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Should Elementary School Children Take Part in Inter-School Sports Competition?

By

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Inter-school sport competition at the elementary level

Inter-school sport competition at the elementary level may be considered as an extension of the "Competitive Achievement Model." In those instances where this model is in place in our public schools system, the emphasis is often on the product or on winning, rather than on the process, or on equal access and learning (Hellison & Templin, 1991). Leading physical education scholars hold the view that the "Competitive Achievement Model" should be kept out of the physical education curriculum, especially at the elementary level (Pangrazi, 2001; Siedentop, 1998; Wall & Murray, 1990). Teachers that insist on including some form of competition in the elementary curriculum are advised to substantially modify the activities in order to facilitate the inclusion of all participants, and create a non-threatening, friendly environment (Pangrazi & Dauer, 1992). Since physical education teachers have full control of all the teams in their classrooms they can pay special attention to the organization and pairing of individuals and teams of equal skill levels. Furthermore, a physical education teacher may reshuffle any team at any time in order to even the competitive fields. However, the substitution of the "Competitive Sport Model" with a "Sport Education Model" at the elementary level, for example, still runs the risk of excluding general health-related fitness from the

physical education curriculum by limiting it to sport specific fitness needs (Hellison & Templin, 1991).

Who would benefit from inter-school sport competition at the elementary level?

Who would benefit from inter-school sport competition at the elementary level? The most skilled and fit students in any classroom benefit most from competition. They enjoy a physical, as well as, social and emotional advantage because they are the most likely to be successful and to get recognition for their achievements (Coakley, 2000; McKenzie & Sallis, 1996). Observations of little league soccer games revealed that the most skilled athletes spend a disproportionate time with the ball. For example, game analysis of an AYSO Boys' Division 6 game via videotape and Second Look for Soccer™ software, revealed that of a total 312 contacts with ball by 9 team "A" members during one 40 minute league game, four players made a total of 260 (80%) contacts with the ball. The remaining five players contacted the ball a mere 52 times, or 10.4 contacts per player for the game. All team members played an equal time and were rotated, including the goalie position (Frankl, & Wright, 1997). Only two of the three leading players on the team have scored all of the team's goals during that whole season. The soccer observational study with first and second graders demonstrates that early competition creates opportunities for success for a very select group of kids. Such an environment that would be biased toward a small minority of the students is unacceptable in the school system.

When are kids ready for competition?

When are kids ready for competition? The general consensus among youth sports experts is that some children reach the social and cognitive maturity that is required for successful participation in organized sports at the age of eight. The ability to understand the complexities of game strategies, however, is typically reached in children who are twelve or older. Thus, most children are not ready for competitive sports before they complete the first or second year of middle school (Coakley, 2000).

The problems associated with an early start

Another issue regarding the appropriateness of an inter-school competition at the elementary level addresses the concerns and potential risks that have been voiced by educators and professional coaches regarding early intense competition and specialization (Bryant & McElroy, 1997; McPherson, Curtis, & Loy,

1989; Pooley, 1981; Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk, 1992). The problems associated with an early start do not seem to be related to a particular activity. Rather, the risks are closely associated with levels of intensity, duration, and frequency of workouts in a particular sport. An early focus on one activity and the exclusion of other sports exposes the child to repetitive motion and impact injuries that affect specific limbs and joints. For example, gymnasts experience a higher than usual incidence of ankle, shoulder and wrist injuries. Similarly, little league pitchers, are prone to "little league elbow" problems (Williams, 1998). When winning is overemphasized and taken out of context, children run the risk of lower self-esteem and social adjustment problems. During any given year in any given league a dozen to several dozen teams compete for one spot, to become the league's champions. In a winner takes all atmosphere, there inevitably are many "losers." Children in such environments end up being held responsible for events that are entirely out of their control. A child can play her best, try her hardest, and still lose. Early starts that are very demanding and stressful lead to early burn-outs and quitting (Williams, 1998).

Some teachers and coaches believe that competition at the elementary level is good because it teaches children how to lose. Learning to become a graceful loser is certainly an important lesson. Still, the inclusion of all children and learning to cooperate with others are more important than learning how to lose (Graham, 1992).

Why are competitive sports slowly and persistently infiltrating the elementary physical education curriculum?

Why are competitive sports slowly and persistently infiltrating the elementary physical education curriculum? The idea certainly did not originate with teacher education professionals. Over a 25 year career in kinesiology and physical education, and close associations with numerous teacher education specialists I have not met one colleague that endorsed formal competition in elementary physical education programs. I have, however, observed a deterioration in our schools in the employment of full-time physical education teachers. The introduction of inadequately prepared part-time coaches into the system as well as the high visibility of varsity athletics at the high school and sometimes at the middle school levels may have contributed to the shift in attitudes about the appropriateness of competitive programs at the elementary level. The fact that millions of elementary school children across America are regularly involved in various little league competitive programs has also contributed to the current change in attitudes towards the implementation of competitive sports in the general education system.

What are concerned physical educators up against?

What are concerned physical educators up against? Close to 90% of parents encourage their children to engage in sports and 60% of parents are involved in youth sports programs (the Miller Lite Report, 1983). Despite the very well documented reports of the many ills of competitive youth sports (Bryant & McElroy, 1997; Coakley, 2000; McPherson, Curtis, & Loy, 1989), and the fact that 85% of parents have concerns about youth sports programs, adult supervised non-school youth sports programs are rapidly growing and cater to some 25 million kids (Frankl, 1998). Almost 50% of the children ages 5-16 participate in youth sports in America. Public non-profit and private non-profit sport organizations, private schools, private commercial clubs, and big business have all joined the frenzy of organized youth sports. The enormity of the youth sports phenomenon has all but completely muffled the voices of physical educators, psychologists, sociologists, physicians and other professionals' serious concerns about non-school adult supervised youth sport leagues. The fact that many competitive programs for children under eight years old exist outside of the school system does not provide legitimacy to the introduction of these programs into the elementary school system. It does, however, create an ever growing pressure on school administrators and physical educators to join this new trend.

There are steps that physical educators can take in order to fight back to reclaim control over their profession

While I do not see an easy solution to this problem, there are steps that physical educators can take in order to fight back to reclaim control over their profession. Physical educators must be able to clearly articulate the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional needs of their students, and should provide a detailed list of the actions they undertake in order to meet those needs. Like other professions, we too must become more transparent with regard to our accountability over reaching or not reaching our stated program goals. The world around us is rapidly changing and so must we. As the "fitness revolution" is gathering momentum we must join this movement and incorporate a mandatory health-related fitness program with clearly stated standard of "well-being" along with the existing skills instruction and skills testing programs (Pivarnik & Pfeiffer, 2002). Finally, we must adopt texts that will supplement and strengthen the cognitive portion of our curriculum. Physical education must be a discipline within the curriculum that requires from students more than just showing up in proper attire. As we continue believing

in our mission and show our conviction and pride in what we do, we will also be in a better position to justify our cause rather than constantly apologize and be defensive about it.

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Start the discussion:

1. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of inter-school competitive programs at the elementary physical education level. Are the identified advantages and disadvantages of equal value and importance?
2. Can the goals of physical education be achieved through the "Competitive Achievement" or the "Competitive Sport" Models? Explain. If not, why not?
3. Should elementary schools implement varsity athletics programs similar to the existing programs in middle- and high-schools? Explain. If not, why not?

How to get involved in the discussion ?

Please send your reaction/questions/comments to Guy Van Damme: guy.vandamme@skynet.be

Guy will collect your replies and then forward it to the author.

The author will read your comments/reactions/feedback and when appropriate will provide additional remarks.

That's all folks - your comments/reactions/feedback will be then added to the discussion list.

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co-ordinator

Guy Van Damme

