Stars Versus Starters: The Relationship Between Ability Level and Character in High School Football Players Attending a Major College Football Camp

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The image of a University of Miami football player wielding his helmet as a weapon during a brawl with cross-town rival Florida International University was broadcast repeatedly across the national television airwaves in the fall of 2006. This most recent brawl during a collegiate football contest has again fueled the debate: does sport build or reveal character? Sport advocates, former athletes, and coaches unabashedly promote the benefits of sport. Yet, scholars and empirical research have consistently backed the notion that sport may just as well contribute in a potentially damaging manner to the development of children and adolescents if not taught, organized, managed, and led properly (e.g., Beller & Stoll, 1995; Ewing, Gano-Overway, Branta, and Seefeldt, 2002; Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005). Beller and Stoll went a step further in concluding, "As such, competitive athletics as it is taught and morally modeled in this country does not appear to cognitively develop young people" (p. 361).

The inevitable question then arises: has competitive sport progressed or digressed in the last ten years since this conclusion by Beller and Stoll? We believe digression has served to promote progression, as a "rock bottom" effect has led to an environment more open to change. Unfortunate and highly publicized incidents in recent years in intercollegiate athletics like the Miami/Florida International and Clemson/South Carolina football brawls and the Duke lacrosse scandal in combination with high profile professional sport episodes like the Indiana/Detroit fan brawl in the National Basketball Association, steroid use in Major League Baseball, and the Minnesota Vikings "Love Boat" sex scandal in the National Football League have served to force the character issue into the forefront for administrators at all levels of competitive sport. The organizational climate in sport is ripe for change, and the next generation of administrators in sport management faces the challenge of creating sporting environments for youth conducive to the promotion of solid citizens with sound character.

Over the last decade, a growing focus on shifting the collective discourse towards youth from a deficit-oriented approach where youth are viewed as problems to be fixed to a more positive mentality where youth are viewed as resources to be developed has taken hold and been labeled positive youth development (see Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2002; Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2001). Positive youth development has filtered into the youth sport realm through advocates determined to shift sport's focus from the competitive win-at-all costs attitude to a structure supportive of the five developmental outcomes associated with positive youth development ("the five C's"): character, caring, confidence, connection, and compassion (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). The First Tee and Basketball Without Borders, industry-sponsored organizations utilizing their respective sports (golf and basketball) as a catalyst for positive youth development, have structured programs that teach life skills concurrently with sport skills. Research on youth development through sport has burgeoned in recent years as academics, practitioners, and national advocates such as the National Alliance for Youth Sports have led efforts to promote implementation of positive youth development programs on a more widespread basis in sport (e.g., Danish, Forneris, Hodge, & Heke, 2004; Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2005; Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005). However, many questions related to sport's context as a medium for positive youth development remain unanswered, as research on sport and developmental outcomes in general have been mixed.

Researchers have found support for increased psychological adjustment, academic achievement, occupational outcomes (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Darling, Caldwell, & Smith, 2005) and social character (Rudd & Stoll, 2004) from adolescents participating in sport when compared to adolescents who are not involved in sport or extracurricular activity. Yet, research also shows increased alcohol use (Barber et al.; Bartko & Eccles; Darling et al.), more problem behavior (Bartko & Eccles), tendencies toward aggression (Conroy, Silva, Newcomer, Walker, & Johnson, 2001), and lower moral character measures (Rudd & Stoll) for organized sport participants when compared to those students participating in non-sport extracurricular activity. However, the aforementioned studies examined developmental benefits and costs in the context of general sport rather than examining certain sports in isolation. Few people would argue that cross-country athletes and football players are vastly different on a number of demographic and behavioral variables, and grouping these individuals together is a disservice to both populations of interest. Therefore, the current study advanced this concept one step further by examining not only football players in isolation, but segmenting football players according to self-reported ability levels.

The purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship between ability level and character attributes in the context of a major college football camp. Campers (n = 230) completed a web-based questionnaire immediately following registration on the first day of a three-day skills camp at a major state university in the southeastern United States. Campers ranged in age from eleven to eighteen. In addition to self-reported ability relative to players on their current team, character was measured as a developmental attribute in accordance with research conducted in Wave 4 of the longitudinal 4-H study of positive youth development (Lerner, Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, Phelps, Gestsdottir et al., 2005). Data analysis is scheduled to be complete for the current study in January of 2007.

With each high-profile negative incident in intercollegiate and professional sport, the general public's view of sport as a vehicle for social change is negatively affected, and the sports industry potentially loses an individual that could have been affected in a positive manner through participation in sport. The one characteristic that consistently binds all of the aforementioned negative incidents is ability level. Therefore, the results of the current study will provide insight into the relationship of ability level and character in team sports like football. Targeted positive youth development efforts towards team sport athletes of varied ability levels may serve to enhance the role that sport plays in developing solid citizens both within the college and professional sport ranks and in our society as a whole.