



Physical Education: Sport and Restraint

What if competitive sports developed restraint?

Anna and Pete both taught sports in private Christian high schools. Several incidents made them think about the attitudes to winning that we nurture through the way we teach competitive sports.

Anna: "Our girls' hockey team was doing well, and we were close to winning the area cup. Lisa, the team captain, was hungry for success. She wanted her final year in school to culminate in leading the team to victory in the local league. Winning really mattered. So Lisa began to introduce various intimidation techniques that were designed to unnerve the opposition. When I realized what was happening, I was really disturbed. I called a meeting to talk about the desire to win, but not at all costs. We discussed the techniques and why they were not appropriate because of the need to respect others, including our opponents. It made me think about how I ran the coaching sessions. I had not talked about these issues before."

Pete: "I taught boys' tennis and had been thinking about the attitudes I was building. In order to teach how to serve the ball, I paired the boys so that they were as close as possible in skill level. I encouraged them to serve to the best of their ability in the attempt to beat their opponent. Each time, the student receiving the serve was required to give feedback to the server, on the strengths and weaknesses of the serve. Then I paired each weaker player with a stronger player. I asked the stronger player to receive the service from the less-skilled player with the racquet in their weaker, usually left, hand. Again they had to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the serve. They were told that, in this exercise, their role as the stronger player was to help their opponent learn how to serve more effectively."

What's going on here?

Pete and Anna saw sports as something that involved not only winning, but also nurturing values related to respect and seeking the good of others.

They engaged students by focusing their attention on the issue of values (banning intimidation techniques) and led them to experience putting these values into practice (helping each other learn).

They reshaped their practice by choosing intentional language to frame learning, setting an explicit purpose for learning, and relating this clearly to how practices were run (opportunities to help others).

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Jesus wasn't prepared to exert raw power in order to win; instead, he modeled restraint and service. To exercise restraint and insist that values apply even in a deeply competitive situation is counterintuitive and involves an exercise of faith. Faith is real faith only when put into action in this way. It is not an abstract set of beliefs.

What difference does it make?

Pete and Anna did not deny the need for competition, but they balanced it with restraint and coaching exercises that showed respect to opponents. A repertoire of similar exercises could be developed.

Where could we go from here?

Develop the idea of "courageous restraint" with students using true stories. Examples:

1. In June 2010, a Detroit baseball player achieved a perfect game, but the umpire made an incorrect call that denied the player his achievement. He had every right to protest. He smiled, swallowed his deep disappointment, and accepted the decision. His reaction earned him widespread respect. Years of training was the only way in which such restraint could come to be shown in a moment of crisis like this. (See <http://nbcports.msnbc.com/id/37479309/ns/sports-baseball/>)

2. In 2010, NATO forces in Afghanistan adopted a policy of courageous restraint that was designed to reduce civilian casualties. Soldiers were trained to refrain from firing in battles with the Taliban if there was risk to innocent civilians. They were reminded of these rules of engagement prior to battle.

Digging deeper

Courageous restraint was shown twice by David. King Saul was trying to kill him, and twice David, who had been anointed as the next king, had Saul at his mercy. In both cases he refused to kill him. David exercised restraint and waited for the throne ([1 Samuel 24:7](#)). That did not mean he did nothing. During that period he built his skill, his forces, and his popularity. Early in his ministry Jesus was tempted to use his powers in the wrong way to convince the people that he was truly the Son of God. Jesus was being offered victory at any cost, but he refused. A significant feature of Jesus's life and his death on the cross was his radical revision of the concept of "winning," which in the understanding of his time meant triumph, particularly over an enemy or competitor. The Biblical emphasis is on the people we become, and the call is to become like Christ in character ([1 John 2:6](#)).

Truth lies in character. Christ did not simply speak the truth; he was truth; truth, through and through; for truth is a thing not of words, but of life and being. Frederick W. Robertson

Developing a Christ-like character is not the same as keeping rules such as the Ten Commandments. We don't grow as Christians just by keeping "the rules" any more than someone becomes a good football player just by keeping the rules of the game.



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