

WELLNESS PROGRAMMING IN COLLEGIATE ATHLETICS: A MOVEMENT TOWARD BALANCE

Nancy R. Goodloe
Baylor University

INTRODUCTION

College and university campuses across America are showing an increased recognition of the importance and value of uniting all aspects of campus life in the total development of the student. But one group of students on the campuses which is often limited in, if not deprived of, its opportunity to experience the normal growth and development which occurs during this four-year period are the athletes, men and women, who represent the universities in athletic competition. Is the price they pay worth the experience they have?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Athletic personnel have historically extolled the virtues of their programs and the positive contributions made not only to the curricula of their institutions, but also to the participants. Palmieri (1973) believed that athletic participation made significant positive contributions to athletes socially, emotionally, mentally, and psychologically. Among these benefits were the development of appropriate coping skills for adversity in life and the formulation of positive approach to life.

In recent years the role of athletic participation as a positive force in the lives of athletes has been under a considerable amount of scrutiny. The legitimacy of the values mentioned above as well as others which have traditionally been placed on athletic participation is being questioned in several arenas and, indeed, by society in general. Problems with drug use, recruiting violations, and the abuse of academic standards have caused national organizations and local universities to reevaluate their programs and to begin looking at creative ways to address many of these concerns. In

addressing the issues voiced by those who would support change in the current structure of sport, Snyder and Spreitzer (1983) offered the following perspective:

Sport tends to be a reflection of a materialistic society; it thus legitimates the existing system. It induces a false consciousness and is an opiate that encourages satisfactions with the *status quo*. . . .play and informal sport are potentially liberating, but formal sport teaches values that are exploitative, inhumane, and pathological because of the inordinate stress on competition. Problems among athletes are seen as the result of alienation from an inhumane, exploitative, and elitist system . . .

Orlick (1974) also recognized the darker side of sports participation when he said:

For every positive psychological or social outcome in sports, there are possible negative outcomes. For example, sports can offer a child group membership or group exclusion, acceptance or rejection, positive feedback or negative feedback, a sense of accomplishment or a sense of failure, evidence of self-worth or a lack of evidence of self-worth. Likewise, sports can develop cooperation and a concern for others, but they can also develop intense rivalry and a complete lack of concern for others.

Snyder and Spreitzer (1983) further state: "The big collegiate sports establishments are not primarily concerned with building character. Rather, they are highly bureaucratized business organizations that sometimes resort to unethical practices to achieve the goals of winning and the resultant gate receipts." Scafer (cited in Snyder and Spreitzer, 1983) expressed concern for the way in which sport particularly 'scripts' young men to be successful, strong, objective, and unemotional. He believed that the pressure to take charge, to come out on top, and not to show pain could lead to dysfunctional behavior such as difficulty in expressing sentiments as well as the inability to be in touch with feelings and to transmit affection and feeling-level communication.

THE PROBLEM

These subtleties, present in the structure of many athletic programs, give rise to problems for student athletes and manifest themselves in negative behaviors. For example, some students who, having not made the team or having missed a season because of an injury, seem to give up on themselves as persons and on life in general. Many of them drop out of

school. Others become involved with negative persons and/or activities which lead them in unhealthy directions. Their grades suffer, and they allow themselves to physically deteriorate. These behaviors result from a profound loss of purpose and self-worth which is tied to their membership on that team. Many athletes become so depressed after the season that they withdraw into themselves from a lack of a social support system outside of the team. Numerous athletes' lifestyles are so limited that they eat, sleep, and live only for the sport. Academics take second place on their list of priorities, because it is seen as a means to their athletic goals. Often no third, fourth, or fifth places exist.

In addition some athletes get by academically by cheating and manipulating teachers for grades instead of applying themselves and studying. Some coaches and athletic academic advisors have been guilty of devaluing the academic experience by placing athletes in courses that have no bearing on their majors or are reputed to be "easy" for athletes. Many athletes approach college with the idea that the next four years will be a training camp for the pros. Unfortunately, this attitude is often perpetuated by their coaches and other athletic personnel. It is easy to see why some athletes develop lifestyle problems associated with a low self-esteem/self-concept, the lack of a sense of worthwhileness and purpose, the absence of a healthy socialization process, insufficient academic achievement, and the development of a value system based entirely on winning.

These observations prompt one to ask: Is there really life after the season? Or better yet, is there really life as an athlete?

THE SOLUTION

Obviously, there are no easy solutions for the current situation in athletics. Athletes and coaches find it difficult to lead a healthy lifestyle and continue to be competitive. Practice, game preparation, and travel are necessary to meet the performance expectations athletes have for themselves and that spectators demand. These require time. In addition, the societal emphasis on winning and the tendency to associate successful programs with winning programs causes a shift in priorities and value systems and does, in fact, act as a deterrent to the development of positive lifestyles. A more broad-based definition of success and a lifestyle stressing quality in all areas is needed by coaches, as well as a willingness to foster these ideals in their athletes.

The key for this type of existence lies in the ability of the participant (athlete, coach, athletic director, etc.) to perceive a concept of life being balanced in six dimensions: physical, mental, emotional, social, spiritual, and occupational (Hettler, 1980). The payoff for this effort results in an in-

creased ability of the individual to become all that he/she can become, to reach his/her highest potential. Abraham Maslow (1968) defined this stage of human development as self-actualization. It requires a daily commitment to reach out and explore the limits of one's potential and to move toward developing that potential. These concepts of balance and maximizing individual potential are synonymous with the wellness trust being felt across the country. Their inclusion in athletic programs is not only possible but is also highly desirable. A brief explanation of each dimension and its importance follows.

Physical wellness contributes to increased levels of health-related fitness through exercise, proper nutrition, medical self-care, and avoidance of abusive substances.

Mental wellness encourages the continued acquisition of knowledge through creative and stimulating learning experiences to enhance mental potential and ability.

Social wellness develops a sense of concern for environmental issues and the development of a personal environment which enables the pursuit of harmony within the family and the community.

Spiritual wellness provides peace and contentment with the personal interpretation of life's purposes and meanings through a relationship with a higher being or perhaps a life force.

Emotional wellness increases awareness and acceptance of one's feelings and self-image with improved self-express, self-control, self-evaluation, and enthusiasm for life.

Occupational wellness promotes preparation for an appropriate career which will provide positive enrichment and an enjoyable experience on the job.

For a wellness lifestyle to provide all of the benefits of which it is capable, it must demonstrate balanced interrelationships within each dimension and among all six of the dimensions. Characteristically, a person may be in excellent physical condition and may have sound nutritional habits; but if alcohol, drugs, or tobacco is abused, that person is not well-balanced within the physical dimension. On the other hand, he/she may have a very well-balanced physical dimension but have a low self-concept and find maintaining relationships to be difficult. In this case an imbalance exists among the physical, social, and emotional dimensions. A unique relationship exists among the six dimensions in that anything that causes an imbalance in one dimension will also affect the other five dimensions. The strength of the individual's lifestyle is determined by the balance within and

among the dimensions—the more balance, the more strength and vice versa.

Surely, then, having wellness-oriented athletes and being wellness-oriented as coaches and athletic directors would seem to be desirable goals. In fact, it would seem that initially athletics was designed to accomplish this objective. However, the reality of competition in today's society is that athletics does very little to promote balance in its participants.

What then can be done to enable athletes and other personnel to become more wellness-oriented, more balanced in their perspective of life? An organized approach to the problem is required. Within the framework of team meetings and activities, a place must be made to devote time to critical issues involving lifestyles decisions. The help of professionals with expertise in particular areas could be enlisted to lead team, small group, or individual discussion sessions. In addition the identification and utilization of special courses within the academic curricula could help the athlete in making a smooth transition academically and socially from high school to college.

Topics which would be appropriate for team meetings and discussion are: (a) self-image concepts that develop a value for the athlete as a person as well as a performer; (b) time management concepts that emphasize positive, healthy ways to deal with stress and control of life; (c) maintaining individuality in the face of peer pressure; (d) developing a faith in a higher being, in one self, and in others, which leads to a positive attitude toward life and living; (e) stress management; (f) building and maintaining relationships, communication and assertiveness skills; (g) academic counseling and tutoring in special areas, study skill courses, and vocational counseling, and (h) fitness, nutrition, and other health-related topics.

The campus wellness coordinator or a staff person in psychological services could be consulted on the development and structure of a program of this nature. Either of these persons would also be excellent resources for additional campus and community professionals who could be utilized in program delivery. A dean or vice-president for student life could suggest ways athletes could become more socially integrated as college students and could educate athletes about social opportunities/activities on the campus. The director of academic counseling could help with specific problems and scheduling needs unique to athletes as well as with career planning and vocational counseling.

Additional campus personnel who could provide valuable insight and expertise would be health education professionals, sport psychologists and/or sociologists, professional education faculty who teach study skills and reading improvement courses, campus chaplains, and the university medical staff. Finally, faculty and other colleagues could serve as mentors

for athletes, to provide a source of support and a listening ear with concerns and problems which need to be verbalized.

Having well-balanced coaches and athletic personnel has to be a priority if a program of this nature is to succeed. These persons provide the proper role modeling which is needed. They also have a well-developed sensitivity to individuals and are able to recognize the symptoms of potential problems early enough to instigate preventive measures before the problems are enlarged.

SUMMARY

The question to be considered is this. Does participation in athletics contribute to the positive development of the athlete? There is enough evidence to suggest not necessarily. But, if a rationale for participation is this positive individual development, then athletic personnel must take the initiative to ensure that this result occurs. Incorporating wellness concepts into the structure of the athletic experience is one way to begin to move toward this objective. Wellness concepts are valid for athletes and athletic programs. They provide an organized, methodical way to enable persons to begin to live their lives to the fullest and to recognize their personal and athletic potential. They provide a way for athletes to experience greater integration in their total collegiate experience and begin to develop skills to transfer this integration beyond the college experience. They provide a way for practitioners to bridge the gap between the reality of what the experience is and the myth of what it is perceived to be.

REFERENCES

- Hettler, B. Wellness Promotion on a University Campus. Family and Community Health: The Journal of Health Promotion and Prevention 1980. 1. 77-91.
- Maslow, A. Toward A Psychology of Being. New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1968.
- Orlick, T. The Sports Environment, a Capacity to Enhance, a Capacity to Destroy. Paper presented at the Sixth Canadian Symposium of Psychology, Motor Learning and Sports Psychology, 1974.
- Palmieri, J. Stressing the Value of Athletics in Education Administration, 1973, 7, 3, 15-16.
- Snyder, E. and Spreitzer, E. Social Aspects of Sport. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1983.