Company Athletics: Developing Leaders of Moral and Social Character

Master Teacher Program

Dan Furlong MA, C.S.C.S.

United States Military Academy

Dr. Mark Evans

Dr. Stephen Finn
Introduction

It is not an absolute that sports builds or develops character. In fact, “whether participating in sports builds character and if character can be measured continues to be a debated” (Doty, 2010, p. 18). Due to the competitive nature of sports, participants easily adopt a “win at all cost” attitude. However, “most research shows that as the level of sport competition increases, the level of character decreases (Doty, 2010, p. 1). This is because competition produces a psychological stress by challenging a “stable self-esteem, increase prejudice and hostility, promote conformity, and encourage overreliance on external sources of evaluation” (Shields, 2011, p. 25). Evidence suggests that competition regularly leads to lapses in principled behavior (Shields, 2011).

The United States Military Academy (USMA), the mission is to “Educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an officer in the United States Army” (United States Military Academy, 2015, p. 3).

As an establishment of higher education, as well as a world renowned leadership development institution, USMA has infused character development throughout its curriculum and programming in order to fulfill this mission. The purpose of this review of literature is to identify how West Point’s physical program assists in current practices developing and graduating “leader(s) of character”. In context of meaning and motivation, the physical program provides developmental opportunities incorporating social-learning theory in the pursuit of affecting both social and moral character development. To best establish current practices for developing leaders of character, and to provide opportunities and concepts pertinent to character and leadership development, West Point’s Department of Physical Education (DPE) incorporates social learning theories and the understanding of moral and social character in the application and assessment of the Company Athletics program.

Whole-Cadet Physical Education Goals

At West Point, the mission of DPE is to develop Cadets to be a warrior athletes of character.

“A warrior athlete of character is a team player who combines mental toughness, perseverance, and athletic skill with exemplary sporting behavior and fair play. The warrior athlete of character has a teachable spirit and demonstrates the drive, will, and courage to stay committed and succeed, regardless of the challenge” (USMA Cir 28-1 2017, p. 6).

West Point accomplishes its mission through four educational pillars: Academic, Military, Physical, and Character. All four of these programs are necessary in producing officers in the United States Army that will lead with character in order to win our Nation’s wars. From early foundations of physical education programs, students are expected to develop moral and social behaviors. These behaviors range from creative problem solving, critical thinking, and “caring about personal and social values, responsibility and gentlemanliness” (Aksoy, 2017, p. 416). West Point, as stated in its mission, is dedicated to the military education of future officers who need to possess these attributes. As such, curriculum reflects not just academics, but all four
pills. In order to reach its mission, West Point is “built on epistemologies that cultivate critical and reflective thinking in the soldier” (Sookermany, 2017, p. 316).

Due to its nature, competition provides students with the opportunity to practice engaging in social and moral issues and fair play mindfulness (Askoy, 2017). The goal of Company Athletics within DPE is to be used as a learning lab where Cadets are exposed to opportunities to develop fair play. Fair play, then, is not reached by enacting a “win at all cost” mindset. It is accepted that “fair play” has started to be used as a standard reference of good behavior in moral ways in competitions (Askoy, 2017, p. 416). Cadets are not graded according to statistics, standings, and wins or losses. They are graded according to the moral and ethical standard they upheld under competitive stressors and influences. Therefore, evaluating fair play in educational settings requires specified rubrics to gauge development. Askoy & Gursel (2017) identified important components of what components to look at when assessing fair play:

> “the behaviors of fair play are assessed by variants in various studies such as fouling, sportsmanship and lacking sportsmanship, knowing and respecting rules of games, good relations with competitors, equal opportunities for everyone, and defending conditions no matter what happens, an honorable attitude in a possible defeat or winning, loyalty all the way, respecting rules, referees and their decisions as well as competitors, giving equal chances to all participants, always maintaining self-control, respecting people who show complete loyalty to people who are participating, respecting social traditions and avoiding a negative approach to someone who participates in sports”

(Askoy, 2017, p. 417)

In terms of physical education as part of a military education, the physical education components included in the curriculum should reinforce the foundations Cadets require as part of their military training. In doing so, their physical training provides intentional impacts in their character development as well. This is because the common denominator linking all these activities is “the growth of integrity, courage, initiative, decisiveness, mental agility, and personal accountability” (Sookewrmany, 2017, p. 321) and develops the whole Cadet.

**Physical Education at a Military Academy**

When speaking about a military education specifically, the importance of emphasizing character development is due to the nature of what this vocation requires. Institutions, such as West Point, intentionally focus on character development throughout the curriculum to graduate leaders of character “in order to form military units that are relevant and capable of carrying out a state or nation’s political intent by utility of violence” (Sookermany, 2017, p. 314). These various tactics all provide meaningful experiences within the four pillars of Academic, Military, Physical, and Character.

West Point utilizes a myriad different tactics combined to offer its unique pedagogical philosophy for the development of Cadets readying them to confront, and close with, the unpredictable. The combination of civilians and military officers, is meant “to teach, discuss, model, and reinforce core values, like integrity, loyalty, and respect, as integral to the character development experiences of their students” (Doty, 2010, p. 18). With regards to the physical program, Company Athletics assigns faculty as Sport Educators to offer mentorship and guidance to Cadet athletic officers, cadets-in-charge (CICs), and coaches. This form of development has been found to be a critical component to ensure fair play and sportsmanship as long-lasting results.
Studies have revealed that “teacher-led discussions are an effective way to engage students in the affective domain. Allocating time slots before, during, and after class to discuss students’ behavior and sportsmanship that is being displayed in the gymnasium is critical” (Schwarmberger, 2017, p. 35). Sport educators provide coaches with the terms of competition and meet with them (called “huddles”) to hold after action reviews (AARs) discussing what went right or wrong, what was addressed well, what was not addressed well, or what was not addressed at all, and to give attainable goals for improvements.

In addition to team “huddles” with the Sport Educator, Cadet coaches are required to submit mid-term and final grades based predominantly on displays of character and sportsmanship rather than sport specific skills or a Cadet’s athletic prowess. (See Fig. 1)

Fig. 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sportsmanship as Play</th>
<th>Persistence</th>
<th>Teamwork/Leadership</th>
<th>Attitude/Coachability</th>
<th>Playing Ability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correct teammates needed</td>
<td>Aggressive, angry, or out of control</td>
<td>Argues with teammates, opponents</td>
<td>Stress is inhibiting</td>
<td>Easily frustrated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prior to submitting grades, Cadet coaches must meet with their players, discuss their grade (performance), and the Cadet player must sign the grade sheet indicating they heard, understood, and accepted their grade. This type of evaluation is similar to Officer Evaluation Reports (OERs) performed in the Army. These reports are used to “ensure responsibilities are clearly defined and vested with appropriate individuals” (United States Army, 2014) and to “identify clear standards” (United States Army, 2014) expected of the soldier.

Feedback of this nature is supported by research where “consistently discussing with students how they enhance the classroom climate and ways to improve their behavior will lead to improvements” (Schwamberger, 2017, p. 35). The Character in Sport Index (CSI) is the rubric tool used for grading social and moral character traits as displayed by fair play and sportsmanship by Cadets. Since Cadet players are evaluated at a mid-term point and at the end of each season, improvements can be monitored. (See Fig 2)

One of the problems facing most physical education programs is that “physical educators often fail to take the appropriate measures to communicate with students who are demonstrating the types of behavior that teachers spend time promoting” (Schwamberger, 2017, p. 35). Not only does West Point’s Company Athletics program have faculty present at competitions to discuss development opportunities, as well as the CSI for Cadets to evaluate each other and be active participants practicing development, DPE also offers the Mike Krzyzewski Teaching Character through Sport Award. This award recognizes West Point Cadet athletes, and sport educators for their commitment to character development through athletic participation and leadership experiences. Making sure to acknowledge individuals who model and demonstrate exceptional levels of social and moral character is also considered to be a vital component in character.
development programming. This is because “pinpointing these behaviors and actions will lead to a higher likelihood of similar behaviors” (Schwamberger, 2017, p. 35).

Internalizing such traits as trust, loyalty, and integrity is important for future officers who will be responsible for making complex decisions along with following specifically dictated orders. Written ordinances or memorandums cannot account for all situations. Therefore, “our ability to fulfill our tasks depends rather on individuals whose judgement is well developed and mature” (Sookermany, 2017, p. 312). When viewing character development through this lens it “suggests that the role of military education in developing future soldiers is one of cultivating judgement...with the purpose of solving the tasks and challenges they are faced with at any time – predictable or not” (Sookermany, 2017, p. 312).

One of the challenges that a character development program like Company Athletics has is the need for a paradigm shift in how it is perceived. Cadets need to be lead from previous mindsets regarding their view of the program to understanding its true pedagogical nature and purpose. Often enough, Company Athletics is still referred to as “Intramurals” and participants describe themselves as “slugs”. However, it cannot be argued that the unpredictable nature of sports and competition marries well with the chaotic nature of conflict. Therefore, it resonates when “an expert on the nature and role of the Army profession, argues military leaders improperly focus ‘on developing individual and unit military competence, when it should have been all along more equally divided between developing their moral character and their military competence” (Allen, 2015, p. 71).

**Company Athletics**

Company Athletics is a leadership-learning lab focusing on developing character and individuals working together to build teams of significance. Due to the competitive and unpredictable nature of sports, it is “an ideal laboratory environment for cadets to develop leadership skills and learn the values of ethical conduct in a highly competitive setting” (USMA Cir 28-1 2017, p. 3). Faculty members from DPE are assigned as sport educators with the responsibility to teach Cadet athletes “how to practice, compete, and live in a way that
maximizes their full potential as human beings (USMA Cir 28-1 2017, p. 3). This environment provides occasions and circumstances that are unavailable in a traditional classroom or even during certain phases of military training.

According to DPE,

“The mission of CA at West Point is to develop warrior athletes of character and build teams of significance through a cadet led and instructor supervised program. The end state of this program is to develop positive character traits in our future military leaders through sport”

(USMA Cir 28-1 2017, p. 3)

The term “warrior athlete of character” is meant to describe a Cadet who is “a team player who combines mental toughness, perseverance, and athletic skill with exemplary sporting behavior and fair play” (USMA Cir 28-1 2017, p. 6). Sport educators, CICs, Cadet coaches, Cadet officials, and Cadet athletes are all important contributors and participants in the success of the overall outcome goals (USMA Cir-1, 2017).

General Douglas MacArthur’s words have been attributed to be the building block for the concept of Company Athletics. The words “Upon the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that, upon other fields, on other days, will bear the fruits of victory” (USMA Cir-1, 2017, p. 3). MacArthur clearly understood the psychological stress of competition and its usefulness through its various challenges. MacArthur believed, “the training on the athletic field, which produces in a superlative degree the attributes of fortitude, self-control, resolution, courage, mental agility, and of course, physical development, is one completely fundamental to efficient soldiery.” (USMA Cir-1, 2017, p. 5). MacArthur, then, required that every cadet had to participate in athletic competition. From his experience, those who had participated in sports, in estimation, were the best Soldiers and described them as “the most dependable, hardy, and courageous officers” and the “readiest to accept and enforce discipline.” (USMA Cir-1, 2017, p. 5)

The Company Athletics program involves over 2,300 Cadets. There are four Regiments each of which having nine Companies. Upper-class Cadets assigned in the role of Company Athletic Officer (CAO) assign under-class Cadets in the roles of coaches, CICs, officials, and players. Each CAO will build team rosters for each of the five sports offered for a particular season. As previously stated, it is believed due to the unpredictable nature of sports, that through participation in sports, these future officers will meet conditions, challenges, and psychological stresses similar to those they may face in combat situations (Doty, 2010). However, the outcome goal is to see Cadets proving to have the desire to compete to win while also demonstrating sportsmanship and fair play since “typically when an athlete or team at any level of sport is considered to have displayed character, the word ‘character’ is associated with a host of values such as teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, perseverance, work ethic, and mental toughness” (Rudd, 2005, p. 205)

West Point believes that “the purpose of any character assessment should be two-fold: first, to assess whether individual Cadets are ‘leaders of character’ and second, to improve character developing programs across Academic, Military, Physical and Character programs when indicated by assessment results” (United States Military Academy, 2015, p. 33). The importance of this approach is valid since “Identification of character development processes, and their promotion and assessment in different environments, can provide information about how to structure contexts to facilitate character development” (Callina, 2017, p.10).

Company Athletics contains all the necessary components research has suggested in order to reach its desired successful outcomes as a character development physical education
program. The program has sport educators who will not only demonstrate “what right looks like” but also discuss learning opportunities from the playing field. Through the CSI, the program provides peer feedback not according to how well a Cadet played, but rather how well that Cadet played with others. Sport psychologists often define an athlete of character as someone “who is honest, fair, responsible, respectful, and compassionate” (Rudd, 2005, p.205), which are traits that can map back to being tracked via the CSI. Although not every scenario can be accounted for, “preparations for the unpredictable should play a critical role in military education” (Sookermany, 2017, p. 310) and sports competition can be considered to provide that. Mostly, “Cadets need to acquire the ability to lose on the scoreboard without losing honor, courage, or confidence. They must learn how to recover from the loss, maintain their winning spirit, and diligently prepare for the next challenge” (USMA Cir-1, 2017, p. 6)

Meaning and Motivation

Internalizing a pursuit towards greater character should be a desired outcome not just for the institution, it should be for Cadets as well. This is because “to be a person of moral character means that an individual is able to apply these moral values willingly, sincerely, and with understanding” (Rudd, 2005, p. 207). Therefore, the “idea” of developing in character must have meaning enough to the Cadet so as to be valued as opposed to merely assumed or even disregarded.

In order to identify motivation for a Cadet to place “meaning” in character or character development, there must be a determined value to obtain it. According to study, “Motivation does not drive behavior, deterministically; nor does it simply set goals. Instead, it provides the current state of being with boundaries and values” (Peterson, 2013, p. 4). To determine an end result as valuable means it is a reward in itself to reach it as a destination. To identify some end as valuable means to grant it consummatory-reward status, formally, as ‘end’ implies consummation.” (Peterson, 2013, p. 6). Therefore, a desired end result may serve as goal so that current behaviors can be eliminated or replaced. Internalizing character development as part of the 47-month experience at West Point, according to this lens, would have meaning and subsequently so would the programs and experiences offered to cultivate it.

In early stages of development “when children play, they adapt their actions to each other. They produce and then share a perspective, and work towards a common goal” (Peterson, 2013, p. 8). However, that changes as they have more interactions and their social experiences shape new understandings. These social interactions begin to encourage an exchange of information about which of these experiences, and the reactions they produce, are desirable and starts to shape their understanding of morality (Peterson, 2013).

Just by applying, prospective new Cadets identify with the motivation of what attending West Point stands for and ascribe meaning to the curriculum and process involved. However, some, due to their perspective, inaccurately devalue various programs without first considering its full meaning, leading to devalued motivation. Once maturity sets in, the realization is achieved that life is a series of games that must be played – the “meta game”. Then it is realized that:

“... those who play properly during a given game become the popular players of many games, benefitting cumulatively from playing each. Thus a vital form of meta-morality emerges: the best player is he who is invited to play the most games.”
Therefore, those who do not exhibit fair play or sportsmanship do so at the risk of a future invitation to play. It is that development of social and moral character that provides motivation as part of a long-term strategy. The more trust, integrity, and loyalty a player displays, the more often that player is chosen to play the greater game.

**Social Learning Theory**

The importance of continuing to mold and shape moral and social character at West Point is because it “involves growth in one’s understanding of the nature of truth and beliefs, values and their relation to self, professional/occupational commitments, political identity, and other critical aspects of adult life” (Calina, 2017, p. 10). Much of what individuals learn and place value on from a moral understanding is influenced by those around them (family, friends, teachers, coaches, etc.). This forms the basis of social-learning theory (Schwamberger, 2017). MacArthur’s assertion that it is “upon the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that, upon other fields, on other days, will bear the fruits of victory” then confirms that when playing games, although competition is taking place but so are discussions and social interactions. Players are learning how to play with each other.

The purpose of Company Athletics then can be seen as a program that provides opportunities for Cadets to form ideologies about other players’ approaches fair play and sportsmanship and decide on their own reactions to those determinations. It meets its intent as a learning environment “where exercises and discussion take place, as well as informal student behaviors, allowing intervention in order to adapt some values and raising personal and social responsibilities” (Akoy, 2017, p. 416).

The CSI can also be considered a useful social learning tool. Being required to participate in sports and competition, Cadets are provided continuous exposure to momentary unpredictable situations. Their responses and reactions, outcomes from previous results of decisions they made in similar situations, are demonstrated in front of teammates, opponents, officials, coaches, and sport educators. It is the collection these momentary actions that determine the grades Cadet coaches will in turn give the player according to how their actions demonstrated sportsmanship, fair play, as well as moral and social character.

Company Athletics is designed to have the Cadet coach “use the experience as a teachable moment by discussing the students’ behaviors and their appropriateness” (Schwamberger, 2017, p. 35). This indirect teaching style using a more Cadet-centered teaching approach is necessary to providing Cadets with more responsibility and is constructive in encouraging moral behavior within the Corps. This is because “it allows students to work in partnership with one another” (Schwamberger, 2017, p. 36).

Since it is accepted “that through participation in sports, future officers will encounter conditions, challenges, and emotions similar to those they may face in combat situations” (Doty, 2010, p. 19). This type of learning interaction benefits the Cadet coach along with the Cadet player since it is a social mechanism they know. An individual will categorize themselves in some form of social dominance (i.e., years class, athletic ability, position), then find their place within that group. Once established, “they rearrange their internal natures, so that they can exist in productive harmony within their group. This grouping requires conflict, war, within or between individuals – and then its resolution” (Peterson, 2013, p. 16).
Reconsidering the “metagame” and social learning theory, the best player of the game is not necessarily the one who wins a game or possibly several games. Instead, the best player is the one “who plays such that the game continues, and expands, so that he and others have the greatest chance to play and to excel” (Peterson, 2013, p. 16). West Point, through its mission, is dedicated to graduating leaders of character who demonstrate abilities enable that they and others “have the greatest chance to play and to excel”.

Social / Moral Character

It should be made clear that there are distinctions between moral character and social character. When in a position of choice between right from wrong, someone demonstrating moral character may display traits of “moral values such as justice, honesty, compassion, respect, and responsibility” (Rydd, 2005, p. 207) having done so willingly having internalized those traits. Moral character is also having the ability “to act honestly when his or her peers are acting dishonestly” (Rudd, 2005, p. 207).

In comparison, social character displays values such “as teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, perseverance, and work ethic” (Rudd, 2005, p. 208). “Social values may be defined as values that have been deemed by a society or culture as being vital in reaching a desired end state” (Rudd, 2005, p. 208). As such, moral character can be in conflict with social character. An individual could be aware that a wrong call was made by an official, exposing this mistake out of moral character may not be as greatly appreciated by the team. It could be considered in direct opposition of team work even though it displayed great integrity and fair play.

“Moral values are distinctive because they are the values that are critical to human relationships and to the upholding of morality” (Rudd, 2005, p. 208). Moral character is also needed to make competition safe as well as balanced. Social character values such as “self-sacrifice and teamwork are types of values emphasized by coaches, parents, and society” (Rudd, 2005, p. 208). Therefore, a Cadet may be demonstrating social character then when acting in the best interest of the team influenced from teammates, coaches, parents, and others, rather than first considering what is morally right influenced by honesty, respect, and responsibility.

Company Athletics, then, is designed to provide opportunities through sports to develop both moral and social character in Cadets. Otherwise, the question needs to be asked should cadets be grading according to teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and work ethic, or should they be graded for justice, honesty, compassion, respect, and responsibility? These are important distinctions to consider because “although values such as teamwork, loyalty, and self-sacrifice may be helpful towards winning, these values may not be enough towards helping athletes compete fairly, honestly, responsibly, and respectfully” (Rudd, 2005, p. 210).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to discuss West Point’s Company Athletics program and its role in character development of Cadets. It was determined that both moral and social character values can be realized during sports participation and competition. It was also that these individual character values offer distinctly different paradigms of character development through sports. Generally, coaches, parents, teammates, and administrators are more likely to value social character values, while sport educators, sport scholars, and even psychologists value a moral character value traits. Considering Company Athletics specifically, Cadet coaches,
Cadet players, and tactical officers (TACs) would do well to consider character from a moral perspective as well as well as social (Rudd, 2005).

Therefore, the CSI clearly identifies the importance of cultivating both aspects in the total development of Cadets. Previous research has shown that West Point’s Company Athletics program’s parameters having “student-centered teaching styles is beneficial for promoting the ideals of sportsmanship and moral behavior” (Schwamberger, 2017, p. 36). It is the continued focus of Company Athletics to create “an environment in which moral development and sportsmanship are held in high regard is critical if physical educators truly want to develop the whole student” (Schwamberger, 2017, p. 37). It is by educating Cadets in the true nature behind Company Athletics, steering them away from a “win at all costs” mind set, and taking a pedagogical approach through identification, reflection, and recognition that Cadets will further develop moral and social character resulting in them being value added in regards to the “meta game”. “We dream continuously of the individual who will manifest that pattern most successfully, and search for him – or her – everywhere. What is the best way to successfully play the largest number of games?” (Peterson, 2013, p. 16)
References


