

2007

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## Repository Citation

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### Citation/Publisher Attribution:

Torres, C. R., & Hager, P. F. (2007). De-emphasizing Competition in Organized Youth Sport: Misdirected Reforms and Mised Children. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 37(2), 292-309.

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# De-emphasizing Competition in Organized Youth Sport: Misdirected Reforms and Mised Children

Cesar R. Torres and Peter F. Hager

Throughout the twentieth century, organized youth sport became an increasingly prevalent childhood experience across Western societies—especially in affluent ones. Millions of children participate in organized sport each year. Participation is accepted and encouraged as an integral part of children’s lives because of its alleged benefits. Arguably, the goal of organized youth sport is to foster children’s overall welfare. Competition has played a prominent and sometimes controversial role in programs espousing this objective. It is precisely through the organization and administration of competitive sports that youth sport programs seek to advance their goal. However, the growing emphasis on winning, as well as the myriad of excesses and abuses that it has created among parents, coaches, spectators, and young athletes, has generated a massive wave of criticism against competition (6;7;11;26;33;37). Many professional organizations, advocacy groups, and experts in the field believe that organized youth sport programs are in crisis and have recommended reforms designed to establish a healthy environment that emphasizes children’s needs and interests first, so they can make the most of their sport experiences.

To ensure this, those who advocate the refocusing of organized youth sport maintain that these programs should “emphasize that there should be action, [and] involvement among all participants” and that adults “need to encourage fun” (6: p. 147; 33). The gist of their proposals is to reprioritize the values inspiring participation in organized youth sport, which necessitates moving away from organizational models that mimic adult-oriented priorities. While confessedly de-emphasizing competition, the recommendations to emphasize action and fun have led organizers and administrators to discourage the formation of regular competitive teams and the keeping of scores or standings, to limit traveling outside the community, and to ensure minimal playing time for all young athletes. This set of recommendations and measures constitutes a growing trend in organized youth sport programs—a trend through which programs purport to underscore children’s interests and welfare over competitive performance and outcomes.

In this essay, we argue that this trend in organized youth sport is unwarranted and misleading to children. We believe that when children are initiated into such

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“reformed” programs, they are deluded about the structure, central purpose, and value of participation in competitive sport. We begin by exploring details concerning the reformist movement, then analyze it under the two most common representations of the central purpose of competitive sport. The first is the “zero-sum” view, which focuses on establishing winners and losers; the second is the “mutualist” view, which focuses on the determination and construction of excellence in sport. This analysis not only demonstrates that the trend of de-emphasizing competition in youth sports is incompatible with these representations but also that it is misleading to children. Finally, we show why misleading children in this way fails to serve their interests and needs and suggest a new direction for reform that, while keeping children’s welfare at the forefront, accurately represents the central purpose of competitive sport.

## 1

The trend toward removing competitive elements from youth sport programs (the trend hereafter) has its origins in the calls for reform issued by many parents, coaches, administrators, former youth sport athletes, and scholars over the last 25 years. During this period, individuals and groups concerned with the well-being and development of children have expressed their displeasure with parents, coaches, and administrators who have emphasized winning and performance over values such as skill acquisition and mastery, fair play, sportspersonship, and fun. The proponents, as we will refer to them, have sought a reprioritization of these value sets that they believe will allow children to learn sport skills in a fun, fair, and developmentally appropriate environment.

To facilitate the development of such an atmosphere, the proponents believe it is necessary to de-emphasize or subtract certain competitive elements from youth sport contests and programs. For instance, the National Alliance for Youth Sport (NAYS) has established standards designed to create and maintain programs that put the development and well-being of children first. These standards call for youth sport leagues to commit to practices that decrease competition between teams and individuals or to altogether remove aspects of sport that promote competition between them.

NAYS Standards 1 (Proper Sports Environment) and 2 (Programs Based on the Well-Being of Children) best exemplify the Alliance’s approach to competitiveness. Implementation guidelines for Standard 1 state that leagues should set minimum play requirements for participants, establish a no-cut policy, and “provide an opportunity for meaningful play for all children” (33). Similarly, implementation guidelines for Standard 2 proscribe the establishment of formal competitive teams prior to age 9. They also state that scores and standings should not be kept at the 5- to 6-year-old and 7- to 8-year-old levels and that standings should be de-emphasized once scorekeeping begins at age 9. Postseason play is not allowed until children reach the 9- to 10-year-old age bracket, and even then it is to be limited to local or community play. Finally, Standard 2’s implementation procedures do not allow coaches to emphasize sport specialization before age 11 and forbid them to mandate year-around participation at any age.

The objective of youth sport reforms such as NAYS Standards 1 and 2 is to create sport experiences for children that are appropriate for their age and developmental level. Standard 2 itself urges parents to “select youth sport programs that are developed and organized to enhance the emotional, physical, social and educational well-being of children” (33). The rationale for Standard 2, as well as for Standard 1, emphasizes the maximization of meaningful participation for each child. Standard 2 in particular was developed and established in response to programs that overemphasized performance and winning. In the background statement for this standard, the NAYS notes that “many organized play experiences for children are carbon copies of adult-oriented programs. The rules, skill expectations and competitive requirements are the same as in high school, college and professional levels” (33).<sup>1</sup>

The trend toward de-emphasizing or eliminating competitive elements within youth sport programs is part of an attempt to change the culture of youth sport by initiating a shift in the values that will prompt parents, coaches, and administrators to create organized sport experiences for children rather than for miniature adults. More adult-oriented youth sport programs tend to emphasize what Coakley has referred to as the “performance ethic.” He has contended that, within such programs,

performance becomes a measured outcome and indicator of the quality of the sport experience. *Fun* in these programs comes to be defined in terms of becoming a better athlete, becoming more competitive, and being promoted into more highly skilled training categories. (7: p. 133)

Although the performance ethic might benefit a select group of talented young athletes, it does not meet the developmental needs of less skilled athletes who are participating in sport in order to learn how to play, acquire skills, be with friends, and have fun. Many young athletes in this second category burnout and leave sports because of parent- and coach-related factors associated with the performance ethic and its accompanying value system. According to Woods (37), coaches who contribute to youth sport burnout emphasize winning over skill acquisition and mastery and focus their energies on honing the skills of more talented athletes rather than helping those children whose skills are not as well developed. Parents also significantly contribute to burnout in young athletes by becoming too involved in their children’s sport participation, overemphasizing the importance of results, and “pushing children to the next level of competition even when they resist” (p. 109).

Many youth sport programs, especially private ones that require parents to pay substantial fees for their child’s participation, foster the aforementioned damaging behaviors by subscribing to and promoting the performance ethic. As Coakley has pointed out, when parents shell out “big bucks” so their child can play a sport, they expect to get the kind of training and coaching that will lead to significant skill and performance improvements, as well as the benefits often identified with youth sport participation (e.g., fitness gains, social skill development, enjoyment, etc.). Some parents begin to view these payments as investments and expect to see substantial returns on them (7: p. 133). Although other benefits are visible to parents, they are not as celebrated and obvious as improvements in their child’s sport skills that can be quantified in statistics and the competitive success of the team for which he or

she plays. Hence, many parents wind up stressing the performance ethic and pressuring coaches, who are already inclined to subscribe to it, to further accentuate its concomitant values.

In acting on behalf of young athletes whose best interests are not being accounted for in adult-oriented programs, the proponents have sought to de-emphasize the performance ethic by reducing the emphasis placed on winning, performance, and competition and highlighting values such as fun, skill acquisition and mastery, fairness, and sportspersonship. They believe that by decreasing the emphasis on the aspects of sports that influence adults and children to become competitive, or by eliminating some of these aspects altogether, they will be able to legislate this value shift and alter the culture of youth sport by requiring parents, coaches, and administrators to focus on the well-being and development of all children rather than the skill development and performance of the most athletically talented ones.

To sum up, the proponents of the trend believe that the competitive aspects of sport are leading those who oversee programs and children to overemphasize winning and athletic performance. To alleviate this problem, they contend that it is necessary to de-emphasize or abolish competitive practices in youth sport programs, including the development of competitive teams and the tabulation of scores and standings. The proponents argue that such practices should be removed from youth sport because they focus adults and children too intensely on children's sport performance and competitive achievements and veil the importance of children's skill acquisition, value learning, and emotional and psychological development. The trend, they conclude, is necessary because it facilitates the reprioritization of the skewed value systems of many youth sport programs and reestablishes the best interest of children as first priority. With the proponents' view established, it is now appropriate to examine it in relation to the two most common representations of the central purpose and value of competitive sport to determine whether or not it stands on solid philosophic ground.

## 2

One of the most debated issues in modern sporting cultures across the world is whether the outcomes of sport contests or the way in which they are established prove the competitive merit and success of contestants. For example, in Argentine football followers of Carlos S. Bilardo, coach of the victorious Argentine side in the 1986 World Cup, believe that winning is the only measure of success. On the other hand, the likes of César L. Menotti, who coached Argentina to victory in the 1978 World Cup, emphasize that how the game is played is of utmost importance (1: pp. 174–176; 2: pp. 52–58; 15: pp. 173–175). In the United States, Vince Lombardi and John Wooden characterized the tendencies embodied by Bilardo and Menotti, respectively. In turn, youth sport has adopted and reproduced these conflicting views of competitive success. The tendencies emphasizing either the product of sport contests or the process by which they are determined disclose not only a persistent fascination with competitive sport but also a fundamental tension between the two most common representations of its central purpose and meaning. One is the zero-sum view, the other is the mutualist view. In addition to

being defended by many sportspeople, these contradicting views have also been articulated in the sport philosophy literature.

The zero-sum view of competitive sport asserts that the achievement of victory by one side in contests necessarily precludes the other from such achievement. Because both sides in contests cannot logically win, contests are perceived as either-or affairs. That is, contests are constructed as rigid phenomena governed by a binary win-lose logic in which one's victory becomes another's loss. Thus, under the zero-sum view, the structure of competition, which pits one side against the other, disconnects contestants more than it unites them. In this respect, Simon (31) has observed that competition "can be thought of as participation in sports contests with the intent or major goal of defeating an opponent" (p. 18). On this account, opponents are at best means to one's own ends, and at worst obstacles to be surmounted. This highlights what Hyland (16) has called "the moment of negativity" in sport, wherein in order to win "I must negate the efforts of the other player or team" (p. 179). Because outcomes make known who was on each side of the competitive winning-losing divide, they are inevitably, and forcefully, highlighted. In short, for the zero-sum view, competitive sport's central purpose exclusively focuses on determining winners and losers.

Unlike the minimalist zero-sum view, the mutualist view does not understand the telos of competitive sport to be an either-or affair. Although it recognizes the zero-sum qualities of contests, the mutualist view stresses the overriding concern for excellence and the cooperative structure inherent in them. Several sport philosophers (10;13;21;27;31) have argued that the core purpose of competitive sport is to compare the relative abilities of contestants to determine athletic superiority. The comparative purpose of contests inextricably binds contestants together, not only because a comparison necessitates more than one side but also because contestants challenge each other and attempt to overcome the challenge in a manner superior to that of their opponents. In this dialectic, contests become sites in which contestants fuse into a collective that strives to achieve excellence. Simon (31) has summarized this view, arguing that "competition presupposes a *cooperative* effort by competitors to generate the best possible challenge to each other" and that competitive sport is better understood as "a mutually acceptable quest for excellence through challenge" (p. 27). For the mutualist view, opponents reciprocally cooperate to catalyze their efforts toward excellence and determine athletic superiority—the conspicuous telos of competitive sport. Because both winners and losers can display excellence in a contest, sport competition is a non-zero-sum game, according to the mutualist view.

Torres and McLaughlin (36) have developed a characterization of contestants' appreciation of sport competition that captures the divergent approaches advanced by the zero-sum and the mutualist views of its central purpose. They have discerned between "outcome seekers" and "resolution seekers." Although both types of contestants are seduced by the basic project of a given sport as delineated by its rules and defining skills, the former find the zero-sum qualities of contests even more attractive. Outcome seekers' fascination with the dyadic structure of competitive sport prompts them into a pursuit of auspicious results that entices them to dismiss concerns with the athletic merit and quality of play that led to those results. Because their measure of athletic success is first and foremost winning, outcome seekers either do not appreciate or fall short of embodying the significant role that excellence

and its cooperative dimension play in competitive sport. That is, “it is very likely that an outcome seeker would make a project out of winning, rather than a project out of sharing a test” (p. 149).

Conversely, resolution seekers are deeply concerned about how athletic challenges are met and legitimate comparisons are established. Because they “take seriously what it means to win,” resolution seekers “comprehend the important role that the opponents play in making winning not only possible but also meaningful” (36: p. 149). Their attitude clearly resembles the mutualist view of competitive sports and its proposed values. Resolution seekers care deeply about how sports are played; they inevitably embrace contests as sites in which athletic excellence is manifested through the opponents’ mutual efforts to meet their challenge while solving their sport’s rule-established and regulated project. In other words, resolution seekers “do not appreciate victory for its own sake but as a reflection of a process by which contestants find worthy opponents, agree to create the best possible test, and attempt to overcome the challenge faced” (36: p. 149). Under this view, the primary commitment is to cultivating the defining skills of a sport and embracing those who are devoted to their advancement. In relation to Hyland’s (16) ideas, resolution seekers supersede the attempt to win in the search for excellence and friendship.

Regardless of whether the zero-sum view or the mutualist view of competitive sport and their respective characterizations by outcome seekers and resolution seekers is to be preferred, they have to be analyzed in relation to our thesis that the trend is not only unwarranted but also misleading to children. As it will become clear later, it is unwarranted because children are not competing, and it is misleading because children are being led to think that they are partaking in a type of activity (i.e., competitive sport) in which they are not.

Let us first consider the trend vis-à-vis the zero-sum view. Among its recommendations, the trend calls for the elimination of scorekeeping at younger levels of youth sport. Its goal is to de-emphasize the winning–losing dyad. However, the zero-sum view and its outcome-seeking proponents would contend that unless scores are kept, it is unfeasible to establish outcomes, which in turn makes it unfeasible to determine winners and losers. This recommendation violates what they consider the basic principle and whole purpose of sport competition: defeating one’s opponent. How would one tell if the purpose of competitive sport was accomplished if scores were not kept and winners were not determined? For outcome seekers, athletic events in which no effort is made to keep track of the score and determine winners cannot be considered, properly speaking, instances of athletic competition.

It could be argued that in youth sport competition it is not necessary to keep scores to determine the outcomes of contests and discriminate winning sides from losing sides. Many contests at this level are so uneven that winners are easily recognized in spite the absence of scores. It is, however, far from clear that scorekeeping is unnecessary at the younger levels of sport. Needless to say, it is an unproven empirical claim that winners and losers can be recognized without scores. More important, if establishing winners and losers is not in itself problematic and only scorekeeping is, those who propose the trend appear to contradict their initial goal of de-emphasizing contestants’ fascination with the zero-sum qualities of competition. What is the point of not keeping scores if winners will nevertheless be recognizable? If adherents of the trend retort that the winning–losing dyad has

little, if anything, to do with youth sports, they are straightforwardly corroborating that in this mode of organized sport, children are not engaged in a competitive activity. When analyzed under the light of the zero-sum view, the trend's proposal to eliminate the keeping of scores either contradicts its own stated goal or it moves entirely away from its ideal of competition.

If the analytical structure of the trend does not hold up well against the challenges posed by the zero-sum view, it does not fare much better when contrasted with the mutualist view. Consider, once again, the trend's proposal to eliminate scorekeeping. This elimination takes away an important indicator of the relative skills of contestants. Although imperfect tools for measuring and comparing athletic excellence, scores unveil consequential comparative information. This is even more true when contestants possess relatively similar levels of skills. For instance, Simon (31) has argued that winning is certainly "an important criterion, sometimes the criterion, of having met the challenge of the opposition" (p. 36). Although he acknowledges that it sometimes inaccurately portrays athletic superiority, Dixon (10) has concurred that "regarding winning as the criterion for athletic superiority is, qua operational definition, irreproachable" (p. 18). Referring to the complexity and difficulty of assessing athletic performance, Torres and Hager (35) have proposed principles that "help in designing and implementing evaluation systems that more accurately reflect and reward performance" (p. 209). If evaluation systems are capable of justly rewarding athletic excellence and the end results of contests are good indicators of the excellence displayed by contestants in the process that established them, the elimination of scores seems unjustifiable. Indeed, it might unnecessarily obscure—or simply make impossible—the determination of the athletically superior side which, according to the mutualist view and resolution seekers, is the most important goal of athletic contests.

Recommendations by the proponents of the trend to discourage the formation of regular competitive teams and ensure minimal playing time for all young athletes also detract from the ideal of competitive sport advocated by the mutualist view and resolution seekers. Entitling each and every young athlete to some minimal playing opportunities simply because he or she desires it goes against notions of excellence and merit. This strategy to promote participation for all undermines the cooperative element in sport contests, what Kretchmar (21) has called the move from test to contest, because it disregards the agreement that contestants challenge each other to the best of their abilities. An objection might be raised that once on the playing field each young athlete puts forth his or her maximal effort. However, in team sports it is the combination of individual athletes' efforts that produces a unified and maximal challenge to the opponent. "In fact," as Kretchmar (19) has argued, "this is why we conceptualize these activities as team tests and team contests" (p. 269). If no performative or strategic reason justifies playing an inferior athlete, the mutual testing in search for excellence is subverted. Here, it is not the technical or strategic versatility of a team to excel in its sport's challenge that prevails but the commitment to play every athlete regardless of athletic merit or need—a principle that both denies the logic of competitive sport and the old axiom of always playing one's best. With language resembling the mutualist view, Delatre (9) has defended the notion that athletic success requires being and finding worthy contestants. Playing everybody does not ensure this and even jeopardizes the validity and meaning of contests' comparison of skill.<sup>2</sup>



Emphasizing involvement among all participants unnecessarily reproduces a tension frequently confronted by sportspeople: sport competition is presented as being about either participation or winning. In other words, the process of contesting is pitted against its end result. Torres (34) has analyzed this dichotomy as found in Olympic ideology. For him, the Olympic motto's and Olympic creed's respective emphasis on the results of contests and participation distort the nuanced subtlety and intricacy of competitive sport.<sup>3</sup> Torres has argued that this is a false dichotomy and that, when an approach similar to the mutualist view is incorporated into the analysis, results and the process of contesting come to form an intrinsically meaningful whole. "This whole, this interconnectedness between one's own and one's opponents' performances, that entails the complexity and nuances of sport competition, is what makes it a project worth pursuing" (p. 251). The trend's dichotomization of sport competition into an either-or affair impedes the theoretical understanding and, perhaps more importantly, the actual embodiment of this radical reconciliation. Because it focuses on participation to the detriment of results, the trend misrepresents the uniqueness of sport competition.

In summary, the recommendations proposed by the trend and its underlying ideas distort and depart from the notion of sport competition represented by the zero-sum view and the mutualist view. Considered under the "winning is everything" attitude defended by the former, the trend appears to contradict its overall purpose. However, it is possible to argue that it entirely neglects the idea of competition. If scores are not kept, the goal of competitive sport is simply not pursued. Similarly, when the trend's proposals are evaluated with the more encompassing mutualist view of competitive sport, they also encounter intractable challenges. First, the elimination of scores removes an important measure for determining athletic excellence and superiority. Second, discouraging the formation of regular competitive teams and ensuring minimal playing time for all young athletes undermines one of the conditions of the move from test to contest, which requires that contestants challenge each other to the best of their abilities in the quest for athletic excellence. So, arguably, the goal of competitive sport is not pursued here either. Finally, the emphasis on participation at the expense of outcomes misrepresents the complexity and nuances of competitive sport.

### 3

Let us be clear that our analysis of the trend and its recommendations in relation to the zero-sum and mutualist views' constructions of the central purpose of competitive sport does not commit us to defending a "win-at-all-costs" approach to organized youth sport or a conception that puts competitive sport before children's interests and needs. Our claim is that the trend misrepresents and departs from both minimalist and more nuanced interpretations of competition in sport. That is, in its attempts to de-emphasize competition, the trend neglects it altogether. Unfortunately, the noble intentions of the trend and its proponents are not only unwarranted and misleading to children but they also fail to serve children's interests and needs.<sup>4</sup>

At this point it is instructive to briefly explore those interests and needs. Schapiro (29), using a Kantian theoretical framework, has argued that "the condition

of childhood is one in which the agent is not yet in a position to speak in her own voice because there is no voice which counts as hers" (p. 729). For this philosopher, childhood is a normative predicament that excuses paternalistic attitudes toward children insofar as the will that would permit authority over them is not yet developed.<sup>5</sup> While recognizing how formidable this predicament is for children, Schapiro has proposed that adults should help children come out of childhood, keeping in mind that it is only they who can do so. The task of children "is to carve out a space between themselves and the forces within them. They are to do this by trying on principles in the hope of developing a perspective they can endorse as their own" (p. 735). In other words, children have to find a voice they can endorse as legitimately theirs. To help children accomplish this, adults must recognize both negative and positive obligations to them:

Our negative obligation as adults must be to refrain from hindering them [children] in this effort [of developing a perspective they can endorse as their own]. We do this by not treating children as if they belonged to a distinct and permanent underclass. . . .

The second part of the principle, which prohibits us from treating children as a permanent underclass, determines both positive and negative duties. Negatively, it implies that we must refrain from acting in ways which hinder children's development as deliberators. . . . Positively, the principle demands that we make it our end to help children overcome their dependent condition. In nurturing, disciplining, and educating children, we must strive as far as possible to make them aware of their natural authority and power over themselves and of its proper exercise. (29: pp. 735–736)

Schapiro (29) has maintained that these obligations, intended to facilitate children's quest to find and develop their own place in the world and personal set of convictions, "all stem from the idea that in order not to abuse our privilege as adults, we must make children's dependence our enemy" (p. 737). She has called this "a principle of Kantian nonideal theory. In the spirit of [John] Rawls's nonideal theory, this principle helps us to find the least immoral way of coping with an obstacle to morality" (p. 737).

In light of Schapiro's understanding of childhood and proposed ethic of adult-child relations, we question whether the trend's misrepresentation of competitive sport is suited to help children work their way out of childhood and become autonomous beings. The trend's proponents are misleading children by telling them that they are engaged in competition when they clearly are not. This implies either conceptual confusion or a disregard for the truth, both of which appear to contradict adults' obligation to help children develop into independent and educated deliberators. Conceptual confusion about the central purpose of competitive sport might lead children to unwarranted conclusions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding a social practice with enormous significance and value in contemporary life. It is no different than telling children that they can ride a bicycle without wheels or that hopscotch and dodgeball are games but not sports.<sup>6</sup> Of course children, appealing to their empirical sensitivity, will disprove in no time the assertion about the wheel-less bicycle. However, they will have a more difficult time finding a way out of the analytical confusion surrounding the underlying notions of games and

sports in the hopscotch and dodgeball example. Conceptually misleading children in this way, whether done purposely or not, is unacceptable. Indeed, if children are to free themselves from ignorance and progressively take charge of their lives, the information transmitted, as well as the methods taught during childhood to make sense of that information and the world in which they live, should be accurate and reliable. Using Schapiro's terminology, it is difficult to comprehend how analytical confusion is a morally justifiable way to cope with an obstacle to sound moral deliberation (i.e., children's immaturity). How can children become independent in the world of sports if they are mystified about competitive sport's nature and central purpose?<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, eliminating competition from competitive sport not only amounts to conceptual confusion, it transforms organized youth sport into a "practical charade" in which adults and children pretend the latter are participating in competitive activities when they are not. Although many children will simply play their roles as athletes in this charade, others will immediately recognize the contrast between their noncompetitive activities and the similar but highly competitive sports they see when attending elite events or watching them on television. The clear differences between two activities bearing the same name can only serve to confuse these bright children and make them question both the truth of their parents' claims that they are playing competitive soccer, for example, and the validity of their own experience of the sport of soccer. This being so, the charade facilitated by the trend will not help children make sense of their sporting experiences and, therefore, will not assist them in their efforts toward autonomy.

If the issue is disregard for the truth, the disservice to children could be even worse. For it seems that at the center of an independent life is a concern for truth. As Frankfurt (14) has forcefully put it, "without truth we have no opinion at all concerning how things are or our opinion is wrong" (p. 59). Although ignorance and false beliefs might make people "for a time, *blissfully* ignorant or *happily* deceived and . . . we may temporarily avoid being especially upset or disturbed," Frankfurt is convinced that, in the end, they "are likely just to make our circumstances worse" (p. 60). Lack of knowledge and falsehood leave people, especially children, not only disoriented but also with a distorted sense of reality and their capabilities and opportunities. These are hardly empowering qualities. In this regard, Savater (28: p. 119) has said that trusting ignorance is both absurd and dangerous. It is dangerous because while capitulating to error and misconception, it denies the liberating role of human reason and leaves people in the dark. It is absurd because it neglects the obvious power of knowledge to help people enrich their lives.

It might be argued that the trend and its recommendations are justified because they protect children from experiences that might hurt them. Their proponents would argue that the costs associated with participation in organized youth sport outweigh the benefits. More importantly, they would argue that the reality of competitive sport is plagued with undesirable behavior and demoralizing effects. After all, adults have a duty to protect children from unnecessary traumatic or unpleasant experiences that would hinder the development of their autonomy. Some realities are so discouraging, unsettling, and counterproductive that children are better off being protected from them.

First, it is questionable whether competitive sport causes, or even correlates to, negative alterations in a young athlete's quest to become his or her own authority,

both in the sport arena and life in general. This is something that has to be empirically demonstrated. Moreover, it appears that some young athletes greatly benefit from competition in sport, whether it teaches desirable traits or merely reinforces them. Second, it might be argued that eliminating competitive sport from a young athlete's life takes away valuable, if sometimes difficult and painful, experiences from such a crucial quest. Third, as Frankfurt (14) has argued, knowing and confronting harsh realities is more beneficial than being oblivious to them. In his judgment,

it is nearly always more advantageous to *face* the facts with which we must deal than to remain ignorant of them. After all, hiding our eyes from reality will not cause any reduction of its dangers and threats; plus, our chances of dealing successfully with the hazards that it presents will surely be greater if we can bring ourselves to see things straight. (p. 58)

How can children deliberate autonomously about the value—and risks—of sport competition if the competitive qualities have been eliminated from their sports experience but the endeavor is still labeled as such? Conceptually misled, children might have a hard time understanding the divorce between the highly visible kinds of sport competitions they are exposed to in their everyday life and their own “competitive yet noncompetitive” experiences. Misleading children also underestimates their growing agency and could potentially end in the dismissal of their explicit, and sometimes legitimate, preferences.<sup>8</sup> Adults' obligation to facilitate children's autonomy demands conceptual clarity. It might well be that some degree of paternalism is justifiable in early stages of organized youth sport. However, this does not merit confusing children. Calling things by their name only helps children overcome the predicament of childhood. Organized youth sport might need reform to assist children in their formidable task of finding their way in the world, but it should not further confuse their initial sport experiences by telling them they are doing something they are not.

The trend and its recommendations for reforms are rooted in the idea that competition is inherently to blame for the strong emphasis on the performance ethic and on winning in youth sport. Its proponents believe that competition itself is responsible for bringing out the worst in parents, coaches, and young athletes; it influences them to act unethically toward others, and, in the case of parents and coaches, it places undue psychological and emotional pressures on children playing sports. If it were true that competition pushed individuals and groups to act unethically in pursuit of victory, then de-emphasizing the competitive aspects of youth sport activities and programs would make sense. We would argue, however, that it is not competition per se that is responsible for the moral breakdowns in youth sport or the excessive pressure adults place on young athletes to perform up to potential. It is, rather, people's attitudes toward competition—their understanding of the central purpose of competitive sport, of how one should compete, of what is permissible in competitive settings, and of the value of winning in sport—that is the basis of these problems.

Although this point might appear to be philosophic slight-of-hand, it is not. For if it is people's attitudes toward competition that are problematic and not competition itself, then what is called for is a shift in those attitudes, not a removal of the competitive aspects of youth sport. Failure to recognize this point has led the

proponents and their followers down the wrong path. By placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of competition rather than on people's ideas about what competition is, reformers have made it seem as if youth sport programmers can make their problems vanish by eliminating competition. Such a characterization is a gross misrepresentation of the situation youth sport programs are facing; moreover, it is leading coaches, parents, and administrators to overlook the benefits that might be gained from maintaining the competitive aspects of youth sport.

In order to create and integrate right-headed reforms into youth sport programs and contexts, we must be willing to be truthful with ourselves and our children. We must recognize that, in general, a flawed conception of competition is driving our ideas about how we should compete with others. This negative view of competition was summed up by Shields (30) in his portrayal of the "decompetitor." Decompetitors are those who see competition as an opportunity to pursue victory by dominating and humiliating opponents. They view sport as a war or battle, their opponents as enemies or at least obstacles to their success, and winning as survival. Such individuals show minimal respect for their sport, viewing its rules as "restraints" to be tolerated and, if necessary, broken in pursuit of advantage (30: pp. 3–4). Shields's decompetitors share some characteristics with Torres and McLaughlin's (36) outcome seekers, as both understandings take competition to be a zero-sum game.

If all instances of competition were instances of decompetition or if there were no alternative approaches to the zero-sum view of competitive sport, then the proponents' efforts to subtract competitive aspects from sport would certainly be warranted. However, not all forms of competition are negative. Shields has noted this fact in contrasting his decompetitor with the good competitor or "competitor." Much like Torres and McLaughlin's (36) resolution seekers, competitors view sport as a partnership with the objectives of skill mastery and excellence. On this view, opponents are enablers who help achieve these goals by presenting each other with the strongest possible challenge, and rules are respected as "imperfect guides to fairness" that create the unique tests that are competitive sports (30: pp. 3–4).

This dichotomy drives home the points that competition does not have to be negative and damaging to children and that it is possible to have enriching competition through which children could learn important values and lessons. It is the positive forms of competition that we need to begin to stress to youth sport participants so that they will have a more enlightened view of competing—one that emphasizes excellence through "striving together" rather than winning through subjugation. Such a view would resemble the mutualist view expounded earlier and is one that could be endorsed by youth sport programs.<sup>9</sup>

In order for positive forms of competition to flourish, however, adults as well as children need to learn what it means to compete in a good and decent manner. For many coaches and parents this will mean relearning what competition is by recognizing the shortcomings of their current decompetitive, zero-sum understanding of sport, and integrating more nuanced and constructive ideas of what competition can be into their views. It is only by doing this kind of work that adults themselves will be able to teach young athletes to compete well. This will, hopefully, allow children to begin to experience youth sport differently by reducing the stress and anxiety they experience when participating and allowing them to have fun while focusing on acquiring sport skills and learning values such as

fair play, sportpersonship, and teamwork. Furthermore, if sport is maintained as a competitive venture, young athletes will have the opportunity to learn relevant contesting skills, such as those noted by Kretchmar (20: p. 134), in addition to the particular testing skills of a sport. These might include learning how to play with a lead, how to come from behind, how to compete well in close contests, and when to take strategic risks.

By changing the way competitive sport is viewed rather than deleting competitive aspects from it, the problems challenging youth sport programs are directly addressed. If competitive elements are simply removed from youth sport, the primary problem remains: people are confused about competitive sport's central purpose and meaning and lack the knowledge of how to compete decently with one another in sport settings. Slowly phasing competition back into sport at later ages will do nothing to solve this problem, as children will eventually learn a more decompetitive, zero-sum view of sport from coaches and parents anyway. By stressing the complexity of mutualist forms of competition at earlier ages, it might be possible to improve not only the culture of youth sport but those of higher levels of sport as well because those competing at these levels will see sport competition as something other than simply a "win first" venture. Children and adults with a mutualist view of competitive sport will be more likely to carry this healthier approach with them to more advanced levels of sport and to begin to affect the manner in which sport is contested at these levels.

It should be clear that the trend, on the other hand, fails to deal with the causes of unethical competition, because it does not focus on enlightening children and adults about the intricacy and richness of sport competition. In addition, by de-emphasizing competition in organized youth sport rather than attempting to improve it, the trend and its proponents decline to confront those who subscribe to the zero-sum view of competitive sport regarding the problems their approach brings. In doing so, the proponents are, in effect, conceding more advanced and elite levels of sport to decompetitors and outcome seekers. Reforms that start by setting limitations on sport competition implicitly agree that prevailing zero-sum attitudes are so ingrained in sport cultures that they cannot be questioned or challenged. There is no justification to give so much power and credibility to those who believe competitive sport is an either-or affair in which the winner takes all and the loser gets nothing but despair. It is a defeatist worldview, unsuitable, and even unpalatable, for people who believe in the power of education, open dialogue, and progressive social change. We are not willing to adopt such a worldview and believe that informing youth sport with the mutualist view will aid in the development of resolution seekers, competitors who will improve the moral welfare of sport at both younger and more advanced levels of competition.

## 4

Childhood is a period of life filled with learning, change, and challenges, all of which influence the development and identity of children. Those who participate in organized youth sport programs experience a variety of challenges as they learn the skills, strategies, norms, and values associated with their sport. During this process, some disappointment is inevitable; for no child will get a hit every time she steps to the plate or score every time he shoots the ball. Sports are sites of risk

and uncertainty, and all children will experience this fact as they take part in them. Two of the uncertainties of sport are those related to competitive performance and outcome. When young athletes “take the field,” there are no guarantees that they will play up to their potential or achieve victory. If, as adults, we are willing to let them risk the disappointment that accompanies poor performance, why are we hesitant to let them risk and experience losing?

In this essay we have demonstrated why we believe it is wrongheaded and counterproductive to deny children an authentic sport experience by removing competitive elements from youth sport programs. This practice is endorsed by neither the minimalist zero-sum nor the more complex mutualist views of sport competition, because it misleads children regarding the central purpose and meaning of competitive sport. Furthermore, this deception is unwarranted and unacceptable given that childhood is a normative predicament that requires battling naivety and ignorance to develop autonomy. Finally, we do not deny the need to reform organized youth sport programs, but recommend that such reforms focus on changing adults’ “win-first” conceptions of competition. By reeducating parents and coaches about the best interpretation of competition and what it can and should be, sport scholars can help them develop the more constructive outlook of Torres and McLaughlin’s (36) resolution seeker or of Shield’s (30) good competitor, which they, in turn, can pass on to young athletes in lieu of misleading them by eliminating competitive aspects of youth sport programs.

In this way, children will hopefully learn to compete in a good and decent manner at an earlier age and will benefit from not being deluded about competitive sport’s central purpose. Simultaneously, adults will learn to alter their damaging, decompetitive, zero-sum views of sport competition, stop overemphasizing winning and the performance ethic, and maintain their honesty in the process. In turn, this honesty will help children in the difficult task of coming out of the immature condition of childhood. Respecting children count on adults for such assistance; they deserve nothing less.

## Acknowledgment

We would like to thank J.S. Russell and Gabriela Tymowski for their helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper. We have benefited from borrowing Russell’s suggested terminology and ideas. We would also like to thank those who gave us valuable feedback when we presented a shorter version of this paper during the conference on “Children, Sport and Physical Activity: Philosophical Dimensions” held at the University of Western Ontario from May 30–June 1, 2007.

## Notes

1. Whether the NAYS’s claim that many organized youth sport’s experiences are “carbon copies” of adult activities is true and justified or unsubstantiated and exaggerated, it is an important element of its explicit discourse and rationale for the trend. The purpose here is to merely cite the NAYS’s position to illustrate the construction of the trend. True, the fact that most sports adjust their rules extensively according to children’s developmental levels does partially erase images of organized youth sport as a carbon copy of organized adult sport. However, perhaps what the NAYS stresses is that the overemphasis of winning and performance seems to be prevalent in both youth and adult versions of organized sport.

2. Ensuring minimal playing time for all young athletes might be important to encourage physical activity for the sake of health, to promote life-long interest in sport, or to develop social ties, among other reasons. None of these considerations undermines the idea that playing athletes regardless of athletic merit or need denies the mutualist view's logic of competitive sport. This does not mean that health, life-long interest in sport, or social ties should not be considered when developing policy for organized youth sport. Indeed, these elements might suggest the need to distribute playing time among all young athletes. However, it is important to highlight that the more considerations such as health or socialization take precedence over the concern for the mutual construction of excellence, merit, or the formation of testing families (21), the less important competitive sport and what it expresses become.

3. The Olympic motto reads "Citius, altius, fortius" (faster, higher, stronger; 17: p. 18). The Olympic creed proposes that in the Olympic Games, "the important thing is not winning, but taking part" and it emphasizes that "what counts in life is not the victory, but the struggle; the essential thing is not to conquer, but to fight well" (8: p. 589).

4. Although not advanced by proponents of the trend, the argument could be made that another reason for trying to eliminate or reduce competition at younger ages resides in children's contemporary lives, which often have modest amounts of unstructured time and include more competitive endeavors than in the past. Given this situation, the elimination or reduction of competition could be seen as a way to introduce more noncompetitive, spontaneous experiences into childhood. If experiences with these characteristics are important for children's development, they should be provided. However, expunging competition from organized youth sports does not provide children with such experiences, because noncompetitive youth sports remain complex, highly structured, and rule-governed activities.

5. To affirm that childhood is a normative predicament that allows for paternalism until children have authority over themselves does not mean that what they do is only intelligible or valuable in terms of their future adult condition. The ability of children to produce genuine art, music, and sport skills, as well as to engage in philosophical reasoning, could be seen as having intrinsic value. For works exploring children's capacities in some of these domains see, for example, Fineberg (12), and Matthews (23; 24).

6. For an influential discussion on the nature of games and sports and their relationship, see Meier (25).

7. One can argue that withholding information from children is acceptable if it facilitates children's path to autonomy. This is a reasonable paternalist position and we presume Schapiro would agree with it. However, there seems to be a difference between withholding information from children and conceptually misleading them. Perhaps, as pedagogy suggests, when concepts, ideas, or theories are so complex that children are presumably unable to immediately make sense of them, it is appropriate to simplify and adapt them to children's developmental level for introductory purposes. Yet, once again, this process seems to have little to do with conceptual confusion and a lot to do with conceptual clarification and comprehension.

8. There is a growing body of literature arguing that children's expressed preferences should be considered when taking decisions that affect them. This, of course, does not mean that children's preferences should be the overriding factor, or that other relevant considerations, including those that might contradict children's preferences, should not be taken into account. See, for example, Bluebond-Langner (3), Blustein (5), Blustein, Levine, and Dubler (4), and Kopelman and Moskop (18). In terms of children's agency, as suggested in Note 5, children are capable of producing and enjoying aesthetically valuable art and music, poignant philosophy, and interesting sport performances. This is an admittedly short list of what children are capable of doing. There are countless examples of children who successfully participate in activities typically constructed as belonging to the world of adults. For instance, a recent article published in the *New York Times* tells the story of a child whose entrepreneurial skills have helped him start several sport-related



businesses. The child hopes to study business at Princeton University. While his father is “proud of Dustin and everything he has accomplished at such a young age,” the article’s author considers that “By the time he takes the SAT, he will have an M.B.A.’s worth of experience” (22).

9. As Simon (32) has noted, mutualist views such as ones proposed by broad internalists can help keep winning in perspective and presuppose “a commitment to such values as fairness, liberty, and equality” (p. 19).

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