



Sport is serious business

Dennis Sleigh

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Forty years ago, I submitted my first article to an educational journal and I was very excited when it was accepted. I expected the whole world to pause and read it, but perhaps everyone was busy that day. One person who did read it was a fellow principal who made it very clear that he didn't like what I had written. The article, *A Thought on Sport*, was an attack on the way sport is handled in schools. My critic told me I had let down the entire Catholic education effort by implying that a preoccupation with sport was a fault. He insisted it was sport that made Catholic schools what they were, and to attack this was to undermine the efforts of countless teachers over the years. Perhaps his comments explain why I failed to gain a nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Forty years on, I still have reservations about school sport although my original article failed to address some of my current concerns. My thoughts on the topic were aroused recently when I heard someone talking about the 2012 Olympics. I was amazed that anyone could actually remember this far back but my companion was definitely an authority on the topic. He pointed out that only twice since our own magnificent Olympics in Melbourne (in 1956) had we done as badly, sinking to tenth place in the world medal rankings. "What," he demanded to know "are schools doing to redress this awful defeat?"

Personally, I have long believed that since Australia is the fifty first most populated nation on earth, accounting for only one-third of one per cent of the world's population, it is pretty impressive to come tenth as we did in the last Olympics. Certainly, it was nicer to come third or fourth, but fair's fair!

I mention this because I still believe that we are making more mistakes than we should in sports education. In saying this, I am conscious of the work being done by dedicated sports teachers, both specially qualified and otherwise, who look after our students and prepare them to take their place in the modern world. Their work is making a significant difference, but there are gaps that worry me, and they continue to exist in many schools.

What, then, are my concerns? I could list several, but I want to concentrate on four of these: elitism, the role of parents, general health concerns and some implications for class teachers.

Is sports education elitist?

A common charge made against sport in schools is that it concentrates primarily on the talented students and virtually ignores the less gifted. This is not a new charge, and it might indeed be said that the modern cohort of PE teachers try very hard to address this, by finding ways to involve those whose talents lie elsewhere.

Despite this admirable intention, it is hard to deny that the elite get most of the attention. In the ever-increasing range of interschool sports, which seem to take students out of class more than was once the case, it is the very successful sportsmen and women who are involved. "Of course that is the case," say the defenders of the status quo, "Why would you send your average or below-average players to represent your school in a sports carnival?"

The short answer to that is: we justify sport in our schools on the grounds that it is to help everyone to get fit and learn skills to take them through an active life – and then we devote most of our efforts to those people who already possess the skills. It is easy to understand that we only send the best away to competitions, because we are driven by a competitive spirit. However, let's not pretend that this sports program is for all. Imagine running a languages program for the whole school but only spending time on those who already speak the language fluently.

The whole question of competition needs to be re-examined in greater depth than can be done here, but I find it hard to understand how we can offer a school-wide sports program and then eliminate most of the school from the competition. I am reminded of the old footy coach who said "Son, in this school it is not winning that counts – it is how much we win by!"

The role of parents

We all know that some parents are an absolute disgrace when it comes to their behaviour on the sidelines, but I definitely believe that a lot of progress has been made in this respect in recent decades. This is great news for those parents who want to encourage their children to play their best without giving them the idea that only winning matters. Parents, after all, are the third leg of the milking stool when it comes to sport: players, coaches and parents. Coaches are often drawn from the ranks of parents, and every supportive parent knows that if it was not for their service as a driver, most games would not take place; the competitors would still be back home, 50 kilometres away.

Parents, however, have another role in the sporting program of a school: they are the ones who can help determine whether the school's program is about extra facilities for the better performers or about an equitable process for all children. This influence might be shown through school councils or through parent association meetings, but an even greater contribution is made by the way parents treat their children at home. If home is place where children are molly-coddled, never asked to play a role, and never faced with physical challenges, it is not unreasonable to expect such children to grow into lounge-lizards, whose only contact

with sport is through games on Wii or watching test matches on television.

Those parents who really want their children to develop physical attributes such as gross and fine motor skills, or emotional qualities such as sportsmanship, will try to make sure that there is always some time each day devoted to letting the children play in a relaxed manner. I am not referring to dancing classes or Tai Kwon Do – admirable those these programs are – but to totally unstructured activities such as riding around the local area with one's friends, or climbing trees or kicking a ball on the nearest oval. It is through these unstructured activities that children are exposed to the contrasting ideas of competition and co-operation; it is through them also that they learn to exercise muscles that they didn't realise they had. Above all, it is through this sort of activity that children learn something about using their free time without having every minute timetabled by school or home. In this way they might have some hope of learning those skills that will carry over into adulthood where time is harder to find and enthusiasm is harder to muster.

A final thought on the contribution of parents to sport: I have already alluded to the parental taxi drivers; they get their children to far-flung venues in the most appalling of weather conditions. I congratulate them on

their dedication and their service to their own children (and to their many seemingly-orphaned friends). However, I think that from time to time parents should also put a few resultant demands on these transported athletes. "If I drive you to Moombooldool on Saturday, you have to help me for an hour in the garden on Thursday afternoon." Not only does this improve the prospects of the garden being weeded, but it also teaches children that they cannot get through life with a "gimme" attitude; they need to pay back sometimes.

General health concerns

One of the many reasons offered in support of a serious sports program in school is that it contributes to healthier students and reduces such problems as obesity. This is all well and good – provided it actually happens. Indeed such spin-offs definitely occur in a school where enthusiastic and competent teachers implement a graded program that enables all participants to master a variety of physical skills and develop the correct psychological attitudes towards fitness. Sadly, in other schools, the program seems to be disjointed, incomplete and sometimes devoid of the mental underpinnings that encourage students to make physical activity a real part of their lives. You don't have to have been teaching for long to discover that many of your ex-



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students have abandoned all physical exercise and have embraced a life where, for them, sport is limited to watching the State of Origin on a plasma screen.

It is hard to determine what causes this relapse. It might indeed be that more time is needed to inculcate positive dietary and exercise habits; it might be that a greater realisation is needed by teachers – over and above the trained PE staff if you are lucky enough to have them – that the formation of good habits is a responsibility shared by the school and the home.

Over the years I have seen several young people who would fail Sportsmanship 101 and yet they turned into perfect sports. Some displayed high level athletic skills, others were mediocre, but they gradually learned a positive attitude to others. Interestingly, many of these gave sport a significant place in their life when they left school – whether it was golf or swimming, yachting or bowls. Because they had been challenged to abandon their lack of sportsmanship, they were helped to develop mindsets that enriched their sporting experience and enabled them to continue to pursue physical fitness for years.

Implications for class teachers

Every teacher would probably like to have healthy children in their class, just as they

would like to have students who study, parents who support them and an administration that gives them any necessary backing. Above all, they would like their students to attend school. (I am reminded of one obvious exception to this ideal picture: a young teacher who wrote a thank you letter to the parents of a very naughty child when they took her away for three weeks holiday during the term.)

Therein, of course, lies the rub. While every child has to do a certain amount of sport and PE each week, it is now all too common that the high achievers in the sporting fields will also miss additional time while absent at interschool competitions and carnivals. While a few might be able to cope with this absence, many are not exactly Rhodes Scholars and the time they miss is rarely made up – especially as the students themselves loathe giving up their own time to catch up with what they missed. The virtual demise of weekend sporting fixtures for schools (a feature of my schooling and my early career) means that the chances of a sports star being in class all year round are very slim.

Aggravating that situation many of the elite sports performers are equally skilled in a variety of games and by the time they attend all the events they qualify for, their formal education suffers badly. Boys seem particularly prone to this, especially those

living in areas where several codes of football are played. Dazzled by the huge sums of money offered to first grade football players, the students often see little value in academic studies. After all, they are confident that the AFL or ARL spotters are just waiting to see them in action before whipping them away to a life of untold luxury!

I envy (from a great distance) those people whose life balance includes a suitable level of physical activity, but I don't think schools can say this result stems from the way we handle sport. Indeed, while much credit is due to schools in this field, we must also accept some blame for any weaknesses in the system. Above all we must strongly resist calls to increase our sport allocation so that Australia can win more gold-plated medals in Rio. Our students deserve better. **ET**



Dennis Sleigh, a retired principal, now acts as a leadership consultant. He has been awarded Fellowships by both ACE and ACCEL and is a successful writer, with four books (two co-authored) and over 250 articles to his credit. Contact him at dwsleigh@tpg.com.au.



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