

My Case for Competition

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KIN 857 – Promoting Positive Youth Development Through Sport

I am basing my experience for this paper on my time coaching high school lacrosse. I worked at a small military school where the majority of my athletes were kids who no longer fit in the public school system and needless to say were not always stellar examples of model behavior. My case for competition comes from relating the studies and wisdom in Shields and Bredemier's book *True Competition: A Guide to Pursuing Excellence in Sport and Society* to my time with that team of young boys.

To start my case for competition I reiterate that my experience as a coach comes from a team of juvenile delinquents. I have had my share of athletes reaching physically aggressive levels during games and athletes desiring to compete for war-like reasons prior to tournaments. So when first discussing why I am for competition it is mandatory to look at the easy route – not competing at all. It aligns perfectly with Alfie Kohn's case against competition. Kohn is a contemporary author and lecturer on human behavior and is a fore-figure for progressive education. He has claimed that "Contrary to popular belief, competition doesn't lead to improved performance or increased productivity . . . Kohn cites numerous studies that all suggest that competition undermines performance." (Shields & Bredemier, 495)<sup>1</sup>. My time as a coach has provided numerous examples to back his claim. In point – it is hard for a player improve their skill when he is kicked out of the game.

The Robbers Cave Experiment, conducted in the 1950's in Oklahoma, provides sound evidence to support Kohn's feelings towards competition. The experiment took a group of young boys into a summer camp setting. They were divided into two groups and spent the first part of the camp solely with their group. They went through many

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<sup>1</sup> All citation numbers refer to the online book format which is out of 4519 pages

different team-bounding exercises before the investigators introduced weekly competitions between the two groups. At first the tension between the groups was minimal but as the time passed the boys become more and more hostile towards the other group. The experiment then turned and had the boys working together on projects and jobs with mutual benefit instead of competition. All animosity between the groups was lost. It would seem that it was the competition aspect that brought the boys to hostility. As stated by Shields and Bredemier: "Regardless of who is participating, competition seems to lead inexorably to hostility and prejudice, sometimes spiraling into open aggression." (405). As stated, I have seen this movement to hostility first hand. A group of boys thrown together will form bonds with each other. If put next to a new group it is natural that they will stick together and ostracize the newcomers.

What I think this experiment lacks is the long-term evidence of group competition and dynamics. I would have liked to see the investigators go back to weekly competitions between the two teams after the period of whole group cooperation. My experience on the field has shown me that once the players know their opponents and have worked with them competition becomes friendlier. They see each other as Partners – which will be discussed later in more detail – and less as unknown enemies. Regardless though of whom they see, the idea of healthy competition comes first from the coach.

In the second chapter of their book Shields and Bredeimer discuss the term Decompetition. They state "Decompetition is contesting that has devolved or decomposed into striving against." (668) All coaches know that their athletes will model the behavior they show. A coach who does not greet an opponent's coach with kindness

sets the stage for their athletes to view the whole team in a poor light. The team is now primed to fight against that team. True competition – also discussed more later – is started with attitude and “When *striving with* decays into *striving against*, it ceases to be competition.” (Shields & Bredemier, 668). The behavior of the players feed off the coach and any animosity from one will, but should not be allowed, to flow to the other. I have often had to check myself during games when upset with a fellow coach to ensure that my players do not move from true competition to all out war.

Right at the start of chapter three Shields and Bredeimer state that “Whether a contest results in competition or decompetion is largely within our control” (855). I wholeheartedly agree with this statement. I also feel it goes beyond what was stated above, setting behavioral tones for athletes, and includes the motivation given for a game. The authors spend numerous pages commenting on the benefits of intrinsic motivation, that it provides “a deep resonant enjoyment [which] sustains their efforts, even in challenging times and experiences of defeat” (872). They stated that intrinsically motivated athletes perform higher and have more enjoyment than others. The example given is a study between Emma who is a very intrinsically motivated young basketball star and Amber whose father forces her to play hockey. My lacrosse team can also be used. The school did not have a gym class; instead all students were required to participate in a sport. This meant that I had some young men who loved the game and others who just wanted the credit. It is very obvious which athletes would improve over the season, which would play in games, and which would enjoy every afternoon. All the extrinsic motivation in the world could not contend with a player who is out there day and night practicing because they love the sport.

This is not to put a case against all extrinsic motivation “Extrinsic motivation is not inherently wrong or bad, and it is certainly common in everyday life.” (Shields & Bredemier, 1275). The authors give the example of brushing your teeth. While the pure joy of brushing is probably low, the payoff of not getting cavities is high. I find that while I do not enjoy brushing my teeth for the actual act I do find the time a calm moment before bed to wind down. So the enjoyment comes from viewing the activity in a different light. In this case brushing my teeth isn’t about the feel of the toothbrush but in sitting quietly. What I take from this is that those who initially might be extrinsically motivated may discover, over time, that they find an intrinsic reason to stay with it. The key for coaches is to find goals for their athletes that push them on that path.

Setting goals can seem easy but carry a heavy weight. The wrong type of goals leads to the wrong type of competition. Kohn furthers his claim against competition in this chapter by stating that “the psychological root of people’s desire to compete is insecurity: (Shields & Bredemier, 2116). And that “the effort to gain self-esteem through competition is doomed to failure from the outset.” (2116). I do not agree with his statements. My experience on the field has led me to find that those who do not play but sit in the bleachers and yell at a team are the insecure ones. I have taken many ‘side-line’ kids and put them in a uniform and on the field and the transformation of belief in themselves is huge. It is through goals set that self-esteem is built. The key is to keep them focused on the right track. The authors talk about the FAIR strategies and I am most connected to number four – the idea of Reframing. The idea that you can “make every defeat into a win” (2296) regardless of the initial goal set. In this way every goal,

whether met or not, becomes a teaching moment. Every teaching moment allows the goals to be turned into goals met. This keeps players on a positive track.

The biggest challenge I have come across is with the view of opponents. Most athletes see opponents as those that are in the way of achieving their own goals. They become enemies. The book puts together an excellent chapter in chapter six as it discusses Opponents as Partners. A team may not like whom they verse but that does not mean they are not needed. The authors give the example that an athlete can practice a goal shot all they want, and their teammates can play defense but its not that same as against an opponent. Their skill goes up because of the opponent's skill. In this way it truly is a partnership. One cannot play the game without the other and most importantly, one cannot enjoy the full game without the other. Again this boils down to the coach's attitude. A positive competition will arise if the coach emphasizes opponents as partners.

At the end of the day whether a competition was positive are not, whether it was a True Competition or an example of decompetition, boils down to the coach. A poor coach will lead through bad examples and bad goals while a good coach uses each moment to bring enjoyment through skill building and learning, to their athletes. The best example I could give of True Competition using my athletes was the year they went to the district finals. As an underdog team the only reason they were able to extend their season and attend is that the top two teams had been suspended from the league for a bench-clearing brawl the year before. While many people laughed that we didn't really deserve it because we those two teams didn't play, I saw the opportunity to showcase true competition.

“The true competitor, as well, recognizes that winning really has little to do with the reasons for competing. For the true competitor, competition is foremost about the benefits derived from the process of contesting.”

(3596)

My athletes walked off the field knowing that it didn't matter that they didn't win but that they got to play. And the initial jealousy in the faces of the banned teams (who came to watch) turned to smiles as my team told them “we look forward to playing you next year”. They viewed each other as partners in a game they share a love for. Without the competition there would be no partnership.

Even with all the struggles of getting 16 boys, who hate each other but hate opponents even more, to play in and gain positives from competition outweighs any negatives. The authors have condensed an immense amount of knowledge into their book True Competition. They step through the downside to competition first but then showcase the ways in which a good coach leads their team to positive outcomes. I believe my coaching history greatly reflects their book in that it would be easiest to just stop all competition but that is not the answer. Training coaches to set proper motivation and goals and training players to see opponents as partners yields a much higher positive than not playing at all.

References

Shields, D. L. & Bredemier, B. L. (1950). *True competition: A guide to pursuing excellence in sport and society*. University of Missouri – St. Louis.