

Invitational Practices in Middle School Athletics

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Invitational practices and strategies have found their way into the realm of physical education (Turner & Purkey, 1983; Chandler & Purkey, 1986; Chandler, 1988). The presence of invitational practices in the physical arena can now be measured (Chandler, 1988). The next logical step is to invoke invitational practices and strategies into an area where even further impact can take place, middle school athletics. The coach, in a leadership position, has the potential to extend inviting concepts to student participants, in many ways into the community and potentially into society.

Interscholastic athletics traditionally provide a program for a few gifted athletes. It is possible to meet many of the same basic objectives of a traditional athletic program on the middle school level by invoking a more inclusive, principle-based and enjoyable, athletic experience. It should be possible to do so for nearly every student who desires to participate. This experience, as well as its positive and achievable goals, may present itself in the form of an invitational approach to middle school athletics.

This possibility seems especially necessary when one realizes that "it seems that youngsters stop participating in organized sports because these activities are less enjoyable to them" (Kirshnit, Ham, & Richards, 1989, p. 601). Research (Chalip, Csikszentmihalyi, Kleiber,

& Larson, 1984; Chandler, 1987; Csikszentmihalyi, 1984) indicates that adolescents enjoy informal sports more so than formalized or organized sports. Kirshnit, et al. (1989) found this to be true specifically among middle school students.

While there is no certainty as to the reasons for attrition among adolescents, they do seem to become disassociated with sports as they get older. The nature of the problem is crystallized when one realizes that "approximately 80% of all children drop out of organized sports programs between the ages of 12 and 17" (Kirshnit, et al., 1989, p. 602). Perhaps a more inclusive, inviting approach may help ensure their continuance in athletic programs from the entry level on. Kirshnit, et al., (1989) also found that the "development of programs that reinforce perceptions of skill and help adolescents fit sports into their increasingly busy lives would enhance the likelihood of continued athletic participation during adolescence" (p. 613). These types of problems affect us all, yet they have answers. Perhaps a part of the solution may be found in a more positive, inclusive and inviting approach to middle school athletics.

Four Assumptions Of Invitational Practices

Purkey and Novak (1988) espoused four assumptions which purport that invitational education "is as much an attitudinal disposition as it is a methodology" (p. 12). In distinguishing invitational education from other educational processes, they assert that there are four basic assumptions which clearly delineate the unique character of the invitational educational process.

These assumptions include the belief that: (a) people are able, valuable, and responsible and should be treated accordingly; (b) education should be a collaborative, cooperative activity; (c) people

possess untapped potential in all areas of human endeavor; (d) human potential can best be realized by places, policies, and processes that are specifically designed to invite development, and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others, personally and professionally (pp. 12-13)

Invitational Potential in Middle School Athletics

What should be the emphasis of a middle school athletic program? In order to fully consider the ramifications of a more effective, inviting middle school athletic program, perhaps it is necessary to look at the potential outcomes of such a possibility. The "all must play" notion (Riemcke, 1988, p. 82) emphasizes the development of skills and healthy competition, capitalizing on the assurance that every child has the opportunity to participate, while every effort is made to eliminate exclusionary tendencies. "Participation, performance, and competition" (p. 82) are the hallmark of such an approach, as students are encouraged "to develop and exhibit skills to the best of their abilities" (Riemcke, 1988, p. 82).

Such a school athletic philosophy can be based in and focused upon the following substantive elements: building self-esteem, development of skill, as well as expanding interest in lifetime and leisure activity. Such elements would also provide opportunities for personal and social growth, as well as providing the encouragement for all students to participate. While winning is valued, other aspects of this athletic philosophy can be met before the coaches "coach to win" (p. 82).

By maximizing the number of activities available throughout the school year, participation opportunities are maximized. Ideally the introduction of a variety of more diverse school athletic activities allows the opportunity for greater student participation. Greater opportunities for participation can be enhanced by the addition of low-cost, high-participation opportunities such as volleyball, soccer, wrestling, softball and others if not already a part of the athletic scheme.

With the emphasis upon skill development, participation and en-

hanced self-esteem through achievement, the student is more likely en-sured greater opportunities for success at upper grade level athletics. There is also the greater likelihood of increased capability in lifetime and leisure activities.

Transference of Invitational Processes to Athletics

Actions which are unintentionally inviting have the potential to be transferred to the learning fields of middle school athletics. The importance and value of athletic involvement, competition, and team work have long been recognized (Duda, 1985). The benefits of implementing the invitational process into middle school activities are many and the rights of the student should be explicit. These rights include maximum opportunities for learning, self-development and enhanced self-esteem (Burke & Kleiber, 1980; Duda, 1985; Higginson, 1985; Hines & Grove, 1989; Kirshnit, et al., 1989).

The role of coaches in society, particularly in public schools, has typically vacillated between one of venerated leader of young athletes to the source of many of the problems in youth athletics. In the invitational sense, the middle school coach can also be the primary factor in the solution to some of the current problems in athletics as well, and perhaps consequently a factor in the solution for the problems of many of the youth in society. The coach serves as a role model for all who partake of athletics. For better or worse the influence is there. "It is well known to psychologists and teachers that success is the best activity to promote continued learning," (Burke & Kleiber, 1980, p. 308) so why not promote success and learning via a more inviting process?

Invitations for Athletic Involvement

With these concepts in mind, it is time that middle school coaches and athletic staffs clearly and emphatically begin to send more effective messages; signals that today's young athlete will be offered new personal opportunities for interaction and growth. These signals are invitations, invitations that are communicated within a middle

school athletic environment. Invitations are opportunities provided by athletic staffs (coaches) for the development of middle school athletic participants in a variety of ways. These invitations are manifested by helping students realize, in an athletic setting, "their relatively untapped potential for physical, intellectual and psychological development" (Chandler & Purkey, 1986, p. 123).

The application of invitational principles to the educational setting, initiated and developed by Purkey (1978), has proven effective, successful, even innovative in the field of education. An extension of these practical principles into the physical arena has been effectively demonstrated (Turner & Purkey, 1983; Chandler & Purkey, 1986; Chandler, 1988).

The Inviting Role of Coaches in Middle School Athletics

Effective coaches are traditionally leaders by skill, knowledge, example, experience and verbalization—all messages, all signals which are sent and received, are invitations. What they do, what they say, as well as how and when they say and do things is of utmost importance, because these are perceived invitations by their athletes to behave in a similar fashion.

Coaches are capable of inviting in many ways. Messages are sent via their physical appearance, their respectful or disrespectful treatment of peers and students, the equanimity with which they treat all, their preparedness, their ability to listen and respond fairly in all situations, as well as the consistency with which they behave. "Invitations are sent and received as messages and may be informal or formal, verbal or nonverbal" (Chandler & Purkey, 1986, p. 123). As such, invitations in their most positive form are intended to inform athletes that they are valuable, able and responsible. Conversely, a disinvitation indicates that they are worthless, unable and

irresponsible. Invitations and disinvitations are manifestations of an attitude and expectation, and they are presented in every aspect of our lives including athletics, which are especially important on the middle school level.

Unfortunately, "coaches in highly structured sports are not sensitive to the needs of the...child who may have virtually no experience in the motor skills needed for success" (Burke & Kleiber, 1980, p. 308). It is not difficult to understand why "the child who is exposed to an environment in which he/she cannot be successful...is quite likely to respond defensively and express hatred for all physical activity" (p. 308). We, as professional educators, must choose to find ways to include invitational methods in our coaching practices.

Invitations and Disinvitations in Middle School Athletics

Examples of invitations include the immediate recognition of players by name, position and special skills. If there are unique characteristics or attributes which a player has, such as leadership, hustling play, cooperation, or physical skills, these should be identified to the player in such a way as to invite their further development. Special team guidelines could also be established to foster respect for team members and coaches. It is imperative that the coach set the tone for team behavior by modeling self-respect as well as respect for others. Negative manifestations or disinvitations might be exemplified by recognition of only selected players, preferential, or unequal treatment of players or the pitting of unequal skill or sizes of players against one another to discourage certain players from participating.

This is especially important since "we know that early experiences with physical activity and sports also have long-term consequences for

physical and mental health" (Remak, 1988, p. 15). "Uncertain and self-conscious children ...run the risk of developing a pattern of shying away" (p. 15) from physical and athletic involvement. This sets the stage for further embarrassment and withdrawal.

"At an all too early age the door might be closed to the many opportunities to enhance life through exercise, sports, and play" (Remak, 1988, p. 15). Hence, there is significant value in implementing the invitational approach in coaching to ensure a positive perspective of and response to middle school athletics. One way to lay the groundwork for a healthy attitude and a positive perspective of sports at an early age is to initiate invitational processes in training coaches and to recognize and value its principles.

The role of inviting coaches is immeasurably important. Their leadership in the development of skill, healthy competitive attitudes, self-esteem, personal and social growth is paramount. They also have the unequaled capacity to place performance in athletics in its relative place. The recognition of the importance of leisure and lifetime activity as it relates to middle school athletic involvement can also provide lifelong benefit.

The Legacy of Traditional Athletics

Duda (1985) conjectured that children's sport "offers a competitive setting overflowing with the potential for evaluation and judgment on various athletic competencies by a host of significant others, such as parents, coaches, and peers. The successes and failures of young participants are observable to all" (p. 55). It is here that divergent opinion chooses sides as to the methods, as well as benefits and detriments of involvement. One side offers "the claim that sport benefits the young because it's fun and the participants tend to enjoy" involvement (p. 55). These benefits lend themselves to the development of feelings of inclusion, belonging, competence, and self-esteem among participants.

Those who argue against beneficial factors of traditional athletic competition stipulate the dangers of competitive stress in athletics and counter that, while increased confidence and self-esteem are noted among traditional sports participants, this opportunity has generally been reserved for only the "elite participants who are very skilled, and that a philosophy of winning at all costs pervades the youth sport scene" (Duda, 1985, p. 55). This is where providing an inviting approach to coaching middle school athletics can come into play.

Duda (1985) suggested the availability of reasonable, practical goals that may help the would-be inviting coach in determining if

he/she is moving in an inviting direction. "For youth sport to be a positive experience, the [participants] need to feel that: (1) they have the ability to meet the physical requirements of the sport situation; (2) they can meet their personal goals and successfully demonstrate competence; and (3) they are in effective control in the sport context" (p. 55). Coaches can do this and they can do it more effectively in an inviting environment.

Combined with the conceptual paradigm in which Csikszentmihalyi (1975) asserts that when one is experiencing involvement (activities) in which the perceived challenges are equal to one's skill level, then enjoyment (flow) can occur. Perhaps then we have taken another step in the direction of the invitational coaching process. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) and Chandler (1987) substantiated, especially where physical activities were involved, that enjoyment was experienced when these criteria were met.

Competition, the meeting of an adversarial opponent who may or may not be an equal in skill, ability, and, strength, usually brings about indeterminable levels of anxiety. Such "anxiety in children's sport has been linked to lowered self-esteem in present and in future sport participation" (Duda, 1985, p. 56). Youth need to feel that they "have some influence over their environment and that goals are within their control" (p. 56). An invitational approach to coaching may help meet this need.

Duda's (1985) proposal for modification of youth sport programs focused on the precept of "having children feel good about themselves as much as possible" (p. 56). In conjunction with this proposal for the incorporation of invitational strategies into middle school athletics, Duda (1985) recommended four points of emphasis:

- (1) Provide a re-emphasis on skill improvement and mastery, especially as a criteria of success, and de-emphasize "competition

- and social comparison;"
- (2) Include the children's perception of their skill level in any goal setting or evaluation process;
 - (3) Rethink the emphasis of effort and ability, rewarding not just skills, but the willingness to try and the effort expended. Since not all participants will have equal skills levels or proficiency, this helps "enhance perceptions of control" in the youth's sporting involvement;
 - (4) In order to enhance enjoyment, fun and the development of self-confidence, minimize social evaluation, especially if negative. It is difficult to improve and develop skill, much less have children want to participate on a regular basis "in front of a critical and demanding audience of coaches, parents and peers." (p. 56)

Agents of Influence in Middle School Athletics

Higginson (1985) suggested that sport participation is dependent upon, at least to some extent, "the influence of socializing agents such as parents, coaches and peers" (p. 73). It is interesting to note that for some middle school participants under the age of thirteen, the coach/teacher is "still a secondary influence on some...athletes' sports participation" (p. 80) while for some athletes of junior high age, the coach/teacher surpassed the parents in influence. This increased likelihood of participation and influence by coaches provides increased opportunities for positive influences in the area of invitations. It was also noted that sport interest for some increased significantly and that athletes were positively reinforced for their sport participation, "perhaps by agents of socialization" (p. 78) such as coaches. Over half the athletes interviewed indicated that their sport interest had increased significantly from under the age of thirteen to the middle school level. There was also the tendency for these athletes to increase the number

of sports in which they participated.

Hines and Groves (1989) determined that there was "no significant relationship...between win-loss record and total self-esteem and its associated factors, that is, self-degradation, family/parents, leadership/popularity, anxiety/assertiveness" (p. 865). This applied between sex and self-esteem as well. Whether you win or lose doesn't seem to be paramount, but having the right and opportunity to be involved at some level does.

It is interesting that this same research found that "a coach's perception has a significant impact in all areas of self-esteem except anxiety/assertiveness (Hines & Groves, 1989, p. 865). What the coach thinks of young athletes and how they are consequently treated as youthful athletes matters. Negative, disinviting coaches can have a detrimental impact upon young athletes. Positive, inviting coaches can have a beneficial impact upon these athletes.

Perhaps we can better assure that coaches have these inviting qualities through some uniform coaches' training process. This may be provided by a coaching methods class which includes the types of principles espoused by the invitational process. Advocacy by local educators or coaches of such principles is another step in that direction. The development of the inviting coach may be best enhanced by the incorporation of these invitational principles into academic coaching curricula. Since the youth coach seems to have such incalculable impact on his/her athletes, it seems requisite that such steps be taken.

In conclusion, the first logical step is in bridging the gap between verbalization and action. It is feasible to develop practical, fundamental applications and strategies that can be easily and willingly implemented to better ensure the presence and of invitational

principles in middle school athletics. Below are listed strategies which have applicability in the development of an invitational approach in middle school athletics.

Invitational Strategies in Middle School Athletics

1. Involve everyone.
2. Teach respect for self and others.
3. Encourage individual skill and personal development, but allow for individual differences in growth and development.
4. Support and foster competitiveness as well as the healthful physical and psychological benefits which accrue from them.
5. Advocate the development of positive self-esteem through self-testing and the demonstration of developed skills and team work.
6. Foster the development of skills to the best of one's abilities.
7. Provide ample opportunities for positive and growth-enhancing experiences culminating in memorable lifetime events. A "lifetime of memories...can be captured in...moments of success and failure, stress, relaxation, physical exhaustion and restless anticipation" (Spindt, 1984, p. 47). These types of memories are among the true rewards of athletic participation.
8. Ensure teams of equal or similar abilities, maturation and skill levels to participate against other teams similarly designated, perhaps even have modified rules and goals.

Indications of the Presence of Inviting in Middle School Athletics

There are elements which may not be categorized as strategies, but which may be deemed instrumental and beneficial in the development of an invitational middle school athletic program. These are signals which are demonstrative of the presence, as well as the importance, of invitational processes in middle school athletic program. Among these are:

1. Devise a means of honoring participants each week, for recognition of not only valued inviting characteristics displayed in a game, but those exhibited in practices as well. After all, practice is where game techniques and many lifetime skills are developed and more participants can be honored in this way, not just a select few.
2. Place formal, tasteful signs around school, athletic facilities and locker rooms indicating specific values and inviting characteristics important to the team, e.g., fair play, equitable playing time, teamwork, sportsmanship, trying your best, when your turn comes give your best effort, etc.
3. Develop a team handbook, perhaps entitled "Who We Are" or "What We're About." In it include items such as players' names, positions, valued characteristics and traits of each team member (hard worker, hustler, team player, selfless player, etc.). Also include items such as team motto, slogans, principles valued by team members, and, perhaps plays, conditioning information, reminders for healthful living for athletes, workout schedules, games schedules, etc.
4. To encourage good sportsmanship and true principles of inviting, have participants meet and shake hands before and after a game. This exhibits inviting at its best to fans, those who emulate athletes, as well as the community.

5. Educate parents regarding invitational values and invite them to practices to support and exemplify important components of invitational coaching.

6. Encourage and support an organization of PCPs (Parents, Coaches and Participants) which meets regularly and which supports and values those principles valued by the team. Bring in guest speakers, former participants, videos, etc. which can be used to promulgate invitational principles in athletics. Examples generated from local high schools, colleges and even professional ranks may be used for inspiration and modeling, but the organization's primary function should be to set forth and support specific cherished values and principles.
7. Use physical education classes in school to advertise and educate about the invitational values and principles. Traditional values of athletic competition may frighten away potential participants.
8. Often, entering sixth-grade middle school students, who may be timid and unsure, can be positively influenced to participate once they meet the coaches and understand what they are about. The "fear to involve" may be overcome not only by openly discussing these values, but also by setting aside specific opportunities for new students to meet coaches and other players. This may be accomplished in several ways: (a) by having coaches meet with new students by classes or in an assembly at the beginning of school, and (b) by providing a "meet the coaches" luncheon periodically. This may be accomplished by grade levels on various days at lunch for students to bring their lunch tray to a designated "coaches' table". There interested students can eat and become better acquainted with the coach in a more casual setting. This also provides an opportunity for them to learn more about the team's philosophy of participation and values. Opportunities such as these tend to diminish intimidating factors and demystify some traditional negative myths regarding coaches (they're hardened, tough minded, workhorses, etc.).

Invitational practices can play an important role in the development of middle school athletes. The success of invitational processes in youth development contingent upon a coach's knowledge of the invitational process, a recognition of its value, and the willingness to implement the practices on a consistent basis.

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