

Moral Obligations
Chyi-Woei Wang
Michigan State University

A study by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency concluded that coaches have the greatest influence on youth sport participants (Boxill, p. 9). Whatever beliefs and behaviors a coach has can be passed down onto his or her players. The influence coaches can have on youth sport participants put them in an important role to teach and model behavior. Coaches must realize that they do not just “teach skills, but they also teach life lessons, including morals, ethics, tolerance, and most of all respect, both for themselves and for others” (Boxill, p. 10). So I was surprised to read that the results of the study done by *USA Today* showed that many players thought their coaches valued winning as the most important thing (Boxill, p. 10-11). According to the study, players lack trust in their coaches due to the “countless documented cases of cheating and malpractice by coaches” in order to win (Boxill, p. 11).

A moral obligation of coaching is to teach athletes the role of opponents in competition. According to Torres and Hager, many of the ethical problems that have marred organized youth sports in America are grounded in the attitudes and tendencies of individuals, such as “runaway individualism,” “obsessive advantage seeking,” and “egregious self-aggrandizement,” within sports and society in the U.S. (Torres & Hager, pp.168-169). These tendencies have even worsened as years went by to the point where they become resistant to simple reforms so that simple appeals to fair play and good sportsmanship are hardly effective (Ibid., p. 170).

There have been attempts to reform therefore by de-emphasizing competition in youth sports. Advocates of these kinds of reforms were concerned that win-first approach to sports “had marginalized the more traditional values of youth sports participation, such as skill learning and mastery, moral and social character development, and fun” (Ibid.). However, according to Torres and Hager, reforms that remove competitive aspects of sports “jeopardize sports’ ability to actualize its education potential” (Ibid.). Torres and Hager then propose a different type of youth

sports reform called “mutualist reforms” that would “maintain the competitive aspects of youth sports while increasing the moral accountability of participants as members of sports practice communities” (Ibid., p. 171).

The effort “to explain the relationship between sports and moral values” resulted in developing a theory in the philosophy of sports called Interpretivism (Ibid., p. 172). According to the interpretivists, the central purpose of competitive sports is not to “beat one’s opponent but to accurately measure and compare contestants’ athletic excellence” (Ibid., p. 173). In other words, competitive sports are best thought of as “a mutual striving for excellence” (Ibid.). It puts the zero-sum quality of competition in the context of the best interpretation of sport (Ibid.). Thus competition binds, rather than disaggregates, contestants together “in a mutual striving for excellence with moral and aesthetic connotations” (Ibid., p. 174).

Since interpretivism construes competitive sports as "a mutual striving for excellence," it compels youths “to ponder their place in this mutuality” (Ibid., p. 176). The mutualist approach to competitive sports helps youths recognize the value of opponents "as moral equals who are also searching for, and affirming, themselves through the quest for excellence" (Ibid.). From this perspective, youth who engage in competitive sports are introduced to a practice “with a set of intertwined moral and aesthetic values" (Ibid., p. 177). Also, the interpretivist account of competitive sports' central purpose demonstrates “what a good life entails and at the same time offers a route to pursue it” (Ibid.). And the mutualism in sports helps in responding to the general problems in youth sports mentioned earlier by "presenting a direction for more sensitive reforms" (Ibid., p. 178).

If we take the mutualist approach, we as coaches can teach athletes appropriate ways to approach competition “by focusing youths on achieving excellence in sports rather than simply

winning” (Ibid., p. 180). Once learned, the mutualist view of sports competition will help young athletes to develop “an awareness of their moral obligations as athletes collectively striving for excellence within a particular sport” (Ibid.). Also, the mutualist coach can teach youth to respect their opponents as “partners in the competitive process” rather than an enemy (Ibid.).

Another moral obligation of a coach is for a coach is to give all of his or her athletes a chance to play. Although this may be difficult to do in higher level settings such as the high school or collegiate level settings, coaches should have the attitude that "everybody should play" (Kretchmar, p. 134). In youth sports, many younger athletes are still learning the basics of sports and the body movements associated with a sport and may be "late bloomers" (Ibid.). These players should be given a chance to play and develop their skills.

A third moral obligation of a coach is to be a "moral exemplar" (Boxhill, p. 9). It has been concluded that coaches have a significant influence on the athletes they coach (Boxhill, p. 9). Therefore coaches have the responsibility to teach athletes morals, ethics, tolerance and respect for both themselves and for others (Boxhill, p. 10). While also teaching their athletes strategies to help prepare for competitions, coaches must teach their athletes about maintaining integrity of sports. Coaches need to teach their athletes to try their best to achieve excellence and not just winning. Being a moral exemplar also means that a coach would need to show the importance of following the regulative and constitutive rules set in a sport.

It’s undeniable that the role of youth sports coaches is of “paramount importance” as they don’t simply teach skills and its mastery, but rather introduce and mentor young athletes into “a social practice with internal goods and standards of excellence” (Torres & Hager., p. 179). Coaches help shape the beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes of their young athletes. It is

imperative that we as coaches teach his or her players that the goal in sports is not the outcome but the pursuit of excellence.

Work Cited

Boxill, J. (2013). The Coach as Moral Exemplar. In R. Simon (Ed.), *The ethics of coaching sports moral, social, and legal issues*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press. pp. 9-17

Kretchmar, S. (2013). Bench Players: Do Coaches Have a Moral Obligation to Play Benchwarmers?. In R. Simon (Ed.), *The ethics of coaching sports moral, social, and legal issues*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press. pp. 121-136

Torres, C., & Hager, P. (2013). Competition, Ethics, and Coaching Youth. In R. Simon (Ed.), *The ethics of coaching sports moral, social, and legal issues*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press. pp. 167-184