



How Sport and Physical Activity Education Could Contribute to Human Survival

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Received: 16-09- 2014
doi:10.7575/aiac.ijkss.v.2n.4p.1

Accepted: 17-10- 2014
URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijkss.v.2n.4p.1>

Published: 31-10- 2014

Abstract

Sport and related physical activity education are not being employed in the best possible ways in the developed world because the decision-makers in society don't truly understand the situation. Illogically, people of all ages in the developed world are not getting sufficient physical activity, whereas those in the undeveloped world are getting too much! In addition, the author questions the vast overemphasis on highly competitive sport at the various levels including the Olympic Games. Further, the situation for the majority of "special-needs" people is poor including those who are exploited by sport competition overemphasis. Six different types of selected competencies are recommended for all children and youth within the educational-system experience. Finally, the author asks five specific questions that should be considered as we seek to improve the overall situation.

Keywords: sport and physical activity education, memes, the Olympic Games

Sport and related physical activity assumed greater or lesser importance starting with primitive societies and continued in later societies on down to the present day. As a social force impacting society, and also as a vital concern for those who later employed it professionally, such activity was used to help people of all ages in a variety of ways as they lived out their lives.

However, as with so many facets of life on Earth, such involvement can be used beneficially or misused to the subsequent improvement or detriment of humankind. It is my argument that we are using it well in some ways, but that we are also abusing it badly in others! In the case of competitive sport, I believe we have gradually abused it (i.e., perhaps reaching a stage where we could well be doing considerable harm with it). Conversely, in the case of related physical activity (i.e., regular exercise or "physical activity education") in the developed world, I believe humans are too often "abusing it by first not understanding it and then by not using it more intelligently"! (In addition, ironically, in the "undeveloped world," people often get too much "exercise" just to stay alive!).

This situation is replicated for out-of-school young adults and then continues on typically throughout people's lives until their death. This is not to say that opportunities are not made available for young, out-of-school adults who wish to "get involved," but such involvement is often expensive, inconvenient, difficult, and/or boring. Additionally, citizens of all ages, including youth, are urged regularly to pay money in some form or another to watch "sport stars" compete in a variety of so-called gate-receipt sports. This realm where "spectatoritis reigns" grew almost exponentially during the second half of the 20th century with burgeoning professional sport and the Olympic extravaganza in its many and varied forms!

(Note: Interestingly, but sadly, a similar situation prevails with young people who have all sorts of "special needs." For example, we send "wheelchair athletes" to their own Olympic Games, but the Creator alone knows what type of recreational sport is being made available for 99% plus of people of all ages who are "wheelchair bound".)

Negative Forces Are Impacting Our Lives

While the above conditions have been evolving, we all appreciate the significant developments that have transformed our lives in what has been called "the emerging postmodern age." There have been many negative social forces impacting our lives in various ways, and the problems of megalopolis have not yet been solved to the satisfaction of many. Savants ask about "the character" we are seeking for people, and daily people in one way or another wonder whether "civilization" will ever achieve what was termed "The Enlightenment Ideal."

This 18th century movement of intellectual change that held so much promise for humankind to be involved socially and politically in the achievement of an ideal society seems still to be a distant ideal. To be sure, many do have the opportunity to use their own reason to help with the development of a superior type of state in those places where such input may eventually contribute to the ideal world community. Yet today conflicting hoary religions are still creating many seemingly insoluble problems that threaten future life on our tiny planet.

World society is obviously in a precarious state. It is therefore important to view present social conditions globally. Throughout this volume I will be emphasizing that competitive sport has developed to a point where it has worldwide impact, and also human physical activity should be so organized and administered that it truly makes a contribution to what Glasser (1972) identified as "Civilized Identify Society"—a state in which the concerns of humans will again focus on such concepts as 'self-identity,' 'self-expression,' and 'cooperation.'

To this point we know that we are organisms, living creatures, who have reached a stage of development where we "know that something has happened, is continuing to happen, and will evidently continue to happen." However, underlying my entire analysis I am searching for the answers to two historical questions: First, did humans in earlier times, equipped with their coalescing genes and evolving memes, enjoy to any significant degree what discerning people today might define as "quality living?"

(Note: Memes are sets of "cultural instructions" passed on from one generation to the next; see note below, also.)

Second, did earlier humans have an opportunity for freely chosen, beneficial physical activity in sport, exercise, play, and dance of sufficient quality and quantity to contribute to the quality of life (as viewed possible by selected sport philosophers today)?

(Note: Of course, the phrasing of these questions--whether humans in earlier societies enjoyed quality living, including five types of developmental physical activity--is no doubt presumptuous. It reminds one of the comedian whose stock question in response to his foil who challenged the truth of the zany experiences his friend typically reported: "Was you dere, Sharlie?")

Can Humans Be Both "Judge and Jury"?

What makes a question about the quality of life in earlier times doubly difficult, of course, is whether present-day humans can be both judge and jury in such a debate. On what basis can we decide, for example, whether any social progress has indeed been made such that would permit resolution of such a concept as "quality living" including a modicum of "ideal sport competition" or "purposeful physical activity and related health education"?

There has been progression, of course, but how can we assume that change is indeed progress? It may be acceptable as a human criterion of progress to say that we are coming closer to approximating the good and the solid accomplishments that we think humans should have achieved both including what might be termed "the finest type" of sport competition.

By calling the development of humans on Earth an "adventure," the question is raised whether human nature was predetermined or whether it is evolving. I believe that humans really aren't very sure about their "human nature" yet, because there have been at least seven rival theories as to its essence extending from Plato to Freud more or less in the Western World--not forgetting Lorenz's theory that humans are innately aggressive.

To this point I conclude that we are organisms, living creatures, who have reached a stage of development where we "know that something has happened, is continuing to happen, and will evidently continue to happen." However, underlying my entire analysis I have been searching for the answers to two historical questions: First, did humans in earlier times, equipped with their coalescing genes and evolving memes, enjoy to any significant degree what discerning people today might define as "quality living?"

Second, I questioned whether earlier humans had an opportunity for freely chosen, beneficial physical activity in sport, exercise, play, and dance of sufficient quality and quantity to contribute to the quality of life (as viewed possible by selected sport and physical activity philosophers today)? What makes a question about the quality of life in earlier times doubly difficult, of course, is whether present-day humans can be both judge and jury in such a debate. On what basis can we decide, for example, whether any social progress has indeed been made such that would permit resolution of such a concept as "quality living" including a modicum of "ideal sport competition" or "purposeful physical activity and related health education"?

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One realizes immediately, also, that any assessment of the quality of life in prerecorded history, including the possible role of competitive sporting in that experience, must be a dubious evaluation at best. However, I was intrigued by the work of Herbert Muller who has written so insightfully about the struggle for freedom in human history. I was impressed, also, by his belief that recorded history has displayed a "tragic sense" of life. Whereas the philosopher Hobbes (1588-1679) stated in his *De Homine* that very early humans existed in an anarchically individualistic state of nature in which life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," Muller (1961) argued in rebuttal that it "might have been poor and short enough, but that it was never solitary or simply brutish" (p. 6).

Accordingly, Muller's approach to history is "in the spirit of the great tragic poets, a spirit of reverence and or irony, and is based on the assumption that the tragic sense of life is not only the profoundest but is also the most pertinent for an understanding of both past and present" (1961, p. vii). The rationalization for his "tragic" view is simply that the drama of human history has truly been characterized by high tragedy in the Aristotelian sense. As he states, "All the mighty civilizations of the past have fallen, because of tragic flaws; as we are enthralled by any Golden Age we must always add that it did not last, it did not do" (p. vii).

America's "Golden Age"?

This made me wonder whether the 20th century of the modern era might turn out to be the "Golden Age" of the United States. This may be true because so many misgivings are developing about former blind optimism concerning history's malleability and compatibility in keeping with American ideals. As Heilbroner (1960) explained in his 'future as history' concept, America's still-prevalent belief in a personal "deity of history" may be short-lived in the 21st century. Arguing that technological, political, and economic forces are "bringing about a closing of our historic future," he emphasized the need to search for a greatly improved "common denominator of values" (p. 178).

However, all of this could be an oversimplification, because even the concept of 'civilization' is literally a relative newcomer on the world scene. Recall that Arnold Toynbee (1947) came to a quite simple conclusion about human development is his monumental A study of history--that humankind must return to the one true God from whom it has gradually but steadily fallen away. An outdated concept, you might say, but there is a faint possibility that Toynbee may turn out to be right. However, we on this Earth dare not put all of our eggs in that one basket. We had best try to use our heads as intelligently and wisely as possible as we get on with striving to make the world as effective and efficient--and as replete with good, as opposed to evil, as we possibly can.

Five Questions to Answer in the Problem-Solving Process

During my professional life of 73 years, I looked starkly at the status of physical activity education and competitive sport in America (the United States primarily). I explained specifically how it developed historically that we have gotten our priorities "all screwed up" in relation to both competitive sport and physical activity education and related health and safety education.

Then, on the assumption that society would want to solve any serious problem, I outlined five questions that society ought to answer as it sought to do just that beginning with "Where are we now? I ended with "What exactly (specifically!) should we do?" I averred that all children and youth need understanding of, and experience with, the following selected competencies:

- 1) Correct body mechanics
- 2) Maintenance of physical fitness (cardio-respiratory and strength activities)
- 3) "Aquatic competence" (how to swim and elementary lifesaving)
- 4) An indoor & an outdoor leisure skill (e.g., badminton, tennis, golf)
- 5) A self-defense activity (major emphasis on defense...)
- 6) An aesthetic movement activity (e.g., social dance)

Next in the process of my professional life, I tackled the entire subject by asking the question: "What happened with sport and related physical activity historically? So then I traced these activities briefly from primitive and preliterate societies to the present. My effort to achieve historical perspective resulted in the belief that (1) an uneasy amalgam" forged from the past exists insofar as children, young adults, adults, senior, be they normal, accelerated, or special-needs people; and (2) physical activity education and related health information in advanced societies has been treated grossly inadequately and insufficiently as a subject of lesser importance in the education curriculum.

To many people what I have to say here will probably mark me as a "mean old man and a spoilsport," a grinch trying to "upset the prevailing applecart...! However, the past few months have absolutely convinced me that we in the so-called "developed" world have our priorities all screwed up in relation to competitive sport and physical activity education. Frankly, I am so sick of "gold-medals this" and "own-the-podium that" that I feel completely frustrated by the money, time, and attention devoted to these activities for the "minute few"! Then, on top of the Olympics Games, we also have the Paralympic Games and the Special Olympics. (Fortunately, the latter two are more like what the "big one" ought to be!) All in all, however, enough already...

Please don't misunderstand me. I believe physical activity education and educational-recreational sport competition are wonderful activities for all people of all ages and conditions throughout their lives. There is evidence that such activity will enable people to live more fully and to also to live healthier lives longer! However, my fundamental point is that--for the good of humankind--we must build from the ground up with all people! As matters stand now, we do a fair to poor to "nil" job of physical activity education with the very large majority of youth (and somewhat worse for the "girl component of the mix"). Yet, when it comes to a minute fraction of youth--"accelerated and special"--within both education and the private sector, we do quite well to excellent to superb with competitive sport.

Dare Competitive Sport Be Unique?

Think about it! Suppose we managed our affairs in this way with any other important subject or activity in the educational curriculum (e.g., English, science, math...)? The outcry would be so loud that all activity in our everyday

world would be brought to a shrieking halt peremptorily. “How dare you deny this essential experience to my son (or daughter)? He (She) has a right to the same advantages that all others get! Throw the legislators, the educators, and/or any other ‘bum’ responsible for this dereliction of duty out of office on his/her rump this very day!”

I simply can’t understand why presumably intelligent people can’t see that somehow—“going West”—the cart has been put in front of the horse! Unless your son and daughter is gifted in regard to his/her heritage of physical skill, he/she is a nonentity in education being deprived of what could be—if properly stressed and taught—a truly important “physical educational experience.” Such an experience would not only help him or her to learn better, but it would also help to keep this young person healthy now and prepare him/her attitude-wise and literally “movement-wise” for “the long journey ahead” through life.

Just consider the prevailing situation starkly! The folks promoting the present “upside-down” approach to their version of physical activity education, including “varsity sport” competition, for all youth will tell you that the present overemphasis for the few is the way to do it. Those “on the bottom,” they say blithely, will be inspired by seeing “all these medals arriving on our shores”. They will start working to “get there” too. I say: “Baloney”! These “physical klutzes”—as they see it—will never have a chance if affairs continue as they occur—or don’t take place!—today. This will continue to be the case until—the next thing you know—these “people in control” today will convince politicians to still further arrange things so that we’ll end up the way they are in China. “What’s this?”, you say. Oh, it’s quite simple. The answer is to classify little boys and girls by testing to determine their inherent physical ability early; take them from their parents; and send them to specially designed schools for early training. Then watch them “get those gold medals on ‘the podium that their country owns’”! Wow! Glorioski! Eureka! Nirvana!

The Sport Hero Phenomenon

I next felt it necessary to take my analysis of the existing, unfair, lopsided situation that exists one step further. Interestingly, and somewhat understandably but disgustingly, we now have what can be termed “The Sport Hero Phenomenon”. As I see it, if you think there is merit to my argument about the inequality that exists in so-called democratic society with regard to overly emphasized competitive sport for a small minority as over against an assurance of a sound physical activity education for the large majority of the populace first, you may also agree with my related analysis of a developing situation that exists very largely for select males of the species.

History has been replete with the exploits of heroes, but has recorded relatively few of such achievements by heroines. It could be argued that today a society needs its heroes and its heroines as part of its growth and development process, as well as its pattern—maintenance process. If these leaders don’t appear in the normal (abnormal?) course of events, it could be hypothesized further that society will somehow create them in sometimes unexpected places as they fulfill unusual roles. (Keep in mind that a hero has “ability admired for his [or her] brave deeds and qualities.”)

A so-called culture hero appears to be a notch higher on the scale, however, and is explained as “a mythical historical figure that embodies the aspirations or ideals of a society.” Certain, quite specific societal conditions provide greater opportunity for the individual with heroic qualities to emerge (e.g., war, emergencies, crises). Nevertheless, we might agree that such a person might appear at any time or place if several conditions prevail in any of life’s recognized activities.

In the realm of sport, there were those who asserted: “We have seen the last of the athletic hero” (e.g., London, 1978). Yet, if society needs heroes, and if they are still emerging in ongoing societal life, is that not reason enough to believe that a true hero could conceivably emerge in competitive sport as well as in other activities? Admittedly, the right (i.e., correct or appropriate) conditions would have to be present (in some sequential order?) for the creation or establishment of such a person.

However, people need to understand what actually has happened through use of their own rational powers. Those people in organizations that are exploiting sport are increasingly luring a gullible public through clever marketed daily by into reactions dominated more by emotions than reason. It may well be necessary to reinforce “civic ego” at the various geographical levels (i.e. community, region, state or province, nation) by the creation of heroes and heroines in the various aspects of social living (including sport). However, the extent to which this should be done through the artificial creation of “dubious superheroes” is debatable. Question: Should society create such status for some even when such individuals do not appear normally in the course of ongoing events?

Should a Country Support the Olympic Games?

There’s a vocal minority who believe the Olympic Games should be abolished. There’s another minority, including the Games officials and the athletes, who obviously feel the enterprise is doing just fine. In addition, there’s a larger minority undoubtedly solidly behind the commercial aspects of the undertaking. They have a good thing going; they like the Games the way they are developing--the bigger, the better! Finally, there’s the vast majority to whom the Olympics are either interesting, somewhat interesting, or a bore. This “vast majority”—if the Games weren’t “there!” every four years—would probably agree that the world would go on just the same, and some other social phenomenon would take up their leisure time of those who watch this activity.

I find that I must ask today whether a country should be involved with, or continue involvement with, the ongoing Olympic Movement—as well as all highly competitive, professional sport—unless the people in that country first answer some basic questions. These questions ask to what extent such involvement can be related to the social and individual

values that the country holds as important for all of its citizens. At present we do not know positively whether sport competition at either or all of the three levels (i.e., amateur, semi-professional, and professional) does indeed provide positive social and individual value (i.e., more value than disvalue) in the country concerned.

The answer to this problem should be determined as soon as possible through careful scientific assessment through the efforts of qualified social scientists and philosophers. We also need to assess the populace's opinions and basic beliefs about such involvement after the evidence becomes available! If participation in competitive sport at each of the three levels can make this claim to being a social institution that provides positive value to the country, these efforts should be supported to the extent possible--including the sending of a team to future Olympic Games. However, if sufficient funding for the support of all three levels of participation is simply not available, from either governmental or private sources, the expressed will of the people should be established to determine what priorities will be invoked after the evidence has been received and assessed by the public.

Where Should We Want To Be?

I need to make the case further that sound physical activity education including an intramural competitive sport experience is good for all boys and girls as they grow up to adult status. The need to monitor the growth and development pattern of the child is vital, because boys and girls today are simply not rugged enough! A majority of them in the "developed" world are either obese or overweight. They are mistakenly being allowed to lead "soft and easy" lives. Although parents should be careful not to employ undue pressures to influence the young person, nevertheless the child's basic needs must be met if a desirable result is anticipated.

However, it should be understood that there is much more to life than sport. Some people seem to think that a normal, healthy youngster should be playing tiddlywinks most of the time, while at the other extreme people go so far as to encourage regional and national sport tournaments for elementary school boys and girls. Some people even have elementary school children running the marathon!

It is simply not possible to discuss organized sport for children and youth intelligently unless we are fully aware of the entire pattern of child growth and development. For example, what is the physical growth and developmental pattern of a ten-year old? What are the characteristics of this age? Or to put it another way, what are his or her needs? My recommendation here is that parents should answer some fundamental questions for themselves.

Questions Parents Should Ask

What questions should any parent ask? The answers--and I have arranged such questions in a sequential order that can be useful--is that there are a number of them as follows:

1. What Are My Child's Needs with Regard to

Physical Activity Education (including Sport)

First off, we should accept the assumption that a parent must strive to meet a child's basic needs. Thus, keeping that in mind, we must learn what excellent, good, fair, and indifferent physical development is. For example, we are told that boys and girls are not rugged enough today. We are told, also, that children are typically too fat. So we need to know what children and youth are getting today in elementary and secondary physical activity and related health and safety education.

2. How Do I Know That My Child/Youth

Is Receiving a Fine Experience?

Then we need to know if this is enough. Does this concur for what I as a parent want for my child or young person? What sort of an "environment" is being provided? Are there any undue pressures? Under what conditions does competitive sport offer an ideal setting for teaching and learning? For example, will my child be introduced to contact/collision sport before maturity? Also, is he/she specializing unduly at too early an age?

Further, despite the fact that we want to guarantee the best type of sport and physical activity education for youth, we need to keep in mind that there is ever so much more to life than sport competition. So what we need in the final analysis is an educational environment that is best for children and youth in an ever-changing, complex, challenging world.

At this point let us be optimistic and prospective about this important matter. Accordingly, I would like to offer a "formula" that could well be tried out in communities of all sizes--and indeed is functioning in enlightened centers already. What I am recommending is steadily increasing cooperation between the recreation director and the physical activity educator/coach already. Basically we know that boys and girls from eight to, say, 13 years of age are an interesting and challenging group with which to work. They are typically eager and anxious to try almost everything and anything. They respond readily to suggestion, and it makes us happy to see them at play (and occasionally "at work" too!). This is the age group where all children should really receive the finest of experiences!

As parents and enlightened citizens, we should encourage recreation directors to work more closely with school principals, the physical activity education supervisors (if your community is fortunate enough to have such people), and

the high school physical activity educators and coaches. You may say that your community is already doing this to a degree. My response is “To What Degree?” Nevertheless, I’ll wager that not many communities have come up with this idea. Why not encourage the high school physical activity education men and women teacher/coaches to suggest “amateur coaches” for your teams from a leaders corps they might recommend? These would be young coaches of both sexes who would receive planned recognition and small honoraria for devoted, capable assistance. These young people might even join the education profession eventually.

Here, I feel, is our greatest potential for coaching leadership. I am certain that in most communities we are not making the best use of such an excellent source for young, interested leadership. Incidentally, along the way we could be running clinics for these young people to develop their leadership potential even further. Also, most of these young people are going to stay right in your community, and it would be useful to them and the community to encourage this idea of community service through an internship experience. Some of them might even go on to follow this type of endeavor as a profession.

A Final Word

I believe physical activity education and educational/recreational sport competition are wonderful activities for all people of all ages and conditions throughout their lives. There is evidence that such activity will enable people to live their lives more fully and also to live healthier ones longer! However, my fundamental point is that—for the good—and the future!—of humankind!—we must build from the ground up with all people!

As matters stand now, we do a fair too poor to “nil” job of physical activity education with the very large majority of youth (and somewhat worse for the “girl and young-woman component of the mix”). Yet, when it comes to a minute fraction of youth—“accelerated and special”—within both education and the private sector, we actually do quite well to excellent to superb with competitive sport.

Human physical activity, broadly interpreted and experienced under wise educational or recreational conditions, can indeed provide value and be a worthwhile social institution contributing vitally to the well-being, ongoing health, and longevity of humankind? Let’s give it a chance!

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