

Performance *and* Moral Character: A Blueprint for Developing Character in Competitive Contexts

By:

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Introduction

When it comes to the topic of character development in performance contexts there are two common clichés; the first is spoken, the second unspoken. The first cliché: *Sport builds character* (more specifically, the competitive nature of sport builds character). The second cliché (the unspoken one): *Character development in the sport context is a luxury afforded those individuals uninterested in performance—that is, winning*. However, the fact is, neither sports specifically, nor competition generally, naturally develops positive character. Further, aspirations for performance excellence need not exclude goals for social and moral excellence.

It has been argued that there is nothing so practical as a good theory. What follows is meant to be a theoretical blueprint for developing character in performance environments. As a blueprint, it attempts to provide broad theoretical plans for constructing a sport experience that consistently develops good character. It is purposely broad to allow for significant custom crafting by coaches. Built around general principles, the blueprint is designed to help individuals and institutions plan, monitor, and evaluate their own specific approach to performance and character development. These principles do not advocate a specific program; the principles are not necessarily ordered by importance, nor do they preclude other principles. Rather, the Blueprint means to reflect key theoretical areas for consideration by those attempting to develop character in performance contexts.

This Blueprint has at least two foundational assumptions: First, character development and performance success are interconnected goals of co-equal importance. Second, when it comes to character development, myriad considerations (e.g. age, sport, context, developmental level) clearly mediate philosophical and pedagogical strategies, with certain ideas or actions appropriate in some contexts, and inappropriate in others. Just as there is no one theory of coaching, no one coaching style, there are many different character development theories. The guidelines offered here are meant to be theoretically sound and, given the limits of time, practically feasible.

The goal of the Blueprint is to construct a broad rubric for ongoing systematic reflection on both the ends and the means for the healthy growth of individuals and communities in a world that values competition. The Blueprint that follows offers some practical strategies; more importantly, it attempts to provide a catalyst for the ongoing development of new and diverse strategies, which will drive the evolution of the theoretical model itself. Character development is a process, not a program; a process that requires systematic and ongoing planning, dialogue, and reflective change. What follows is one articulation of the content and process involved in this important endeavor.

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1. Character is the composite of values that define an individual, team, or community; character is values in action.

The term “character” is frequently used, but rarely defined. In Greek character translates as “an enduring, or indelible mark.” Thus, character might best be defined as “values in action.” As we consider the character of an individual or community, we are most often referring to the cluster of core values consistently put into action. Whether we’re referring to an individual or a team, we wouldn’t describe them as possessing a certain character if their displays of behavior were atypical, erratic, or the result of luck. Just as one great performance doesn’t indicate a star, so too an accidental push that knocks someone off the curb saving them from an oncoming vehicle, doesn’t indicate a person of character. It is precisely when thoughts and actions are intentionally, consistently, freely, and logically chosen in the face of competing options that an individual or team may properly be said to have character.

Character is a visible manifestation of several inter-related processes: the display of honesty, respect, perseverance, or courage is the end product of one or more psychological processes, most often divided into three general categories--cognition,

affect, and behavior. And, while these three processes are frequently portrayed as separate—or at least separable—they are in fact interconnected, and nearly impossible to separate. Like a great jump-shot in basketball, a virtuoso musical delivery, or a technically perfect piece of writing, the display of character is comprised of numerous skills, skills for putting values into action. And, just as it is impossible to teach individuals to shoot a three-pointer by simply showing them a video or exhorting them to be better, it is impossible to teach someone to be honest utilizing similar strategies.

Most coaches recognize that achieving excellence requires hard work, perseverance, self-discipline, and determination. In other words, it requires performance character. **Performance character** refers to the knowledge, habits, and dispositions necessary for success in sport, school, the work place, and other performance contexts. Cultivating performance character includes: (1) Developing a strong work ethic and an internal commitment to putting forth one’s best effort; (2) Developing skills for realizing self-efficacy (confidence in one’s abilities), perseverance, and goal-setting; and (3) Developing a healthy achievement motivation and approach to competition.

Even if they don't always spend a great deal of time explicitly working on it—except to exhort players to possess it—most coaches acknowledge the importance of performance character, as the connections to achievement dividends aren't hard to identify. But the cultivation of performance character is only one part of a coach's educative charge. Coaches also must focus on developing their players' moral character.

Moral character refers to the intangibles of moral excellence—integrity, honesty, concern for others and for justice. Moral character moderates our personal desire for success with issues of justice and a concern for the greater good. The cultivation of moral character includes: (1) Developing a moral identity, whereby athletes see their moral-self as an essential part of themselves, (so essential in fact, that they feel a sense of betrayal when they do something other than what they feel is right) and have a conscience that is independent of social pressure to act in a way contrary to their beliefs; (2) Developing moral reasoning and problem-solving abilities, along with the skills required for democratic citizenship (including service and leadership as a team and within the wider community); and (3) Developing a healthy life-style and life-goals, and the self-control and self-discipline to

remain committed to these goals in the face of other, competing goals.

If, as coaches, we hope to develop a culture of excellence that creates good athletes and good people, then coaches must consistently and systematically develop *both* performance AND moral character. The legendary basketball coach, John Wooden, taught his *Pyramid of Success* each fall prior to the season. The *Pyramid* outlined the intangible character attributes—performance *and* moral--that would distinguish his UCLA basketball teams. He did not leave it to chance that his teams would have character; he taught it intentionally and proactively, which ensured the distinguishing mark of UCLA basketball would be lasting and positive. When the performance pressure is greatest, teams and individuals must have familiar skills and routines to act upon—whether it's shooting a big free-throw or telling the truth in a difficult situation. We're pretty good at developing the skills and routines needed for game time performance; we're less effective in developing the skills and routines of character.

The development of character requires knowledge, understanding, reasoning, commitment and habit; in addition, it requires specific social and

emotional skills for living out the psychological and social dimensions of the core values in varied contexts. For example, our knowledge and reasoning about honest and fair play may be put to the test when the context and people surrounding us affect our emotions. Just as sport skills must be practiced at game-speed, so too the social and emotional skills of character must match the intensity of the moral development context. And this becomes especially important when the public nature of sports is coupled with internal and external pressures to win and excel. As individuals, teams, and communities we will undoubtedly assume a distinguishing mark; the question is not whether we will have character, but whether our character will be carefully crafted or left to the forces of chance.

Practical Strategies:

- ❑ Through team dialogue, discuss the values that are important to your team. Be explicit in establishing the core values that will define you and your team. If you want a team of honest, fair, and respectful players, don't assume they'll become that way; help them to desire those values and to develop the skills to live them out.
- ❑ Utilize diverse strategies for teaching the core values. Don't simply preach about good character. Along with direct instruction, use team discussions, real-life examples,

- hypothetical situations, and other opportunities to practice using them.
- ❑ Provide time during team and/or individual meetings to help players construct a personal vision of their performance and moral identity, who they ultimately want to be as players and as people.
- ❑ Discuss the importance of a strong work ethic with players. Provide frequent opportunities for them to monitor their own work habits, as well as those of their teammates.
- ❑ Provide regular opportunities for players to set specific, measurable goals in *all* aspects of their lives (e.g., sport, school, character, and life). Help players develop skills to track progress toward their goals.
- ❑ Help athletes make connections between performance character and moral character by providing regular opportunities throughout the season to reflect on them (e.g., "How can I be a competitive athlete with integrity?").
- ❑ Define and practice the specific social and emotional skills required for living out the core values in and out of performance contexts (e.g., as a team, create strategies for refusing performance enhancing drugs; proactively develop strategies for controlling anger, handling peer pressure, and being respectful; encourage players to become involved in leadership and service learning opportunities in the school and community).

2. Character develops best when it is caught *and* taught.

Perhaps one question most accurately captures the crux of the debate over how character develops: Is character

caught or is it taught? In this question lies the heart of an age-old debate, pitting those who think character education is a process of direct instruction against those who view character education as a lived process or experience. Do we get character from simply being around others who value, possess, and/or model good character? Or, does character develop through the explicit teaching of knowledge, skills, and dispositions?

When asked how they contribute to character development most character educators—be they parents, teachers, coaches, or other individuals in leadership positions—tend to argue that they lead by example; that is, they tend to feel that individuals “catch” good character by being around good models. In part, this is true. However, this approach has some real weaknesses. First, those who make this claim generally mean to imply that “those around me catch all the good things I do or intend by my actions, but remain unaffected by the not so great things I do.” Second, most coaches dole out character development in direct proportion to the talent of the player; that is, the best players get more time and attention because they seem to be more important to the team’s performance. Finally, character

development, for many, implies a willingness to get rid of the bad apples—a willingness to fire, throw off the team, or kick out of the community—anyone who doesn’t seem to get the character message.

Many of these philosophies seem problematic. Coaches would never assume that players learn how to perform at the highest level simply by being around other great athletes—if only it were that easy! Instead, coaches explicitly teach the component skills within a sport, paying particular attention to the nuances of very specific aspects of the game. Coaches and leaders set an ideal performance and they use numerous teaching techniques to help others meet that ideal: they explicitly teach, they discuss with players, they observe and mimic exemplary technique. Shouldn’t the same be true for character development?

Character education is strongest when the three dimensions of character (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) are interconnected, when character is both caught *and* taught. Coaches must model and structure an experience that exemplifies the values they wish to teach (i.e., implicitly), while simultaneously labeling the actions of good character and the virtues they exemplify (i.e., explicit). This method effectively integrates modeling and cognition,

and provides at least one practical strategy for creating deep and lasting moral development growth. This process integrates the expectations of the community (moral knowledge of the core values) and the lived experience (moral behavior), which simultaneously connects to the internalization of the moral standards (moral emotion). In character development, as with any other performance domain, the goal of the leader or coach is to proactively structure challenges or opportunities for growth where individuals can develop through the assistance of teachers, parents, or peers. Although we never get it perfect; hopefully, we make strides towards perfection.

When we define and discuss the core values and reflect on the applications and breakdowns within our teams, we begin to assert control for shaping team character, rather than simply leaving it to the whims of good fortune. When we actively label the team processes, connect them to team norms, and discuss their importance, we increase the chance of seeing consistent and principled action.

Practical Strategies:

- ❑ Establish processes whereby all team members are held accountable for their actions (note that consequences don't always have to

- be equal for there to be accountability).
- ❑ Continuously discuss and consider together the rationale and importance of rituals, processes, and philosophies.
- ❑ Live out the values; discuss how and why they are important for individual and collective success; but if a breakdown does occur discuss that also—you don't have to be perfect to be a good teacher.
- ❑ Seek ways to integrate the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of character (e.g., discuss the game applications of core values; consistently refer back to them when discussing particular team decisions or incidents; help team members practice reasoning about moral issues by discussing them as a team when they arise; practice doing what is right, but difficult).
- ❑ Make player-centered problems team problems and involve the team in creating appropriate solutions.
- ❑ Don't assume team members "get it" from stimulating speeches; verify through discussion what, exactly, they did "get," or take away. It's always important to hear player perspectives and reactions in whatever context works best for your team (e.g., through team meetings, individual meetings, questionnaires, etc.).
- ❑ Model the elements of good character and explicitly discuss the importance of your actions.
- ❑ Empower players to care about and take responsibility for their own character and for the character of their teammates.
- ❑ Help players to see that "character development is an inside job," something that may begin in a group

context, but that must be constructed and attended to individually.

3. Individual character develops in and through a community context.

Even in the context of teams and communities, there is frequently an assumption that every individual bears sole responsibility for their individual success or failure. Too often we fail to acknowledge the powerful influence of the community on the individual. In nearly every instance, however, individual character develops within a community context (even in individual performance endeavors).

Clearly, character development—all development in fact—is mediated by a context. For good or for ill, the community context impacts the individual's experience. In fact, the experience of team and community is one of the primary sources of attachment that individuals seek. In general, the most successful teams have the best sense of community. (This doesn't always mean that the team is made up of friends who spend a great deal of time together outside of the performance; it simply suggests that team members know and accept their roles and see the importance of each team member). Teams also are distinguished by a particular character or mark; they are remembered as tough or

weak, cheap or fair. The community in turn leaves a mark on the individuals that make it up.

The experience of community is one of being known and needed, valued and supported—a reality that is clearly not reserved for a select few. This is why we join teams. The experience of community is as much a possibility for the role player and the every-day team member as it is for the superstars. Further, community is precisely an experience, a dynamic ever-changing experience, and not some stagnant entity. Your family, team, or town may always have the same name, location, and reason for existing; nevertheless, the experience of community is constantly changing. We can say that the authentic experience of community is one where there are shared norms and values, a place where community members are safe to express themselves and to pursue challenges, a place where the highest and broadest development is supported for and by every individual.

The experience of community is a double-edged sword: We often define community by demonstrating how the members of the community are alike (our common uniform, our common traditions, and ceremonies), and thus, distinct from other communities. This is a good thing. We

know ourselves as the football team, the concert band, the X-Brand Corporation; however, when that experience of community becomes exclusive, it can be a dangerous thing. This is the so-called “jockocracy” where a particular sports team is bonded together by intimidating, harassing, and demonstrating superiority over those not on the team.

Just as individuals do not develop in a vacuum, free from the influence of the community, so too communities are influenced by other macro-forces. Inevitably, the influence of parents, the larger community, and political and social forces affect teams, schools, and businesses. For example, sport communities are directly impacted by macro-forces in the policy arena, including state guidelines on the frequency and duration of practices, regulations regarding sport participation on Sundays and holidays, league realignments and other similar policy decisions. It is precisely because an individual community does not exist in a vacuum that communication between different groups is so important. If, in the ideal, we seek to develop closely knit communities with a strong sense of identity, communities that, nonetheless, are able to find connections to and an underlying respect for other

communities, it is vital that there be inter- and intra-communication regarding the shared and divergent values, goals, and expectations of different groups.

We can be known and needed in an authentic way without being the star of the team or the lead in the play. If all community members understand and accept their role, if all members value each contributor and the significance of their contribution, if we value teams as an end in themselves and not as an instrumental means to personal ends, then participants experience a deep sense of community.

Practical Strategies:

- ❑ Work collaboratively to establish team norms, rituals, rules, policies, etc., and constantly refer back to them.
- ❑ Attend to the needs of your team or organization with the same attention given the individuals on the team: Discuss team goals, the needs of the team, individual's responsibility to the team, etc.
- ❑ Seek ways to find common ground with other teams and organizations (e.g., take your team to the school play, find similarities between different fields of interest). Team members may have a variety of interests, which may serve as a guide.
- ❑ Involve parents, youth groups, and other stakeholders in your team or unit.

- ❑ Identify your community values and discuss their importance to the community.
- ❑ Provide opportunities for players to act in various roles on the team; emphasize the value and importance of each role for the team's overall success.

4. The development of performance and moral character requires healthy competition where competitors give their best and seek the best from their opponents.

At first glance it would seem that the very nature of competition is antithetical to positive character development. How so? For many, the notion of competition pits all individuals—even teammates and colleagues—as adversaries competing for limited resources (e.g., playing time, promotions, championships, etc.). This idea of competition stresses a war-like relationship: I win only when you lose, where all means are justified, and only one end ultimately matters—winning. Nevertheless, this notion of competition is at odds with the root meanings of the competition concept; in fact, it's a perversion of a concept that has much to offer character development. This isn't some kind of inauthentic, feel-good verbiage about "all for one and one for all"; it is a lived experience, grounded in the original roots of the Latin word, "com-petere"

meaning "to strive with."² In other words, we can only achieve our individual best when we challenge and support each other. For example, you earn a gold medal at the Olympics when I give my best performance. I achieve a personal best time (which doesn't necessarily mean I get first place) when your best effort pushes me to excel (or to achieve my best effort). In this way, we compete *with* each other, not *against* one another.

Teams, be they sport, classroom, or business, must create the structures and processes whereby participants come to feel as responsible for the growth of teammates as they do for their own development, because it is through the strength of the community that we get the most from ourselves. At every level of performance competition, new levels of excellence are achieved when participants find good competitors. This is true not only between teams, but also within them. For example, in his biography, *Drive*, Larry Bird describes the invaluable contribution of certain practice players, citing the commitment of these players as a direct contributor to the Celtic's success. By competing with the starters every day in practice, these practice players

² Competere: petere, Latin for "to strive;" com, meaning "with." For a more complete discussion of competition in sport, see D.L. Shields (May 12, 2001). *Opponents or Enemies: Rethinking the Nature of Competition*. University of Notre Dame.

brought forth new levels of excellence, which translated into performance success for the Celtics when they competed “for real.”

Although artists, musicians, businesspersons, and politicians reach new levels when they find good competitors to compete *with*, one may ask, “Aren’t we striving *against* our personal limitations and *against* the marks set by other competitors?” Absolutely. But, when we come to understand competition as “striving with” instead of “striving against,” we come to appreciate, to value, even to seek out good competitors, who will help us to get the most out of ourselves. This notion of competition also provides a legitimate and authentic role for all members of the team: I may be the lowest member on the team talent chart, but if I see my role as giving the starting team the very best competition so that they’re prepared to win on game day, in the process I tap into the depths of my own best potential.

Practical Strategies:

- ❑ Discuss and reflect on various perspectives of competition and find ways to redefine “winning” to include multiple winners.
- ❑ Help players establish processes designed to recognize personal bests, overall improvement, and other personal victories from games and practices.

- ❑ Discuss as a team ways to help each other maximize personal and team achievement.
- ❑ Have team members role-play various roles on the team, including those of coach and official.
- ❑ Continuously reflect as a team on *how* we win, as well as *that* we win.
- ❑ Avoid war-type analogies that pervert perspectives on competition & discuss potential problems with these analogies.
- ❑ Provide opportunities for team members to establish team goals.
- ❑ Be explicit about the individual and collective need for good competition.

5. The competitive climate and motivation orientation deeply impact the development of character and community.

When we discuss character development in contexts where game performance—that is, winning—matters, we must consider the nature of the competitive climate. The competitive climate is a crucial factor in both the development of character and the display of good sportsmanship. The competitive climate shapes our beliefs and guides our strategies for making sense of winning and losing. In essence the competitive climate concerns the locus of competitive control; it is centered around three key questions: 1) Who are we competing with? 2) What does it mean to win? and, 3) What are we competing for?

Regarding the first question, if we ask ourselves whom we are competing with, and the answers suggest another competitor, the other team, or another teammate, we may see the locus of our competitive control resting outside ourselves. Instead, participants should strive to keep the locus of control within themselves, to see the ultimate competition as a competition with themselves, the quest to actualize their fullest potential. Discussions of motivation orientation examine the reference point guiding an individual's competitive focus. The literature identifies two general types: an ego (or performance) orientation is one where a person is motivated to demonstrate competence in relation to others by showing superiority in the task at hand (e.g., by winning, by getting the most right, by getting credit or recognition for a good deed done). A task (or learning) orientation is where a person competes against self-referenced personal achievement (e.g., a better time than before, more right on this test than last time, fewer unnecessary interruptions of the class today than yesterday).

In addition to direct positive links to numerous performance outcomes (academic, athletic, and other), a task orientation tends to promote self-reflection and awareness, to support strong intrinsic

motivation, and to reduce helpless response to failure. By promoting a task orientation, leaders are providing participants the proverbial fishing pole, rather than the fish. For example, a basketball coach who defines victory by the quality of the minute details—the quality of our screens, our team defense, our shot selection, our passes, etc.—lays the groundwork for creating a team committed to self-improvement and focused on things they can control. This in turn often results in improved overall performance.

Doesn't the scoreboard ultimately matter? Yes. But the scoreboard tells only one part of the story. Sometimes you lose according to the scoreboard, but the quality of effort and execution indicate several levels of victory. This addresses the question of, "What does it mean to win?" When participants learn to see the quest for excellence as the ultimate victory, they are less likely to make winning a one-dimensional construct. Instead, task-oriented participants will create a multi-dimensional concept of winning that has more than the scoreboard, report card, or paycheck as the final measure of success.

A task orientation provides each member of the team—and the team itself—with overarching goals that can be broken into self-referenced particulars: the physical,

intellectual, social, and moral skills. These tasks can be practiced and monitored over time, simultaneously promoting cognition and habit. Cognition, in particular, is developed when participants learn to assess moral breakdowns, or failures. Whether it's a loss on the field or a moral breakdown in life, a task orientation provides participants the opportunity to feel a sense of control over their ability to change. As students set goals, monitor personal progress against those goals, and acquire skills to accurately attribute the antecedents of success and failure, they grow in their intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is present when we do something not as a means to some other end, but for the sheer love of it. We enjoy activities when we are adequately challenged, when we have a sense of control over our destiny, and when the process becomes the reward.

Task orientation is best accessed through discussions of performance character. Performance character centers on a personal conscience of craft rooted in doing our very best, on every detail in our control. A person with strong performance character is one who values attention to and mastery of the smallest details and does not obsess about things outside of their control. This kind of performance character can be

developed when participants learn to set, monitor, and re-establish clear goals for themselves. Further, this same process leads to success in all areas of life, be they intellectual, physical, or moral. This addresses our final question, "Why do we compete?" When we develop a task orientation we compete to strive for excellence; we compete to maximize our individual and collective potential. The trophies and other external incentives may provide additional motivation, but the root of our motivation rests in our quest for individual and collective excellence.

Practical Strategies:

- ❑ Make winning a multi-dimensional concept: have participants set overarching goals and as many sub-goals as possible.
- ❑ Help participants find ways to measure progress toward their chosen goals using self-referenced criteria.
- ❑ Focus team and individual attention on monitoring progress and raising the bar towards new challenges.
- ❑ Provide team members the necessary training and development to meet those challenges.
- ❑ Stress individual and collective excellence as the goal; downplay the scoreboard, trophies, and other external signs of victory.

6. Leadership requires skills and commitment far beyond game performance.

Competitive contexts seem to thrive upon longstanding metaphors and clichés, such as “sports build character,” “sports teach you about life,” and the other common cliché, “sports build leadership.” However, just as sports don’t naturally build character or teach participants about life, they don’t necessarily teach them about leadership either. In fact, if you asked most coaches, they would probably suggest that, “when it comes to leadership, players either get it at birth, or they don’t get it at all.” In other words, many assume that leadership can’t be taught, that it’s just a natural gift. Is this true? Is there a leadership gene? Are some individuals naturally more inclined to lead than others? Probably. Nevertheless, leadership can be developed; it just requires time, attention, and an understanding of how athletes view leadership.

When athletes hear the statement, “We need a leader to step up on this team,” they generally assume the coach is looking for a performance leader, someone who will take the big shot, make the big play, lead the others on to victory. While at times this may be true, more often, true leadership requires someone to step up and confront a player whose emotions are out of control. It requires

somebody who will continue cheering when all hope is lost. It requires someone who will push other team members to work harder—both on and off the field or court. This type of leadership is essential to character development through sport. And yet, athletes struggle to understand a notion of leadership that is not performance contingent. They see themselves as leaders only if and when they are the best game performer on the team. They might think, for example, “I’m having a great game tonight so at halftime I can tell others to stop whining to the officials.” Or, “I hardly ever get to play so I have no right to tell the best player on our team to stop sulking on the bench when they’re subbed out.” And, while many players and coaches feel that teams can have too many leaders, in fact the best teams are comprised entirely of leaders—that is, team members who lead at different times and in different ways, each according to their team role.

Leadership is a complex and multifaceted concept, but it can be taught. And when it is, it creates a direct and positive influence on performance and moral character. In general, leadership is predicated on at least three key constructs: honesty, responsibility, and respect. These concepts work together in the display of

leadership. Honesty means that individuals can be honest with themselves. It means that individuals can accurately assess their own strengths and weaknesses and assume their role within the structure of the team. Honesty also suggests that individuals are willing and able to accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses of their teammates. Responsibility reflects a commitment to do what is necessary for individual and team excellence, what is right but frequently difficult. It may mean taking responsibility for one's own behaviors, or for confronting others that are ignoring their responsibilities. In a team setting, responsibilities change based on an individual's role on the team. As the tenth player on a basketball team, my responsibility may be to communicate an honest belief that a teammate (or all of my teammates) needs to work harder in practice; it may mean confronting a starting player who has just sulked off the court. As the star player on my basketball team, it may mean taking a big shot even when I'm not playing well. It may mean supporting other players who are having a bad night. Respect is the core value that moderates the honest execution of responsibility. Respect for self, respect for the team, respect for the dignity of the individual and for their particular

struggles, respect for the game: all these dimensions provide an inter- and intra-personal buffer that tempers what and how we communicate.

If we want players to lead—on and off the court—we must continuously discuss what leadership skills are required in a particular role. As roles change, so do the nuances of leadership. Leadership tactics that might be appropriate and effective on a sport team may not be as effective in a classroom or social setting. We cannot assume that one set of skills or a single leadership style will work in every environment.

Practical Strategies:

- ❑ Discuss and define the hallmark qualities of leadership: honesty, responsibility, and respect.
- ❑ Discuss opportunities for leadership and empower members of your team to be a leader in their particular role.
- ❑ Realize that if players are to be leaders in other areas of their lives, the requisite skills and styles must be developed; develop leadership skills that extend beyond game performance into the other areas of life (e.g., teach players to lead in school, in their communities, etc.).
- ❑ If you have team captains, choose these based on leadership skills, not necessarily game performance.
- ❑ Cultivate a team climate where honesty is valued and not seen as a threat, and where respect moderates honesty.

7. Communication is the operating system that drives character development, without it we cannot progress.

It has been argued that, “character development is an inside job,” a task that individuals must personally attend to, something that can’t be done for them. In essence this is true, as the individual must be committed to a process of change and improvement. Coaches, however, can do many things to foster individual and team character.

Nearly every opportunity for character development is linked to communication. Communication is clearly the force that drives character development. For better or worse, the content of character is revealed through and developed by the process of communication: what we say and how we say it, what we don’t say and what we don’t allow others to say, our written words, as well as our physical actions and body language; this is how character is developed (and revealed!).

When we consider communication as the master process for accomplishing character development, many understand this as a monologue not a dialogue; they see communication as an exclusively didactic, unidirectional attempt to get the moral of the story across to the other. Too often coaches

see themselves as the primary communicator, believing that they must provide the magic words of inspiration, tactical insight, or moral guidance athletes need to become moral citizens—in their sport and in life beyond. In fact, an elaborate communication web is required: all members of the immediate and extended team need effective communication for the optimal character development experience.

Imagine the following activity as a metaphor for the web of communication necessary for optimal character development: the head coach of the team holds in his possession a ball of yarn; the coach then throws the ball to the assistant coach, holding on to the end of the string; the assistant coach next throws the ball to the captain on the team, who in turn passes the yarn to another player, and so on. Upon receiving the yarn, each team player throws the ball to another team member always holding on to their particular end of the string. This is the reality of the communication web: it begins with the coach but must extend to and between all team constituents—players, parents, and fans. The web becomes stronger as more and more strands are added to the web. The string that stretches between constituents is symbolic of the dialogue that should take place. It shouldn’t

be simply a monologue dominated by any one stakeholder. Good dialogue between coaches and players that bounces the ball of yarn back and forth repeatedly will form cable-like strength and will be supported and reinforced through the communication between other stakeholders. A single-direction, one-dimensional strand of communication is easily severed; but, a sinewy and complex web of communication is resilient against isolated communication breakdowns.

To convince coaches of the importance of good communication between themselves and their players is not a hard sell; it's a little more difficult to convince coaches that they must provide outlets for players to communicate back to the coach, and even more difficult to convince them of the importance of communication between players. However, coaches need to make sure they are clearly communicating the performance *and* character goals for each meeting or contest, followed by opportunities for questions and comments from players regarding the tasks at hand. Are there times when the coach's voice is the only voice heard? You bet. We certainly don't want to open up the team discussion during a timeout in the last seconds of a big game—but we might, because players frequently

have insights into game situations and other team issues. Regardless, there should be consistent opportunities where players can communicate to the coach their experiences on the team, and outside of the team. This might take the form of brief meetings with the coach, team meetings, or other avenues for communication. The important thing is that communication should not be viewed as occurring only between the coach and the star players, as something used when things are going great, or as a last resort when things have run terribly amuck. Rather, it should be recognized as an invaluable medium through which individual and team character is proactively developed.

Communication among players is just as important as communication between coaches and players, if not more so. If players come to rely exclusively on coaches to settle disputes, communicate norms, and hold players accountable for performance and character expectations, the team and individual character will never reach its full potential. Players must be empowered with the skills and the authority to communicate openly with each other. They must come to feel a sense of responsibility for teammates, a sense of responsibility that desires human excellence for teammates in all phases of life. This responsibility is rooted in honesty

(with self and others) and moderated by respect (for the other, for the game, and for the team). Moreover, the same standards of communication hold true for all team stakeholders (parent-parent, coach-parent, parent-athlete).

Practical Strategies:

- ❑ Use communication proactively to establish solid relationships, rather than simply to handle problems.
- ❑ Provide regular private time to talk with players individually—about performance *and* character issues.
- ❑ Encourage players to communicate openly and honestly with each other, spending extended time developing skills for communicating about difficult topics.
- ❑ Begin practices and games with clear communication of the character and performance goals for the game. End games and practices reflecting on relative effectiveness in reaching established goals.
- ❑ Engage in activities specifically designed to develop communication skills (e.g., specific activities where teammates offer each other praise and constructive criticism).
- ❑ Communicate team norms and expectations to parents at the outset of the season.
- ❑ Establish a plan for communicating with parents on a regular basis.

8. Sportsmanship is the final fruit of many vines.

If a single term can capture the ideal of character development in achievement or

performance settings, it is “sportsmanship.” For most, the term “sportsmanship” connotes a sense of justice or fair play; it suggests honest applications representing the spirit of the rules, respect for the game, for other participants, and for the officials. The term also implies an individual and collective responsibility for upholding the integrity of the game and the safety of the competitors.

Given that one term, “sportsmanship,” has such great meaning for achievement environments, many tend to focus on the direct cultivation of sportsmanship, usually through exhortation. On the face of it, this technique is not without merit; there is certainly nothing wrong with stating outright the importance of good sport behaviors. It is important to remember, however, that sportsmanship is the final fruit of many vines, including the particular community and the macro-forces influencing the community (the competitive atmosphere, the motivation orientation of the individual and the community, to name a few). Good sport behaviors generally represent a careful balancing act of values and end-goals.

Legislating sportsmanlike behavior is like legislating morality: it may produce the desired outcome changes, but frequently it fails to affect the internal disposition or instill long-term commitment from an individual or

community. Therefore, if sportsmanship represents the ideal—or at least one part of the ideal—then we must seek to understand all of the components that underlie it. We must go beyond exhortation and legislation to dialogue, reflection, and change. Sportsmanship is not always a black and white issue; there are times when one can attend to the letter of the law and directly violate the spirit of the law. When it comes to sportsmanship, most coaches and competitors identify certain absolutes, which they agree are always out of bounds. However, when it comes to good sportsmanship, the real controversies lie in the nuances: When does exuberance become “trash-talk”? When does healthy confidence become “fat and sassy”? When does the “hometown crowd” become an intrusion upon the game? When does a coach’s passion and intensity become an unhealthy threat to the participants?

If sportsmanship is an umbrella, then core values represent the wire frame enmeshed in the fabric of the umbrella. When we see the fully extended umbrella that is good sportsmanship, we are witnessing a perfect tension between countless values. Too much emphasis on one particular value and the umbrella rips; too little emphasis on other core values and

the umbrella sags. Like an illusive perfect game performance, it seems that we never get sportsmanship perfect; there are simply too many factors at play. However, we can continuously strive to reach the ideal of good sportsmanship.

Practical Strategies:

- ❑ Identify and promote widely the absolutes of good sport behavior: the moral boundaries that all can agree upon regarding safe and healthy participation.
- ❑ Provide ongoing opportunities for players, parents, and coaches to dialogue about the gray areas of good sport behavior (e.g., speaker-series, discussion groups, listserv or website), seeking always to grapple with and clarify those difficult issues that cause tension.
- ❑ Continue to educate participants on the multidimensional roots of poor sport behavior.
- ❑ Teach players to value the spirit of the rules, not simply the letter of the rules.

9. If we intend sports to be more than a game, we must extend the lessons beyond the fields, pools, and courts.

Ask coaches, educators, athletes, and parents the question, “What, exactly, do sports contribute to the life experience?” and in general, you will hear overwhelmingly positive affirmations on the contributions of sport to human development. Their

statements generally might be summarized in this way: "Sport develops, educates, and prepares individuals for life." We must ask, is there any merit to this contention that sport is preparation for life? It would seem that there is: sport does prepare you for life, but it may be a life of cheating, abuse, and crime, or it may be a life of integrity, growth, and overall flourishing. If we expect the lessons in sports to be positive, we must intentionally teach them as described in detail in the principles above. Furthermore, if we intend for the lessons of sport to extend beyond the fields, pools, and courts, we must devote the same level of attention to that endeavor. There is nothing to suggest that the lessons of sport magically transfer to other domains: sport participants are not magically better leaders, better citizens, better people.

Many times sport provides a world within a world where athletes come to accept stretching the letter and spirit of the rules as simply part of the game, always trying to get away with as much as possible in the quest to gain an advantage over an opponent. Athletes maintain their moral identity by convincing themselves that these transgressions are simply "gaming," things they only do in sport competition. Frequently, however, a pattern emerges where athletes dismiss all moral transgressions in all areas

of their life as gaming: cheating, shoplifting, physical and emotional intimidation, crooked business deals, are all reduced to a sort of game, a game without moral absolutes.

Lessons learned in sport are not without their dangers: emotional intensity, desire, resolve, physical strength development, the ability to suppress short term pain for long term gain all require that certain safety mechanisms be in place. For example, coaches who teach their players how to dominate their opponents both physically and emotionally also have a responsibility to discuss the dangers of using these techniques in other areas of life—and contact sports must provide an even heightened level of caution. Dominating on the football field and not taking "No" for an answer in the trenches of the line may be part of the game of football. But not taking "No" from a fellow co-ed in the dorm or in seeking certain types of professional advancement will result in huge moral losses—personal and societal.

The bottom line: sport has the potential for unique character development; however, potential can be for good or for ill, and its access depends in large part on the catalyst. While the character lessons learned in sport do not necessarily transfer to other domains of life, legitimate opportunities

do exist for positive development through sport. A particular strength of sport is its affective draw on sport participants. Athletes generally play sport by choice, based on their love of the game. This is not necessarily true of other activities in their life (e.g., school). Their intrinsic desire to play means athletes may be more likely to listen and attend to the desires of their coaches and teammates. Time spent at practice, bonding through the common endeavor, shared victories and defeats, all lend a sort of natural authority to coaches. Coaches must utilize the natural authority gained through their coaching competence on the performance side to positively influence player's goals and expectations in other areas of life. Coaches must explicitly discuss the performance and character standards for all areas of an athlete's life.

In sport the adage goes, "you play like you practice"; the same seems true in terms of character. Many individuals don't realize they're playing the character game most of the time. Coaches who allow sexist or racist talk on the bus, coaches who ignore below average school performances, coaches who don't support and encourage spiritual development, in sum, coaches who don't support the development of the complete person, run the risk of developing

human beings prepared to lose at the game of life.

Practical Strategies:

- ❑ Explicitly discuss team norms for areas outside of sport (academic life, social life, etc.).
- ❑ Provide strategies to help players find balance in all areas of life.
- ❑ Provide enrichment activities outside the sport realm for players (e.g., theatre, art, spirituality) so they can experience other life-outlets.
- ❑ Be specific in naming the sport lessons and their application in other areas of life.
- ❑ Promote a conscience of craft in players that challenges them to win and lose with integrity.
- ❑ Discourage gaming practices—both inside and outside of sport—which dismiss moral transgressions as opportunities to seek a competitive advantage.

10. Character development, like athletic performance, requires a reflective process of planning, evaluation, and revision.

Like the ever-illusive perfect sport performance, character development is never perfectly complete. There is no point in sports or character development at which a team or individual can remain: one is either moving forward or backward. Character development is a dynamic process, not a terminal product. As a dynamic process, it requires a never-ending cycle of planning and reflection. In sport, the

most successful coaches are organized and systematic in their planning, constantly tweaking the game plan to meet the next challenge, the next opponent, or evolving player development and personalities. The same is true for character development. While teams will have macro-level character and performance goals for the season, they also will need to identify a series of micro-level goals to guide day-to-day progress.

The key to coaching for character is cultivating reflective coaches and players. We might think about Reflective Coaches as good airline pilots: It is said that there exists a perfect parabola connecting any two destinations and that airline pilots engage in a constant process of righting the plane to keep it on that perfect path. Granted, they are off the perfect path more than they are on it, but they never stop the righting process. Reflective Coaches begin with some end goal for team and individual development. They then embark on a process of ongoing reflection and change. They use different tools for reading team progress and for making informed in-flight changes so as to arrive at the intended destination. Character development is a cyclical, never-ending process that requires constant planning, monitoring, and reflection.

If you don't know where you are, you can't know how to get where you want to go.

There are numerous strategies coaches can employ to plan and monitor character development. Team meetings at the outset of the season should identify team goals and values (for all stakeholders, including the players, coaches, and parents). At that same time, players should construct their own mission statement outlining their personal roles and goals as a member of the team. The players' mission statement should include sport goals, as well as goals for other areas of their life; it should also include a method for monitoring progress. Throughout the season coaches should integrate character as a regular part of their team process. By beginning practice or games with team meetings that outline performance and team goals and by providing opportunity for dialogue on other critical issues, coaches and players should come to see the character piece as absolutely integrated. For example, coaches might identify categories for framing practice or games that include offense, defense, and character. Under each area the coach would identify the keys to that game or practice in each of the areas.

Coaches can monitor relative effectiveness using a variety of tools. They can regularly discuss performance and

character progress with players during personal meetings with coaches. Call it the "two-minute drill" and have players meet with coach every week to discuss how things are going on and off the court. If an emerging issue requires more time, the player and coach then have an opportunity to schedule it. Have longer meetings (say ½ hour in length) at the beginning, middle, and end of the season. Provide a survey questionnaire to parents, fans, and officials to ascertain feedback on the perceived character of your team. Videotape all parts of the game (including the bench activity) and reflect on the character-based strengths and weaknesses revealed in the video. Conduct an end-of-year exit survey with each player to gather players' perceptions of the most important things they learned, the most valuable aspects of a coach's approach, and other elements of the experience that suggest the distinguishing mark left by this particular sport experience.

Practical Strategies:

- ❑ Hold two-minute individual meetings with players, coupled with longer meetings at the beginning, middle and end of each season.
- ❑ At the outset of each season, have a few role and goal sessions to plan and discuss individual and team goals.

- ❑ Integrate character as a regular part of the team process.
- ❑ Examine videotape on the displays of character by the team and discuss strengths and weaknesses as a team.
- ❑ Give attitudinal surveys to players.
- ❑ Survey parents, fans, and officials for their perceptions of team character.
- ❑ Conduct exit interviews or surveys that seek to determine the distinguishing aspects of the experience for players.

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Coach's Character Development Self-Evaluation Checklist

Directions:

The following check list is designed to provide information on coaches' approach to character development. The information WILL NOT be used to evaluate coaches. Rather, it provides important information that can guide future discussions of character development in sports. The checklist begins with several open-ended questions (items 1-3); please provide as much information as possible. Then, respond to each remaining item by circling the appropriate number to indicate how frequently you engage in the activity. (Additional space can be provided below each item for persons to explain their responses.

If you feel comfortable, please also provide the personal information below. It is helpful to see how perspectives differ based on coaching level and sport. It is not required, however, if you prefer to remain anonymous.

Name _____ Sport _____

Coaching Role _____ Grade/Level _____

1.) As a coach, I think character development involves...

2.) As a coach, I try to develop positive character in my players by...

3.) As a coach, I find the most frequent character-related problems we experience are...

Frequency Scale: The following scale should be added to items and should include an opportunity to “explain” in order to capture the specific thoughts or examples that informed a coach’s answer.

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
1	2	3	4	5

Explain:

Principle 1: *Character is the composite of values that define an individual, team, or community; character is values in action.*

1.1) At the beginning of the season, coaches, players, and their parents explicitly discuss the core values that will define our team.

1.2) As a team we regularly discuss our team’s values, what they mean, how we live them out, and why they are important.

1.3) Athletes are challenged throughout the season to develop *both* performance character (i.e., work ethic, perseverance, self-discipline) and moral character (i.e., respect, responsibility, honesty, caring).

1.4) Athletes have regular opportunities to set and track progress toward specific, measurable goals for performance character and moral character in *all* areas of their lives.

1.5) I use team and/or individual meetings to help athletes construct a vision of who they want to be as athletes *and* as people outside of sport.

Principle 2: *Character develops best when it is caught and taught.*

2.1) As a team, we regularly discuss the rationale and importance of team rituals, processes, and philosophies.

2.2) I make athlete-centered problems team problems and involve the team in creating appropriate solutions.

2.3) I model good character and explicitly discuss my actions, including my mistakes.

2.4) I empower athletes to take responsibility for their own character and for that of their teammates—in team situations *and* outside of sport.

2.5) I discuss the game applications of the core values and refer back to them when team decisions or incidents arise.

Principle 3: *Individual character develops in and through a community context.*

3.1) We establish team norms, rituals, rules, and policies as a team at the beginning of the season.

3.2) As a team, we discuss team goals, team needs, and each individual’s responsibility to the team.

3.3) We try to recognize and appreciate the accomplishments of other sport teams (not our own) and other non-sport activities (e.g., theater, band & chorus, etc.).

3.4) We utilize positive team-building activities (e.g., team meals, positive team activities, team service, etc.) and forbid all types of hazing.

3.5) I find specific roles for each member of the team and emphasize the value and importance of each role for overall team success.

Principle 4: *The development of performance and moral character requires healthy competition where competitors give their best and seek the best from their opponents.*

- 4.1) As a team, we regularly share perspectives on all aspects of competition—positive and negative.
- 4.2) We discuss ways to help each other improve and maximize personal and team achievement.
- 4.3) As a team, we reflect on *how* we win or lose, as well as *that* we won or lost.
- 4.4) I use and encourage positive language when talking about our opponents (e.g., worthy competitors vs. enemies; competitors that bring out our best, etc.).
- 4.5) I promote an attitude in my athletes that challenges them to win and lose with integrity.

Principle 5: *The competitive climate and motivation orientation deeply impact the development of character and community.*

- 5.1) Team members are given regular opportunities to set *personal* goals related to improving their character and their game performance.
- 5.2) I make winning a multi-dimensional concept by having my athletes set overarching goals (e.g., winning a certain number of games, making the playoffs, etc.), as well as sub-goals (e.g., personal records, personal improvement, etc).
- 5.3) I help my athletes find ways to measure progress toward their chosen goals.
- 5.4) I provide the skills and training necessary for helping athletes meet their goals—both performance and character.
- 5.5) I emphasize excellence, both individual and collective, as the ultimate goal and downplay the significance of the scoreboard, trophies, and other external signs of victory.

Principle 6: *Leadership requires skills and commitment far beyond game performance.*

- 6.1) On our team, we define and discuss the hallmark qualities of leadership (e.g., honesty, responsibility, and respect).
- 6.2) I talk with each of my athletes about their particular leadership opportunities.
- 6.3) I empower team members to be leaders in their particular role and in particular situations.
- 6.4) I spend time developing leadership skills in my athletes that extend beyond game performance so that they are prepared to be leaders in other areas of their lives.
- 6.5) Team captains are chosen based on their leadership skills, and not solely on their game performance.

Principle 7: *Communication is the operating system that drives character development, without it we cannot progress.*

- 7.1) If problems occur on our team, we discuss them together as a team.
- 7.2) I use communication to establish relationships with my athletes, as well as to solve problems or give instruction.
- 7.3) I provide regular time to talk individually with athletes about both performance and character issues.
- 7.4) I begin practice and games with a clear communication of the goals for the game, and

end games and practices with a reflection on how well we met our established goals.

7.5) I engage my team in activities specifically designed to develop open and honest communication skills.

Principle 8: *Sportsmanship is the final fruit of many vines.*

8.1) I discuss with my athletes the moral boundaries of safe and healthy sport participation.

8.2) I provide opportunities for dialogue with athletes and parents about the nuances or “gray areas” of good sport behavior.

8.3) I explicitly discourage all gaming practices (i.e., strategies that don’t necessarily violate the letter of the law, but do violate the spirit and detract from the true sport competition, such as pulling jerseys, tampering with equipment or facilities, etc.)

8.4) We discuss the importance of valuing the *spirit* of the rules, and not simply obeying the letter of the law.

8.5) I utilize contemporary examples of positive and negative sport behaviors as topics for discussion with my athletes.

Principle 9: *If we intend sports to be more than a game, we must extend the lessons beyond the fields, pools, and courts.*

9.1) I communicate the importance of good character in other areas of my athletes’ lives (i.e., outside of sport).

9.2) As a team, we explicitly discuss team norms for areas outside of sport.

9.3) I provide strategies to help my athletes achieve balance in all areas of life.

9.4) As a team we specifically name lessons learned through sport and outline their application in other areas of life.

9.5) I challenge my athletes to use their sport experiences to connect with and serve those in need.

Principle 10: *Character development, like athletic performance, requires a reflective process of planning, evaluation, and revision.*

10.1) I monitor individual character development and work with athletes to make a plan for improvement.

10.2) When reviewing videotapes of competitions, we reflect on the aspects of performance character and moral character for that competition.

10.3) I give surveys to monitor the attitudes and behaviors of my teams each season.

10.4) I survey the parents, fans, and officials to gain their perceptions of our team character.

10.5) I conduct exit-interviews with team members to determine the distinguishing aspects of their experience (e.g., “A character lesson I learned from being on this team is...”; “Something I would change to improve the character and performance of this team is...”).

ⁱ The authors also wish to recognize the significant contributions to the development of the Blueprint & Checklist by Jamie Arsenault, Athletic Director and Head Basketball Coach at the New Hampton School, and by David Shields, Clark Power, and Brenda Bredemeier at the Mendelson Center for Sports, Character & Community at the University of Notre Dame. Last revised 2/17/2004.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Matthew L. Davidson, Kelli Moran-Miller, and Jeffrey Pratt Beedy. "Performance and Moral Character: A Blueprint for Developing Character in Competitive Contexts." Center for the 4th and 5th Rs.

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