Self-Concept and the Discussion of Youth Sport – A Critique

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ABSTRACT: Critiques of sport today reflect an increasing tendency to equate sport with pathology, especially in terms of the discussion of youth participation and the interpretations of the self-concept relative to youth sport participation. Mirroring a societal shift that places the self at the center of the debate, sport is presented as either unwilling or unable to foster changes toward the more reflexive discourse exposing it to a wide range of criticisms for which there are few defenses, especially in terms of its clash with an ever-evolving therapeutic ethos. The following, thus, marks an assessment of this perceived shift as viewed through the prism of both popular as well as academic discourse in regards to the clashing of youth, sport, and the more contemporary struggle for the acquisition of self-esteem.

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This subject of the mundane is part of the paradox of being human. It keeps revealing new dimensions of the human subject as we study it. It leads toward contradictions, and in the process it brings us to a better understanding of ourselves. (Bruyen, 2)

Introduction

A very different set of guidelines underscores the discussion of contemporary sport. Once expressed by American leadership and embraced by the general population as a bastion of positive socialization and a reinforcer of sound moral policy, sport is rarely spoken about in these terms anymore. Increasingly more negatively addressed, the discussion of competitive sport today seems enveloped in a cloud of despair, a far cry from less critical and unashamedly partisan triumph of the human spirit debates as
expressed throughout much of the late 19th and early to mid 20th century and as often reinforced as part of the general wave that appears to have crept into the collective consciousness that marks modern America.

Modern American sport, co-opted by powerful forces and reclaimed as a sort of flickering moral flame by the increasingly disenchanted middle classes, has become nothing short of a nostalgic rejoinder of what once had made the nation great and what seemed poised to hasten its demise. The notion that a once sacrosanct sporting domain has become a safe-haven for the thuggish, the morally suspect, and the profit-making machinery churning out controversy while reveling in its product has become something of a chief article of faith in modern America on all sides of the political divide, leaving it ripe for such scrutiny and attempts to reform it to the extent that even sitting presidents feel obliged to voice such concerns in of all places as the annual (and Constitutionally mandated) State of the Union Address.

The emergent focus on something that was once seen as an intriguing yet altogether unremarkable escape from the routine has thrown the discussion of modern sport into a remarkably new light. Sacrosanct no more, the increasingly ubiquitous and contested sporting terrain has indeed become as fertile and relevant a thread of inquiry as we have seen in some time in terms of our collective attempt to interpret the role of an overarching leisure apparatus that many insist is as problematic today as those daily traps from which such pursuits were thought to shield us.

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Current debates have brought us an additional shift in these discussion, one with a cultural component that seeks to pin potentially devastating psychosocial ramifications on such matters that may have been predicted given the increasingly prominent place that the introspective plays in contemporary life. Still, that sport has bridged this chasm between the aggressively heightened competitive spirit, once so self-consciously welcomed as part and parcel of the American character, and the suspect outcomes as viewed through the self-reflective prism of popular psychology offers by my reckoning undeniable evidence that American sport, which has long since been an expression of the mundane, has augmented its place within the everyday culture by the extraordinary vision its various debates offer in regards to the changing nature of contemporary American life.

Primary to this shift is the re-evaluation of the once vaunted sport builds character motif that played such a vital role in America’s wholesale embrace of sport. But the shift itself, though at times relatively unclear, marks a profound, if not problematic, direction in the overall debate surrounding sport criticism and its social and cultural links with modern life. In essence, if competitive sport does not build character, buttress acceptable behavioral patterns, provide sound moral training and socialization, and any of the other standard expressions relative to sport uttered through American past, what role does sport play in today’s interpretation? Furthermore, what does this say about sport’s continued place in the social landscape?
Youth, Sport, and the Modern Self

If there is any single sport-related concept that galvanizes many of the critics of sport today it is the socializing effect sport is perceived to have on youth, especially as it relates to the development of the self. This also provides the largest gap that separates the more traditional from contemporary sport analysis. Interestingly, the connection between an emerging sport pathos and the existence of a self-reflective component in effect receives minimal, often at best peripheral, focus from commentators immersed in the subject who seem content in offering it a similar treatment as do the more tradition-bound theorists—a sort of intellectual given that needs little or no tangible theoretical development. Still, while the dual ideals of sport and the self-concept are rarely paired directly per se, they do indeed inform one another’s worth in the nature of the debate surrounding youth participation in competitive sport.

That the self as we view it today even appears in the periphery of sport literature marks a radical departure from the more traditional commentary related to 20th century sport, i.e. sport as the revered collaborator of instilling an American universal within the culturally diverse masses. It was not so much a case that sport’s promoters and advocates ignored issues of self-reflection and similarly constructed self-concepts relative to their critiques. Rather these constructs were assumed to be a part of the total sport experience and a bi-product of the participatory nature of sport as well as the ebb and flow of success and failure relative to the competitive process. By and large sport commentators tended to place their collective focus on the issues pertaining to socialization, assimilation of ideals and values (especially amongst the immigrant orders), and the salience of lessons
gleaned from a sportive environment, leaving the more particularist aspects of individual behavior and the reflexive psychosocial ramifications of sport participation to the realm of behavioral science. Gradually, however, the issues of a positive self-concept and the search for the proper degree of self-fulfillment and -development, and most specifically in children, through participation in sport has been wrestled away from an emergent strain of modern character advocates and replaced with, among others, the notion that participation in sport may be more problematic to the development of the individual than many of the pioneering voices or their detractors may have imagined. As popular child psychologist and frequent youth sport commentator Dr. Darrell J. Burnett observes:

We’re living in a age where the preservation of traditional values can no longer be taken for granted. It seems we need to have reminders to maintain our awareness of the importance of preserving the basic human values which are essential to the survival of a community.

Through this particular frame of reference, Burnett posits that while the sporting environment may not be the end all for ethical training, it does, nonetheless, lend itself to introducing important life-lessons for children, something that he claims must be taken into account prior to any child-centered athletic endeavor.

That the self should emerge as a contemporary axiom for commentary in any child-related endeavor is not all that surprising given both the academic as well as popular attention it receives today. Still, this focus is fraught with contradictions and potentialities that serve to impair critical discussions concerning the relevancy of sport in
children’s lives as evidenced by the varying degrees to which those who explore such issues present it. Hence, by welding psychology-based critiques of the self-concept, and especially the role that self-esteem plays in youth development, to contemporary sport-criticism, critics offer a pattern of analysis that serves to highlight a much more problematic nature growing within competitive sport while casting further misgivings in regards its continued place in the lives of young and promising participants.

Indeed, most contemporary writing on youth sport has shifted away from the traditional ideals of sport as character building, potentially patriotic, and even a necessary part of development of youth—the great sport myths that once marked the American competitive spirit—and deservedly so. Many are quick to point out that much of what was frequently considered to be a matter of common sense and hence a part of the overall sport-friendly consensus that developed in American culture was at best based on spurious research and at the very least agenda based—particularly at the levels of patriotism, implanting Americanist ideals in immigrant children, and the acceptance of war. For example, in their substantive discussion of what they deem the myth of school sport, Miracle and Rees base their discussion on the presumption that the institutionalization of school sport was neither a great social construct nor, upon further review, a positive convector for socialization in the lives of 20th century youth, communities, or in the realm of human relations:

Americans’ beliefs about sport seemingly require no proof. Certainly if we look for scientific evidence to support popular, cherished beliefs about sport, we shall be disappointed. Studies purporting to demonstrate proof for the sport myth either have
examined small, special populations or they have used flawed methodologies. No studies capable of withstanding rigorous scientific scrutiny offer much support for any tenets of the myth. If the sport myth is to be supported with convincing scientific evidence, the research has yet to be done. (222)

Such recent and dramatic shifts in this discussion further support the appearance of a noxious backlash aimed at what many feel to have been a markedly divisive institution, that more often is regarded rightly or wrongly as a reinforcer of the traditional order rather than an instrument of change so integral to the unashamedly a priori models of many contemporary sport critics.

The Therapeutic Ethos

A jumping off point for understanding the context of the more fashionable debates regarding competition, children, and the unfolding backlash against the backdrop of contemporary discourse is James Nolan’s *The Therapeutic State: Justifying Government at Century’s End*. Though not a sport researcher by any stretch, Nolan, nonetheless, offers a detailed accounting of the logic of modern capitalism and, hence, its socio-cultural corollaries, through the rubric of a society in flux and in search of both meaning and potency through what he claims to be a nascent yet powerful therapeutic ethos.

Throughout, Nolan posits that for many Americans therapy, which he portrays as “a soft remedy to the harshness of life in a highly rationalized society,” (283) has become the baseline for much of what we know about our world and ourselves. In a sort of *Original Sin as political motif fashion*, Nolan constructs a view of society that positions
the self, rather than a more traditional collective consensus, as a moral intermediary and therapy as the steadying and cohesive element that stands poised to mark the nature of progress and, ultimately, the direction of twenty-first century life. This burgeoning philosophical construct offers to a complex and often pressure-packed world a ready set of interpretable explanations for modern injustices and hardships by reinterpreting life as a process of navigating diseased minds and scarred psyches through spaces in which either successful healing or the trauma of denial or relapse dictates the means by which a modern society conducts its daily affairs. And among the more fundamental variables affecting this change is the self-esteem paradigm, an increasingly central feature of emergent youth sport debates.

A growing penchant for exploration into the construction of individual self-esteem marks a rather provocative departure from the more traditional human-centered notions that once expressed progressive designs through a much more collective rather than individuated approach. Throughout his analysis, Nolan traces the evolution of an increasingly passionate and driven self-esteem advocacy that Nolan claims “speaks of its advancement as no less than one of movement proportions.” (152) This embracing advocacy has in turn charged itself with the daunting task of bringing the joys and benefits of increased self-esteem into public spaces even in the face of mounting scientific skepticism, resulting in what Nolan deems “a conspicuous arrival” (4) of the emotive self in the contemporary discussion:
Clearly, the self-esteem philosophy sees itself as a cushion to the harshness of life in the machine... Thus it is clear that the self-esteem movement views the nature of our rationalized society as repressive, disempowering, mechanistic, and hostile to our natural humanness. Yet, in spite of this evident disapproval of the bureaucratic nature of the modern rationalized world, self-esteem advocates wholly endorse the capitalist order. (178-179)

This emergent orthodoxy as he regards it has grown to inform a great deal of what takes shape in contemporary life in virtually every social milieu and especially those involving American youth. By this account, it becomes a matter of feeling good rather than doing good [my italics] that has emerged to take precedence over what constitutes a successful navigation of the modern terrain. In terms of a continuum between youth and the self-esteem advocacy, there exists a parallel form espousing a character content containing a melange of accepted and acceptable behavior too imbued with a self-esteem component and affecting just about every feature of the youth experience. As noted educational researcher Rita Kramer observes, little of what transpires in a given school day seems free from the reach of the self-reflective ideology, though recently we have seen a popular backlash brandished at such popularly-driven debates as creative spelling and social (or peer) promotion. As teacher increasingly becomes akin to counselor, and as students find themselves the focus of emotive concerns rather than performance, it becomes apparent that school, with its artificially enhanced gloss of esteem, has become a radically different place today. She notes:
Wherever I went…I found a striking degree of conformity about what is considered to be
the business of school and the job of teachers. Everywhere I visited…I heard the same
things over and over again…I found idealistic people eager to do good [sic]. And
everywhere, I found them being told that the way to do good [sic] was to prepare
themselves to cure a sick society. To become therapists, as it were, specializing in the
pathology of education…What matters is not to teach any particular subject or skill, not
to preserve past accomplishments or stimulate future achievements, but to give to all that
stamp of approval that will make them “feel good about themselves” [her italics]…Self-
esteeem has replaced understanding as the goal of education. (209-210)

Or as NYU humanities professor Herbert London explains it in a syndicated column:

Kids may be happy about a school because the classes are easy, or the basketball team is
having a winning season, or they’ve discovered puppy love. But none of these conditions
enhance what children know.

In other words, the main means by which teachers are ostensibly able to cure their
students is through the promotion of self-esteem, and little is thought to be free from this
particular model, which is where we come back to the discussion of youth sport.

**Youth, The Self, and the Failure of Contemporary Sport**

Prefacing a discussion of youth sport participation by claiming that “there simply is
no magic age beyond which participation in youth sport programs can be delayed so as to
guarantee that such [problematic] outcomes will not occur,” (81) University of
Washington in Seattle psychologist Michael Passer asks rhetorically whether or not we allow our children to participate in sport too early on in their development. He then goes on to develop a register of what he feels are the perceived risks intrinsic to participation in youth sport, including:

- The potential suffering of one’s self-perception of physical confidence
- The onset of long- and short-term competitive anxiety
- Decreasing popularity with teammates and peers due to poor performance
- The possibility for psychic bruising (said to effect one’s ability to assimilate into sport at an older age)
- A perceived general decrease in self-esteem levels (81-83)

This type of precautionary-based breakdown is an increasingly widespread component of contemporary treatments of youth sport, treatments which typically present competition as fraught with at best inconsistencies and, in all likelihood, hidden hazards. Even those in support of the maintenance of some form of youth sport draw heavily upon the psychosocial ramifications rather any other array of perceived benefits in this debate. For example, in an article posted on the American Psychological Association web page entitled “Sports Lift Esteem in Young Athletes,” Maureen Weiss of the University of Oregon throws her support over to school sport because “[p]hysical activity and sports have tremendous potential to enhance children’s self-esteem and motivation” while Ronald Jezierski, a physical education specialist in the Santa Clara (CA) School District drawing liberally on older traditions, endorses sport based on a more utilitarian concern
that maintains that youth participation in sport is acceptable insomuch as participation can equate to higher grades and better and more manageable behavior (1-15). And Tara K. Scanlon of UCLA reminds in that same APA report that though sport can serve as an achievement arena for youth:

[W]e need to show that what they have learned on the field applies in other areas of life. Learning how to work with peers and adults and the joy of mastering skills are just a few things that can be learned in that environment if it’s done right.

In this respect even those who maintain a positive outlook toward some aspect of the traditional competitive model for child actors seem skeptical unless the requisite esteem and character issues are structurally upheld. Still, there remain much less accepting discussants whose disdain for sport centers on what they deem to be the more dehumanizing, anti-human effects sport has on individual development.

In exploring the development of sport relative to school and mass culture around the turn-of-the 20th century, education historian Joel Spring was moved to note:

While athletics was promoted as a cure to technological society, that very society turned it into a commercial enterprise. Athletics became big business. The naiveté that led to the belief that athletics could cure society’s problems overlooked the fact that without any fundamental change in the social and economic structure, athletics would be turned into a business enterprise. This occurred in public school and college athletics as well as professional sports. (495)
Here Spring anticipates the coming focus on sport as more than potentially corrupt and imbalanced but as well increasingly unable to fulfill its so-perceived promise to liberate the masses and may even exacerbate the effects of what could be construed as potentially devastating psychological outcomes. There is a strong dose of such rhetoric coursing throughout contemporary sport debate, a sense that what many commentators (see Mecca, Smelser, and Vasconcellos; Covington; Engh; and Jeziorski) recognize most about our so-called sport obsession is not sport’s failure to serve but its failure to serve properly. By attempting to exposé the position that sport is both corrupt and palpably corrupting, many commentators eschew the discussion of why society was so compelled to co-opt sport in the first place and simply (some might say uncritically) revive the older, more Victorian-based methodology that advocates a co-opting of sport as a means to serve a higher albeit more modern cause—the promotion of more self-friendly and fashionable values and sentiments.

By saying little about at-large social inequities, commentators depict sport from a sort of what are you doing for me now [my italics] perspective relative to changing perceptions of social progress, the irony being that on the field of play the notion of what have you done for me lately [my italics again] has long since informed an athlete’s ability to continue to prove his usefulness to the team. Isolated away from the social forces that govern such institutionalized pursuits, however, sport’s themes can be posed as indefensible, especially as it pertains to its effect on the esteem of its child participants. Here exists a plethora of reflective commentary aiming to expose the unsavory elements within the structure of sport that see it primarily as a matter of psychosocial pathology.
As Bredemeier and Shields of Notre Dame’s influential Center for Sport, Character & Culture observe:

In a competitive situation, most people become more ego oriented and less task oriented. Consequently, sports tend naturally to stimulate an emphasis on the ego orientation, which can have negative consequences for moral behavior. (390)

Others see anything related to competition as a matter to be at best endured, feared, loathed, and reformed, and in some cases even abolished altogether.

**The Humanist Critique**

Perhaps more than any other school of thought, modern strains of humanism have escalated the attacks on sport as a matter of social and psychic preservation. Often viewing competition as somehow separate from its social, political, and even economic links, humanist-oriented critics extend the analysis of competition into what they deem a dehumanizing absence of cooperation within the framework of the competitive paradigm, adding heft to the everyday concerns of child advocates.

The humanist interpretation of competition places it squarely on to the realm of pathology, posing concerns as a matter of mutual exclusivity. For example, when popular education lecturer Alfie Kohn poses the question of competitiveness in schools as a matter of mutually exclusive goal attainment while at the same time professing “that by its very nature competition is always unhealthy,” (Kohn B, 15) he suggests that
competitiveness can solely be viewed through the lens of winning and losing while further suggesting that the aftermath of a competition serves primarily to place both sides in peril, i.e. winners become targets while losers suffer inconceivable damage to their self-esteem while withdrawing into psychically disadvantageous states as a result. This debate is underscored by an *a priori* acceptance of the increasingly accepted ideal that competition offers few vestiges of human-centered agency but rather acts to inhibit individual creativity while promoting conformity and discouraging risk-taking. As Kohn claims, this presumed outcome serves to create a non-progressive, dehumanized subject that subverts rather than encourages human agency through the extinguishing of what he deems “the Promethean fire of rebellion” (Kohn A, 130-131). In this regard, Kohn is able to reverse the more traditional view and pose emergent strains of anti-competitive lobbying efforts as both socially healthful while at the same time morally sound.

To be sure, critics of the humanist position often counter that this particular form of the analysis is more agenda-laden and less a tribute to human activity then a statement on human frailty, a point that reflects of many of the concerns raised throughout Nolan’s work. Whereas Terry Orlick, another influential opponent of competition who draws liberally on the traditions of John Dewey and Bertrand Russell, can pose the anti-competition position as one which takes into account a caring approach that allows for a child’s early experiences in sport to be positive, nourishing, and one that may promote further involvement, others see these sorts of stage-managed sporting environments as destructive to the spirit of achievement and goal-attainment. For example, in his critique of the trend toward what he deemed “[f]riendly games” (37) in British primary schools,
education researcher Alex Standish observes that the absence of competition from children’s games in effect threatens to remove the motivation component to succeed along with it, and the results of what began as an earnest expression of compassion on the part of school administrators threatens to deprive children of both the thrill of competitive passion and the development of indispensable physical skills.

In Closing

This recoiling from competitiveness within the athletic milieu seems to have resulted from sport’s inability to reconcile the changing values and moral instruction informed by the therapeutic ethos. Whereas Dragnet’s Detective Friday on 1960’s era television may have then been able to tell us then that “baseball teaches young Americans fair play,” few would embrace that position in today’s climate given the treatment of professional and otherwise high-profile sport, especially as it relates to child-aged participants. The much more likely debate to be encountered seems to be driven by both the prurient value behind today’s more spectacle-laden sport industry and the continued exhibition of insensitivity relative to someone such as the controversial, though now retired, baseball star Albert Belle, who on CNN Television in December 1998 once remarked, much to the dismay of youth advocates, “When I step out on a field, it’s a war zone out there!”

I must note here as well that rarely will contemporary analyses of youth sport reference the leisure and enjoyment components of sport participation. Rather, critics
seem compelled to aim their collective focus on matters pertaining to psychological and physical risk, poor socialization, the unhealthy aspects of an overdeveloped sense of hyper-competitiveness (another fashionable and targeted predisposition thought to lurk dangerously about the competitive framework), and even how competition serves to reinforce elements of traditional social inequality, concerns that serve to inextricably link sport to a litany of popular anxieties that permeate other domains within the culture.

Indeed, plastered on the large windows along the front of my son’s tae kwon do school are imposing reminders of the school’s more fundamental goals and objectives: self-control, self-discipline, self-confidence, and self-esteem (see Figure 1 below). Still, every time I arrive at a function there I generally witness a recognizable mix of athletic intensity along with lots of smiling, sweaty, loud, and obnoxious boys and girls working hard but obviously enjoying themselves. In that sense it would appear that the only members of that particular strata who fear the worst are the organizers/adults/parents themselves who see this pursuit as part of a much grander scheme based on a litany of larger psychosocial concerns, a matter that serves to reinvigorate the growing assumption that something is amiss when it comes to the relationship between youth and sport, a notion that has come to underscore the spirit of today’s debate.

That the children themselves have become increasingly aware that adults have taken treating them like “little veal chops, tenderized little medallions that we need to guard,” as suggested by laconic columnist Matt Labash (see “Dodge This!”), cannot be discounted either. Most children are astute enough to realize that when everyone gets a trophy for participating in a sporting event regardless of outcome or that the premier

Figure 1
A preoccupation with the self can be seen in such widely disseminated images as this Georgia tae kwon do school window.¹

Participant on the field is required to log bench time in an effort to even the contest, the luster from that moment is quickly to wear thin. Still, that we have been able to take something so relatively inconsequential and turn it into a problematic arena ripe for despair says more about the collective fears of a society in a seemingly endless state of flux and uncertainty than it ultimately does about the theme of competition and the search for a more effectively actualized self.

¹ Source: Author’s photograph. 7 April 2002.
References


