



Character Development

A Practical Strategy for Emphasizing Character Development in Sport and Physical Education

RUSSELL W. GOUGH

This is the conclusion of a three-part feature on character in physical education and sport. In the November/December issue, after an introduction by feature editor Dennis Docheff, Jan Mulkey of the Character Education Institute of San Antonio, Texas, presented a historical overview of research on character in education. Gloria Solomon followed with an article supporting the view that the physical education setting can improve moral development.

In the January issue, George Sage examined the impact that sport can have on character development, and Sharon Stoll and Jennifer Beller discussed whether character can be measured.

Lickona (1991) has usefully described good character as consisting of three interrelated dimensions: moral knowing (knowing the good), moral feeling (desiring the good), and moral behavior (doing the good)—habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of action, respectively. While sport and physical education can certainly provide contexts for facilitat-

ing the first two of these dimensions (Ryan & Wynne, 1993), they offer concrete settings for helping students understand the behavioral dimension of good character. In particular, well-organized sport and physical education activities can provide powerful contexts for teaching students about the development of good moral habits.

In this regard, a practical, proactive, and nonjudgmental strategy will be presented to encourage students to reflect meaningfully on the development of their moral character vis-à-vis the development of their athletic or physical education skills. This strategy is presented in four parts. First, an accessible, working conception of character as habit is defined. Next, the fundamental importance of good habits for moral behavior is discussed. Third, a general explanation is offered of why doing the good can seem so difficult. Finally, the analogy between the development of one's moral habits and the development of one's athletic or physical education skills is applied to the notion of developing personal character that does the good naturally and consistently.

Character as One's Personal Bundle of Moral Strengths and Weaknesses

Aside from theoretically complex and nuanced conceptions of character beyond their immediate grasp, students can be encouraged to consult their dictionaries, where they will find entries for "character" such as "moral or ethical strength" or "a description of a person's attributes, traits, and abilities." Definitions such as these lend themselves to a classical understanding of character: put simply, the general notion of one's personal bundle of ethical strengths and weakness, or, as Plato, Aristotle, and other ancients would have said, one's personal bundle of virtues (good habits) and vices (bad habits). In this classical sense, one of the most important ways to counter one's lack of will or resolve to do the good is through the development of good moral habits.

In *Nicomachean Ethics* (especially book two), Aristotle captures the essence of character as habit when he makes numerous remarks such as the following: "We are what we repeatedly do;" "By doing brave acts we become brave;" and, "Moral excel-

lence results because of habit." In this classical sense, character as habit implies a set of ingrained dispositions to act in one way rather than another, those specific ways in which one would act *characteristically* or "as a matter of habit" in a given situation (e.g., honestly or dishonestly, responsibly or irresponsibly, respectfully or disrespectfully, fairly or unfairly, patiently or impatiently, and so forth).

The fact that individuals are disposed to act in a certain way does not mean, of course, that they will always or necessarily act in that certain way, or that they will always or necessarily act according to what is their habit. Humans are not automatons. We have the capacity to act contrary to the ways in which we are disposed to act. For example, Johnny may be impatient "by nature," but this does not mean that he will always act impatiently; or Johnny may be honest as a matter of habit, but he is still capable of being dishonest. (It is worth noting that if Johnny occasionally does act contrary to these habits, he would nonetheless remain, as a matter of habit, both an impatient and honest person.) Thus, to have habits of character simply means that we are disposed, because of the actions we have performed in the past, to perform similar actions in the future. And, importantly, while we have the capacity to act contrary to our personal habits, most of the time we will act consistently with our habits—good or bad.

Using the classical notion of character as habit, an analogy can be drawn between moral character development and sport and fitness training. First, whether morally or athletically speaking, common ground exists in the idea of one's strengths and weaknesses or of one's good habits and bad habits. Since students of even relatively young ages can grasp the idea of his or her athletic strengths and weaknesses (e.g., "I'm not a good hitter, but I'm very good at catching fly balls"), students can also be encouraged to reflect on their moral character strengths and weaknesses (e.g., "I always play by the rules, but I do tend to lose my temper when referees

make bad calls"). For pedagogical purposes, this idea could be incorporated into a self-awareness or a self-reflective moral exercise in which students are encouraged to describe "what they're made of"—first with respect to their athletic strengths and weaknesses, and subsequently with respect to their habits, good and not so good, of personal moral character.

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Second, whether morally or athletically speaking, common ground exists in the idea that weaknesses or bad habits can be overcome if one works at it. That is, a sustained and conscientious effort must be put forth until what was weak has become strong, and until what was a bad habit has been replaced with a good one. Again, just as students can grasp what it takes to develop a particular athletic skill (e.g., "I need to practice my hitting a lot more if I want to get good at it"), they can begin to appreciate a similar principle with respect to their own personal character development (e.g., "I need to get in the habit of showing more self-control when referees make calls that I disagree with").

The Important Role of Moral Habits

The character-as-habit paradigm can be especially effective when students are asked to consider those situations in their day-to-day lives when they have a clear idea of the morally right course of action. That is, instead of focusing on difficult "moral dilemmas," students can be encouraged to reflect on the extent to which their personal bundle of habits facilitates or frustrates their responsibility or obligation to do what they know is right and good. For example, a discussion question that could be raised is: "Since we all agree that we should treat game offi-

cialists with respect, what traits or habits of your personal character might help or hinder you from treating game officials respectfully?"

One notable feature of this approach is that it demonstrates to students that uncertainty over the morally right thing to do is not typically the greatest challenge of their everyday lives. In other words, on a day-to-day, game-to-game, practice-to-practice basis, their most significant character-building challenges are often more a matter of doing the good than a matter of knowing the good; more a matter of having the strength of character to do the right thing than a matter of analyzing and resolving complicated moral dilemmas; more a matter of actually keeping one's cool after a game official makes a questionable call than a matter of determining whether it is morally proper to spew four-letter expletives at the official.

Knowing the good does not imply that doing the good will be easy, much less automatic. Gough (1997) has described such difficulties as internal struggles of character between "What I *ought* to do" versus "What I *want* to do" or "What I *feel* at the moment" or "What I would *like* to happen" or "What I *fear* might happen to me." Specific examples of such internal struggles include: "I really should shake my opponent's hand" versus "The last thing I want to do is shake my opponent's hand"; "I shouldn't pick a fight with my opponent" versus "I'd like to rearrange my opponent's face"; "I shouldn't break this rule" versus "If I want to keep up with the competition, I've got to break this rule."

According to the character-as-habit paradigm, the resolution of internal struggles such as these will typically be determined by—or at least will be significantly shaped by—one's particular strengths and weaknesses of character. By drawing attention to these internal struggles of character and the important role that habits of character play in resolving these struggles, this character-as-habit strategy gives concrete emphasis to one of the core goals of

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virtually any character education framework: the essential notion of personal responsibility. It does so insofar as it concretely drives home to students the extent to which defending one's immoral, unethical, or un-sportsmanlike action with appeals to "the pressures," "the heat of the moment," and "other teams do it" is most often an excuse or rationalization for one's improper behavior. Indeed, even if the facts of such appeals are true, they are typically beside the point, morally speaking.

Moreover, the following is not a legitimate candidate for an internal struggle of moral character: "I shouldn't break this rule" versus "Everyone else is breaking this rule."

The reason is telling: we do not ultimately break the rules because everyone else is breaking the rules, nor can we justifiably blame someone else when we break the rules. We often break rules because of something we want, for example to win, succeed, be famous, or be accepted. Thus the most fundamental moral struggle is not between us and someone else, but is between "what I should do" and "what I want" (or "what I feel" or "what I would like to happen" or "what I fear might happen"). More specifically, it might be characterized as follows: "I should follow the rules" versus "I want to win so badly that I will break the rules."

Seen in this light, students can better appreciate the extent to which they, as free, decision-making moral beings, are ultimately and solely responsible for the actions that result from such common internal struggles.

As Kilpatrick (1992) has noted, an individual cannot meaningfully choose some course of action if he or she lacks the capacity—the strength of character—for it. For example, running the Boston Marathon is not a choice for those who are out of shape. Running a marathon becomes a meaningful choice

only for those who are willing to put in many months of training. Similarly, an individual's freedom to choose respectful behavior over disrespectful behavior is severely limited if he or she has never developed the habit of being civil or courteous to others.

Developing Character that Does the Good Naturally and Consistently

A critical question naturally arises: How does one become good at doing the good?

Sport and physical education provide powerful and concrete contexts for addressing this question. Consider the following line of basic questions that could be put easily to students:

- Why does your coach or physical education instructor make you practice the same athletic skills and techniques over and over?
- Why do you hit, serve, catch, throw, shoot, or kick a ball hundreds or thousands of times?
- Why do you spend countless hours running, jumping, swimming, riding, or lifting until you are completely exhausted?
- What, in fact, is so important about practice?

The most common and obvious responses to this line of questioning, of course, will invariably involve notions of improvement or success:

- I practice to get better, to improve my skills.
- I practice so that I can win, so that I can beat my opponent.
- I practice to be the best that I can be.

Importantly, the ultimate goal of sustained practice is not merely to improve or succeed but to improve or succeed to the point where a given skill or technique becomes "second nature" or "automatic." Through practice we strive to achieve a level of athletic skill such that we can execute that athletic skill

excellently, effortlessly, unthinkingly, and consistently.

According to the classical notion of character as habit, developing good moral habits is analogous to developing good athletic skills. Students can begin to appreciate the analogy by comparing two famous and remarkably similar sentiments offered by football coach Vincent Lombardi and moral philosopher Aristotle: "Success is a habit" and "winning is a habit," expressed on numerous occasions by Lombardi (Walton, 1992), and "Moral excellence is habit," emphasized throughout Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The similarities are more than terminological. First, not unlike the process of acquiring athletic skills, good moral habits cannot be developed without determination, hard work, and practice. As Aristotle emphasized, no one who desires to become good will become good unless he or she literally practices doing good things. Thus, to become an honest or respectful person, for example, one must practice individual acts of honesty or respect.

Second, precisely analogous to the ultimate goal of athletic training, the ultimate goal of character development is to reach a point where doing the good becomes "second nature" or "automatic" to us. Through sustained and conscientious effort—practice—we strive to achieve a level of moral habit or "skill" such that we can perform morally appropriate actions "effortlessly, unthinkingly, and consistently." Like our moral role models whom we strive to imitate, our ideal quest is to become the sort of people for whom honest, respectful, and responsible actions flow naturally and consistently. Moreover, this explains why each of us already possesses certain strengths of character: because someone very important in our lives—a moral role model or moral "coach"—encouraged us to do the right thing repeatedly until it became an ingrained habit of our personal character.

Focusing on the development of specific and ingrained moral habits affords a relatively concrete (even

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Figure 2. A Sampling of CARE Activities for December (Tolerance)

Student Activities

- Create a CARE card. They send the card to someone who is different from themselves (e.g., race, age, ethnic background, culture, handicapped, disabled, etc.).
- Create posters that show the theme of tolerance.
- Try to do *simple* tasks in the classroom with eyes closed. Then, discuss the needs and feelings of a person who is blind.
- Role play situations about tolerance.
- Complete a CARE "name-exchange." Students then do something nice or kind for the student that they select.

Teacher Activities

- Read a story to the class. As the story is read, gradually lower your voice until it can barely be heard. Following the reading of the story, discuss the needs and feelings of a person who has a hearing impairment.
- Compare and contrast different cultures. Then have students create charts showing similarities and differences.
- Incorporate literature into the daily lessons by selecting a book that emphasizes the theme of tolerance, for example: *The Ugly Duckling*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, *Are You My Friend?* and *My Friend Jacob*.

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long-term) way of dealing with internal struggles of character. For if an individual does indeed cultivate enduringly strong moral habits, then many of these internal struggles will cease to be struggles at all. Indeed, in the character-as-habit paradigm, "what I ought to do" can ultimately become synonymous with "what I want to do" in a person who works diligently to develop strong moral habits. For such a person, doing the good becomes not merely a matter of "I should" but "I would." And conversely, avoiding the bad becomes not merely a matter of "I shouldn't" but "I wouldn't." Doing the good, then, becomes not merely the thing one does but the thing one is—one's personal character.

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Russell W. Gough is an associate professor of philosophy and ethics in the Humanities Division at Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA 90263.



Developing and Implementing a K-12 Character Education Program

SHIRLEY FISHER

The future of any nation depends on the values and character of its youth. Today good programs in values and moral education are succeeding in schools districts around the country (Kirschenbaum, 1995). This article will share how one character education program has been implemented throughout the school systems in the community of Bordentown, New Jersey.

Community of Bordentown

The Bordentown community has a population of approximately 12,000. The character education program involves all of the children in the community. The schools and the number of children attending these schools are:

Bordentown Regional School District	1,800
Lutheran Church School	87
Play and Learn Nursery School	55
St. Mary's School	174
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Total	2,016

Program Development

A group of community members met in May of 1996. School administrators, teachers, school nurses, guidance counselors, parents, and a member of the local police force attended the meeting. The group discussed character education, ways to implement a program in character education, education for violence

prevention, and conflict resolution. By the end of this meeting, the individuals present realized that they wanted to implement a district-wide program in character education to start in the fall of 1996. (It should be noted that a physical/health educator was instrumental to the development of the school program.)

A meeting was scheduled to involve staff members in the different schools within the district, an extremely important step in developing a program of this nature because the success of such a program would depend largely on the level of commitment among the staff.

During the second committee meeting, which included several more teachers and parents, it was decided that the emphasis would be on complete community and parent involvement. At that time, a name for the program was determined: Community Action Reaching Everyone (CARE).

Mission Statement

The CARE committee created a program mission statement:

Community Action Reaching Everyone (CARE) is a community-based organization committed to support the nurturing of shared values and positive means for resolving conflict. The membership includes parents, students, teachers and administrators from local public and private schools, representatives from local service and religious or-

ganizations, and community leaders from business, government and police.

This mission statement provides the two major aspects of the CARE program. The CARE planning committee addressed the first aspect—the nurturing of shared community values—through lengthy discussion of 24 potential values. Ultimately, they decided that the program would focus on one priority value during each month (figure 1), and continue throughout the summer recess.

The list of monthly priority value themes included six core values from the Aspen Declaration, the product of a 1992 character education conference. Character educators were uniting around a strategy of teaching core values developed through community consensus (Cohen, 1995). Community consensus is a most important aspect in the development of any community-wide program in character education.

The second major aspect declared in the mission statement is a positive means for resolving conflict. During the 1995-1996 school year, 14 peer mediators were trained at one of the elementary schools on a pilot basis. Then peer mediators were trained in the fall of 1996 at both the high school and junior high school levels. This school year all children and staff learned strategies for resolving conflicts constructively in each of the elementary schools in the Borden-

Figure 1. Monthly Themes for 1996-1997

September	Respect*
October	Responsibility*
November	Cooperation
December	Tolerance
January	Courage
February	Trustworthiness*
March	Self Discipline
April	Fairness*
May	Citizenship*
June	Caring*
July and August	Safety and Risk Assessment

*core values

town Regional Public School District. Resolving conflicts constructively has also been examined through the junior and senior high school health curriculum.

Implementation of the Program

The implementation of character education in the Bordentown community uses a "comprehensive" model, meaning that the program includes all value-related issues. It is also comprehensive in that it occurs throughout the school system, including the school bus program, the playground, and all extracurricular activities (Kirschenbaum, 1995; Lickona, 1992). All school activities aim to engender an atmosphere of respect, kindness, and caring, while using all monthly themes. Large banners are displayed in all schools to remind everyone about the mission of CARE. This demonstrates a complete interdisciplinary approach to character education. In addition, comprehensive values education takes place throughout the entire community. CARE team members recognized the need for continued community support and placed a major emphasis on achieving it. The name CARE (Community Action Reaching Everyone), chosen by the planning committee, clearly demon-

strates the importance given to community involvement. Parents, students, teachers, school nurses, administrators from public and private schools, representatives from local service organizations and religious communities, and leaders from business, government, and police all participate. The atmosphere the planning committee has established in the

schools is also very important throughout the community.

Comprehensive values education is comprehensive in its methodology. It strives to teach and impress values upon the children by frequent repetitions. Another important part of this method is the modeling of values. Young people deserve to see adult role models who possess integrity and a joy for living. They also deserve opportunities to learn responsible decision-making skills (Kirschenbaum, 1995). The CARE program has stressed the importance of being a good role model. All staff members and parents are encouraged to model values and help teach young people problem solving and decision-making skills. CARE also stresses using literature to teach and model values.

CARE team members developed activities for the theme of the month and distributed these activities to each teacher. The teachers then integrated them into teaching schedules for the appropriate grade level. The elementary school years provide students with a new world of knowledge, with new possibilities arriving in the form of books, music, art, and athletics. Therefore, the planning team decided to begin the program with a k-8 focus. In addition to the teachers and coaches who provide

these learning opportunities, fellow students who share in the lessons and the experiences are critical to the program's success (Coles, 1997). Some activities for high school students were developed and will be included for the 1997-1998 school year.

Each teacher also receives a small poster with a "thought for the week" printed on it. The poster is displayed, and at the end of the week the class reviews the thought. All staff members are asked to make positive comments when some behavior in the classroom, gymnasium, or playground reinforces the thought of the week.

Evaluation

The first evaluation of this program was in June 1997. CARE team members developed four survey instruments. The instrument for children concentrates on CARE activities. Questions include asking students whether they changed their behavior concerning values because of the CARE program. In addition, the survey contains questions about conflict resolution skills.

The survey instrument developed for the parents or guardians of the children included questions about the number of times children talked to parents about CARE activities. They were also asked to report whether their children changed their behavior during the school year.

The teachers in the program were asked similar questions and were requested to share one or more noteworthy activities that supported the CARE program. The fourth survey instrument went to administrators and asked about the effect of the CARE program on the school environment during the school year. All four survey instruments requested recipients to select the values to be included in the CARE program for the following school year and posed open-ended questions to encourage suggestions for improvement. This evaluation process took place in five schools during the final week of the school calendar.

Implications

Individuals in each school are responsible for the coordination of the CARE activities within that school, and health and physical education teachers have assumed a major responsibility in this endeavor. There are many opportunities to develop and nurture values in health and physical education curricula. For example, a six-week physical education program in Project Adventure helped turn a distressed middle school into one of the best schools in Boston, recently featured in an article in *Phi Delta Kappan* (O'Donnell, 1997).

Educators realize that character education must be approached with an interdisciplinary mindset. Because the areas of health and physical education present values in contexts that are quite different from the rest of the curricula, it is natural that these areas can make great contributions to character education. Through careful planning, health and physical education professionals can help students gain a high-quality character education.

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Shirley Fisher is an associate professor of the Health and Physical Education Department at the College of New Jersey (formerly Trenton State College), Trenton, NJ 08650.



Character in Sport and Physical Education—Summation

DENNIS DOCHEFF

For years, school administrators, parents, and others who have supported extracurricular sport activities have claimed that "sport builds character." It has also been argued that involvement in sport prepares the participant for later situations in life, making sport an avenue for "real life education." Yet, in a recent *Sports Illustrated* article, Bamberger & Yaeger (1997) reported on a 1995 poll of 198 Olympic or aspiring Olympic athletes, who responded to two scenarios.

Scenario 1—You are offered a banned, performance-enhancing substance, with two guarantees: (1) you will not be caught and (2) you will win. Would you take the substance? One hundred and ninety-five athletes said yes; three said no.

Scenario 2—You are offered a banned, performance-enhancing substance, with two guarantees: (1) you will not be caught and (2) you will win every competition you enter for the next five years, and then you will die from the side effects of the substance. Would you take the substance? More than half of the athletes said yes.

In addition to Olympic athletes failing to maintain integrity and honor in their sport performance, we also see increased violence in professional sport. We see athletes failing to fulfill their contracts, demanding unheard of amounts of money for their "service," and demonstrating behavior that falls short of what we expect from a role model.

Character education should begin in and always revolve around the

home. All of us parents must teach our children how to "take the harder right," instead of the easier wrong. However, teachers and coaches too are in a position to teach young people much about life. We can help prepare children to live productively in society, assisting in the development of leaders of good character.

It seems that fewer people shoot for the ideal anymore. Of all people, teachers and coaches should be leaders of good character and leaders in goal setting and achievement. If we cannot strive for the ideal anymore, then we are counterproductive to the purpose of education: to strive to be the best possible person. Sport and physical education can build character in an indirect manner. Sport and physical education can be means through which character development may occur. However, this character development can be positive or negative. The outcome of character development is determined by a number of factors—that is, the character of those that support and drive the endeavor, including coaches, teachers, administrators, parents, booster clubs, and the student body.

Mostly, it is teachers and coaches who influence the behaviors of the students and athletes. It is they who can discipline the students and athletes for inappropriate behavior or give praise for positive actions. It is they who set the tone for the entire learning team. When students or athletic teams have "character problems," the problems often stem from a teacher or coach who has demon-

strated poor character. When the leader's character seems to be an inappropriate guide for young individuals, then administrators, parents, and booster clubs need to remove the problem. This demonstrates the maintenance of high standards for teachers, coaches, students, and athletes. If we want students to refrain from lying and cheating, then we should not lie and cheat. If we want students to be physically fit, then we should maintain acceptable levels of fitness. If we want students to refrain from using drugs and alcohol, then we should refrain from using drugs and alcohol (not just during the season, but all the time). Should not teachers and coaches fulfill the same expectations they have for their students? This implies a need for faculty character development programs.

As educators, we must take personal responsibility for the development of good character in others by the demonstration of good character in ourselves. We must endeavor to be the best that we can be, to motivate others to strive for their ultimate potential, to exert a positive influence on others, to serve others and the community, and to make the world a better place. That is what educators are supposed to do.

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Dennis Docheff is an associate professor in the Department of Physical Education at the United States Military Academy, West Point, NY 10996.