



KINGS' SP
CHARACTER COACHING
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Many make the claim that sport is good for character. And this makes sense. Sport provides competition, encourages teamwork and leadership, and regularly places us in positions of success and failure from which to grow.

So, it would make sense that sport improves character because it gives us opportunities to do so.

But is there any evidence for this? Is there any evidence that sport actually *does* improve character? It seems that there's little scientific evidence that exists to support this claim. However, this doesn't mean that sport is not good for character. It just means that maybe no one has looked for the evidence yet. Or maybe the impact is neutral. Perhaps sport is not necessarily good for character, but not necessarily bad either. Or may whether sport is good or bad depends on the individual.

In sports psychology we are really interested in why people demonstrate positive or negative behaviors and what we can do about that. Think of professional footballers who dive, rugby players who deliberately injure opponents, cyclists who take performance enhancing drugs, athletes who disrespect opponent, umpires, and referees. These kinds of negative behaviors are commonplace and tolerated within sport. But there are also positive behaviors such as the marathon runner who helps a collapsed competitor cross the finishing line.

Sport results in building resolve and resilience and mental toughness but character actually requires a **moral component**. Moral behavior is governed by people's values and people's values are determined largely by how they were raised and what they've experienced in life, what they think is important. People who have self-respect are people who live according to their own moral code and moral standards. We can also think about moral behavior in terms of inhibitive and proactive behaviors. Inhibitive Behaviors refer to refraining from doing something bad conversely proactive behaviors mean doing something good.

Kohlberg was the first psychologist in the US in 1958, to research morality. He would present moral dilemmas to participants, then analyze the way in which people responded to those dilemmas.

Would it be morally right for a husband to steal money to pay for a lifesaving drug for his wife that he cannot afford otherwise? Most people would say yes even though they would say it's wrong to steal. But if we changed the moral dilemma to would it be morally correct for him to steal the money or the drug to save a pet animal, would your answer change?

It's about analyzing our moral reasoning

if you think that the husband should steal the medicine or steal the money for the medicine to save a human life it is probably because you believe a human life has more fundamental value than the property rights of another person. This indicates and highlights something about your values and principles.

Kohlberg proposed a model of moralization, and this contained three levels of morality (pre conventional, conventional and post conventional) And within each level, there were two stages.

But it's important to note that progression through these levels is not automatic. In fact, some people get stuck at the lower levels.

1. The first level is doing what is right to avoid punishment. This is egocentric because it doesn't consider the interests of others. Just the interest of self
2. The second stage would be following rules only when it's in your immediate interest to do so. for example, doing what's right because there is a reward attached to it. Think of young children doing this. "Behave and in the grocery store and I'll get you an ice cream on the way home" This is again, individualistic, self-interest.
3. The third level of morality is doing what you're expected to do by the people close to you. This is a sort of need to be a good person in other people's eyes. At this point morality has some relational component
4. The fourth stage would be doing what you promised or agreed to do, fulfilling contractual agreements. You said you would, so you do. This is about behaving consistent with the roles and rules of a society.
5. The fifth level is being aware that you have an obligation to follow the law because of a general social contract. Not necessarily something you've agreed to but it's a pro social attitude. This stage shows an awareness of general social values and rights, good citizenship behavior.
6. The final stage which is considered the highest level of moral reasoning is not actually following a social code but following self-chosen ethical principles. This would be a moral point of view.

So, at the youngest stage or the earliest stages of moral development, it's all about following or breaking rules based on self-interest and what you can get away with. In the beginning, it's about simply avoiding punishment, which is common in young children as they're unable to reason at a sophisticated level and they do not consider other people

in their moral decision making. But as people develop, their morality *usually* matures, and they become more aware of others and relationships. Now if they do the right thing, it's not simply dictated by a rule or punishment. It's now influenced by people's expectations of them. At the conventional stage of morality, an individual wants to believe that they are a good person and want other people to consider them a good person and therefore that's why they behave the way they do. This is the motivating factor. For example, shaking hands after a game whether you've won or lost isn't part of the rule of a game, but it is a social expectation and to not do so would be considered unsporting. The post conventional stage of morality goes beyond society and expectation. Here the individual will follow their own carefully selected ethical principles rather than go along with the crowd.

For example, in the early 2000s, there was a lot of doping discovered in the Tour de France and many that were caught, blamed coercion, and said that within their team if they didn't take performance enhancing drugs, they would suffer the consequences from teammates and coaches. But someone in a post conventional level of morality wouldn't do this because they would have a more resilient approach to the ethical principles which wouldn't be governed by the opinions of others.

Understanding why we do what we do from a moral perspective is a sign of moral competence.

The British novelist, called CP Snow who said

“when you think of the long and gloomy history of man, you will find more heat hideous crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than have ever been committed in the name of rebellion”

We all do things below our normal moral standing. Very few children grow up picturing themselves winning an Olympic gold medal by cheating. So then, how does that happen?

Psychologists would explain it through a process called **Moral disengagement**. disengaging from our own moral or ethical code through a series of **psychological maneuvers**

Moral Disengagement Psychological Maneuvers examples:

1. Moral justification is cognitively restructuring harmful behaviors into honorable ones. Changing the meaning of something
2. Euphemistic labeling is labeling culpable activities as less harmful. An example of euphemistic labeling is instead of saying we broke the rules we say we are bending the rules. It doesn't sound as bad. But what's the difference in reality? The two are the same. But people don't want to feel guilty about breaking the rules. So,

they change the language from break to bend, because it doesn't sound as bad and therefore doesn't lead to as much guilt.

3. Advantageous comparison is comparing transgressive behaviors to more reprehensible ones (For example, telling yourself it's not as bad as what someone else is doing)
4. Passing on responsibility to someone else. Displacement of responsibility which is viewing personal actions as actually the directive of others. We also use diffusion of responsibility which is dividing responsibility among the group. So, displacement of responsibility in sport would be an example where a coach tells you to do something immoral, but you carry it out by telling yourself you're simply following orders or instructions.
5. Diffusion of responsibility. An example of diffusion of responsibility would be saying, well, you're doing it because everybody else is doing it. Or you lost a game because of how everyone performed rather than how you performed.
6. Reducing the expected consequences or Distortion of consequences minimizes harmful consequences of detrimental actions, and dehumanization. So that would look like depriving the victim of human qualities, seeing them as the enemy instead of seeing them as a fellow human.
7. Attribution of blame is viewing oneself as the victim. It moves the victim role to the perpetrator. So, you might do something wrong. Fake a foul in a competitive situation, and when caught but called out by the referee, play the role of the victim. These maneuvers often lead to physically aggressive behaviors.

Moral disengaging is disengaging from a moral code through a psychological maneuver. So moral disengagement is a series of psychological maneuvers a person goes through to convince themselves that normal ethical standards do not apply in a given situation.

But there are also examples of sportsmanship. One famous example is where Robbie Fowler playing for Liverpool against Arsenal in 1997. Fell over an England teammate David Seaman and was awarded a penalty but Robbie Fowler got up and told the referee that his decision was wrong and that he'd simply fell. An Australian cricketer during the semifinal of the 2003 World Cup who was not given the out, walked giving himself out

Athletes often morally disengage because they value winning over other more fundamentally accepted moral values.

Studies show that athletes tend to use moral reasoning pertaining to "It's not my fault" and "it's not that serious" to justify their actions. it's also true to say that athletes with mastery orientation or task orientation, tend to engage in fewer anti-social behaviors than those motivated by ego orientation.

So do people who cheat in sport also cheat in life and vice versa? Generally, psychological characteristics such as personality, mental toughness and emotional intelligence remain fairly stable in everyday life and in sport. But some suggest that sport, or games are conceptually and emotionally distinct from everyday life. Some would describe sport as **a world within a world** in which normal restraints of everyday life are temporarily set aside in favor of a conventionalized structure which allows typical moral norms to be transgressed. They would claim that sport is a unique context and emphasize sport morality differs from morality in everyday life.

This would be described as game reasoning or **bracketed morality**.

Since sport may be seen as spatially and temporarily separate from everyday life, the desire to win is a more temporary state than one's typical drive to be successful in life. Studies show that in high school and college athletes, the level of moral reasoning used in sport was significantly lower and less developed than the moral reasoning demonstrated outside of sport. Some suggests that the reason for this is that there's an extremely high ego orientation within sport, which results in the lower moral behavior or behavior.

Sportspersonship is used in place of sportsmanship and is defined by several factors including

1. Commitment to full participation
2. Respect for social conventions
3. Respect for rules and officials
4. Respect for the opponent
5. Lack of negative approach
6. Principled game perspective

A sense of play hard but play fair play fair

There is a bias in reporting. For every one negative act of bad Sportspersonship that is published there are 1000s of incidents and acts of good sporting behavior that don't make the headlines. There is a lot of fair play in sport. There are also psychological approaches to enhance fair play.

Building Sportspersonship includes things like

1. developing a mastery climate and orientation
2. building a moral community that sets standards for behavior and culture,
3. role taking

4. reflection
5. power transfer

For example, building a moral community is building a community that recognizes each person's character development, and includes rewards for good teamwork as well as good athletic performance, to encourage people to perform in a way that establishes a mini society that benefits all.

Role taking is then designed to develop empathy for others. Here, athletes would undertake the roles of other people to gain a greater understanding of what that's like. A particularly useful idea is to include the role of the official. You're likely to be more empathetic, kinder, and compassionate towards people once you have experienced what they experience.

Reflection is something that all coaches and psychologists should be encouraging athletes to do more of. By reflecting on your moral performance as well as athletic performance, you may be more driven towards improving both.

And finally, power transfer requires greater responsibility to be passed on to athletes. We tend to stick to rules we make, more than the rules of others. So as such, providing greater influence and not just rules but the direction and setting of rules and running the team, heightens athlete responsibility and accountability. This actually reduces the likelihood of moral disengagement.

So, can we develop character? If we accept the moral obligation in doing so we can improve the sportsmanship. We can increase motivation towards fair play and character integrity.

Compassion closely related to empathy, refers to an individual's ability to appreciate and care about the feelings of others and put themselves in someone else's shoes. For example, having just beaten an opponent we know that gloating would not elicit good emotional responses in them. And we would know that by putting ourselves in their shoes. Compassion is a form of love and is actually something that God Himself encourages from us.

Integrity is about maintaining moral intentions. So, integrity requires athletes to know what is right, believe they can do what is right and then carry it out. This is despite all other temptations. This requires mental toughness, emotional intelligence, and courage.

Attempts have been made to introduce greater moral development into sport for example, in school. One of the reported research studies in this area examined the impact of an educational activity program called fair play for kids. This included activities around problem solving for moral conflicts, identifying how to solve Fair Play dilemmas and

acting them out and then taking part in relay games to learn how to resolve team conflicts. In this particular study 450 elementary school children were divided into three groups and monitored for seven months. The first group had fair play for kids embedded in all parts of their curriculum. A second group had it embedded in the physical education sessions only and the third group was the control group who didn't take part in the program at all but their moral development was still measured. After seven months the two groups who took part in the program both displayed significantly more moral development in terms of moral judgment, reason, and intention. This shows that although it requires effort and training character can be developed, even in young athletes.

Imagine a situation where John is playing cricket for a school. While fielding the ball loops up towards him and he dives forward to catch it. It bounces an inch before his hand, but no one has seen this. His teammates cheer while the batter walks off. John must first interpret the situation, identify what options he has, make a choice, and then act upon it.

Character coaching or a program that sets goals for character development would include things like having John

1. Consider how someone else would feel, how he would feel if he were batting to encourage empathy and compassion
2. Character coaching would also include developing a mastery orientation to value winning less than mastery of a skill
3. Character coaching might include teaching John about Kohlberg moral levels of development, and thinking about what his own personal moral and ethical code is, and to what extent he wants to live by it.
4. It might also involve thinking through the concept of sport being a world within the world. Meaning, do we really want to set a separate set of moral standards for sport? Or do we instead want to live by a code of conduct that is consistent in sport and out of it? Moral bracketing
5. We might teach a love of the game more than a love of winning such that respect for the rules of the game trump cheating
6. We might want to give John practice moral dilemmas so that he can reason through these decisions outside of the pressures of a fame situation.
7. We would work to reduce all the different elements of psychological maneuvering, that allows moral disengagement.
8. And we would examine all the ways in which social environment and upbringing and personal experiences have influenced John's Moral Development. We would do this in order to analyze why the person believes some behaviors are acceptable, and others are not. And we would use this as the platform from which to develop improved moral reasoning and moral standards.

9. We would examine where John's identity lies. If he is imbalanced in terms of having too much focus on his sport identity – he may be liable to act in ways to protect it, at all costs. Creating a healthy identity outside of sport, is beneficial for moral behavior
10. As Christians we would discuss the fact that God sees all and judges all, including the heart. And that the moral principles of the bible are universal and eternal and should not be side-stepped for the sake of a game.

The psychologist Steven Pinker said moral goodness is what gives each of us a sense that we are worthy human beings. In many ways, moral goodness and moral reasoning is what distinguishes us from all other animal life on this planet. And is certainly part of how we are ultimately judged by God.