hooking process. In both the United States and in Africa the popularity of attempting to use sport has a hook regularly creates an attitude towards sport of expectation. When working in the Chicago inner-city I had an innocent conversation with an eleven year old participant in a soccer program, asking her if she was going to attend the upcoming week-end of games. Exasperated with the number of activities she was attending, the girl responded “I do so much for this soccer program; when are you all going to something for me?” In Angola youth soccer players who seemed to spend most of their free time in dusty, ragged, and uniform-less pick-up games quit a league organized by an outside organization simply because they were not allowed to keep their uniforms. In Detroit a cherubic six-year old girl scored a basket and immediately turned to me with a huge smile on her face to ask “how much money do I get?”

Attaching messages, programs, and rewards to sport, no matter how honest the developmental intentions, regularly creates an expectation that sport is something to be undertaken only for unrelated extrinsic rewards. Ironically, of course, the initial and intuitive appeal of sport is that it should be fun for its own sake. And it can be. In my experience when children get immersed in sport activities, temporarily forgetting the hooks attached to whatever development-through-sport agenda is being promoted, they regularly experience the exuberant joy that so many of us value in sport. And that joy often does bring them back for more. But the effort to hook children with sport equally often produces an unintentional developmental by-product: the expectation that sport should only be undertaken when there is an immediate and tangible reward.

#### *Does sport build community?*

From my time working in the Republic of Malawi I have a vivid memory of riding a bus into the crumbling capital city of Lilongwe, seeing a draping banner hanging over the dusty road, and being shocked at the message that a national schools soccer tournament was “reducing juvenile

delinquency through sport.” The shock came because I had spent the last month discussing and reading about the various fights and conflicts between schools and communities that were taking part in the tournament. Far from “reducing juvenile delinquency” many Malawians I knew were talking about whether the tournament could go on amidst the animosity it engendered.

Intense competition in all parts of the world seems to produce a similar outcome. When emotions run high and competition is passionate, aggression and conflict are rarely far behind. Considering the ingredients, this product is unsurprising. In this framing the only surprise comes from the frequency with which sport is cited as a peace keeper. There is the admirable Olympic ideal of people putting their grudges aside out of respect for competition. But there is also the reality of sport, competition, and violence. Sport has started as many wars as it has ended.

Nevertheless, when figures with the intelligence and dignity of Kofi Annan and Nelson Mandela claim sport brings people together they cannot be altogether wrong. Clearly sport can serve to create a common goal that allows individuals within a community to unify, as was the case with South Africa after the end of apartheid. But sport can simultaneously serve to create an easy enmity between communities, as is the case in the regular reports of fighting between rival club supporters in European soccer. The essential point in relation to development through sport is to recognize that the ability of sport to bring people together and craft positive developmental experiences is far from automatic. Sport experiences have the potential to develop antagonism or affection; the choice often depends upon the nature of the competition and the care with which programs are designed.

*So, what is positive about development through sport?*

One of the driving motivations for my interest in development through sport programs is the memory of sitting in classes during graduate school reading and discussing extraordinarily critical perspectives on the role of sport in society. I felt that the critical vision of sport we read and discussed, a vision of sport as a social practice embedded with inequality and injustice, had nothing to do with my personal, overwhelmingly positive, experiences of sport. I thus felt compelled to challenge that vision- to redeem sport in the eyes of scholars and social scientists by studying how development through sport can work. Now that I am a social scientist, I look at my younger resistance as naïve. But not entirely wrong.

While I remain a sport fan, I have become something of an intellectual pragmatist. The popularity of sport makes it something that will inevitably be used towards developmental ends. The manner in which sport is used makes it something that will inevitably be critiqued towards academic ends. And the combination of the two makes sport something most useful when critically respected for the complexity it embodies as an empty cultural form.

Ultimately, the bad news about understanding sport as an empty cultural form is that it may not be the development panacea some organizations and individuals would like to believe. But the good news is that taking a critical perspective on the idea of development through sport can allow the popularity of sport to not be taken for granted. While sport is not a panacea, I remain convinced that when employed intelligently it can serve as a positive developmental influence. The thousands of smiles I have seen on the faces of children playing in diverse and distinct communities (complicated as they may be) tell me so.