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Accessibility Divides in Youth Sports and Their Impact on Development

Introduction

Both team and individual activities promote character development, but the principles that dictate success relative to each one are different. Individual activities, like triathlon, encourage self-mastery and motivation. Team activities, like volleyball, foster cooperation skills. Different values encouraged by the two types of activity shape a person in distinct ways; a particular sport can breed negative or positive ideals, depending on the existing outlook and circumstances of the person who signs up for it.

Young athletes should choose a sport that will optimize their character, and a key determinant of whether or not an elected sport is suitable is how it is played. Unfortunately, individual sports, which would be most beneficial to low-income children, considering the personal growth mindset which they promote, are not accessible to them. Wealth divides provide the option between sports types to children with a higher socioeconomic status while depriving those in struggling communities of the opportunity to choose. As highlighted by the 2019 photographs of 'Hoops,' an exhibition at The National Building Museum by Bill Bamberger, some sports are more available in any part of the world, requiring little resources. A basketball hoop can be set up in abandoned, neglected areas, made more affordable by disregarding a net or backboard. Backyard courts make the game an option for most children, regardless of their location (Bamberger, 2019). Most simple team sports are widely accessible because of their easy setup. Soccer can be played with a ball and any two goal markers: two chairs, two branches. On the other hand, an individual sport like sailing would require expensive equipment and individualized training with professional coaches that many cannot access.

Beyond financial and geographical accessibility, racial inequalities further limit young minority athletes wishing to pursue individual sports. This is exemplified in the New York Times article, "The Meaning of Serena Williams" by Claudia Rankine, of Serena Williams's belief that, "the daily grind of being rendered invisible, or being attacked, whether physically or verbally, for being visible, wears a body down" (Rankine, 2015). Serena Williams's journey highlights how, when an area has an isolated minority population, racial stratification becomes a prominent barrier for young athletes' ability to progress. These athletes must overcome white gaze and the weight of racism alongside economic struggles before they can fairly step foot on an interracial competitive sports ground. This heavy burden takes its toll on a child's mindset, but it can serve as good preparation for facing discrimination in adulthood. Essentially, financial limitations and ethnic divides keep young minority or economically struggling individuals from pursuing individual sports which could positively contribute to their development, and society must step in to combat this issue.

Sport Accessibility

Ronald B. Woods, human performance professor at the University of Tampa, researched sports' cultural relations to society in his book *Social Issues in Sport*. He discussed how sports serve as a form of entertainment and means of demonstrating wealth for high society members who tend to elect individual or private club sports as their athletic pastimes- a sport like golf, useful for the consummation of business deals in adulthood. Woods also explained that the middle class is dominated by moderately expensive sports like football, played in tax-subsidized interscholastic teams. These sports are cheaper and promote collaboration, accommodating many players. Finally, Woods noted that members of the lower class enjoy many of the same sports as the middle class, but are more likely to engage in neighborly play (on any beaten court or tattered field) than in organized sports. Woods recognized that there is an exception to this tendency of the lower class to play team sports, since athletes often partake in low-cost prole sports like boxing (Woods, 2016). This exception emphasizes the problem of youth sport accessibility limiting a

young child's ability to broaden their outlook and improve their mindset, as violent prole sports promote a skewed image of self-respect.

There is a direct relationship between sports involvement and social class (Wilson, 2002), but divisions in who plays which sport are caused by substantial wealth disparities between families from different ethnic or racial groups. Their deep roots have had many consequences, and today "the typical White family has eight times the wealth of the typical Black family and five times the wealth of the typical Hispanic family" (Bhutta et al., 2020), contributing to racial and income-based residential segregation. Exclusionary zoning practices cause segregated residential patterns to continue, and since public schools are based on zoning, minority children are at a disadvantage when pursuing sports for their reduced funding.

There is an issue of equity, presented by poor availability of sports to minority children. In fact, the Aspen Institute researched underserved youth sport participation with the University of Florida, finding that, "rates for white children exceed that of African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian kids... [and data] on other historically marginalized groups such as Native-American children are not even reported in government-funded studies that track physical activity in youth" (Sagas & Cunningham, 2014). When minority children do engage in sports, they tend to be team sports, which are more accessible, offered at public schools or easily practiced with little equipment in local public spaces-parks or quiet roads (Bamberger, 2019). Individual sports require athletes to assume a high cost, with training that takes place in private organizations (often located in urban centers), and specialized equipment that must be individually purchased. Minority athletes wishing to train in a sport, often in low-income, rural areas, have to choose from the limited team sports available to them and seek the, "friendships, and community that can be forged through the game" (Bamberger, 2019), not career advancement. Youth in wealthier districts near urban centers are privileged when it comes to building their skills, and are able to play niche individual sports with fewer competitors, leading to later personal development advantages like the opportunity to receive collegiate scholarships or be recruited by a college to play. The differences in access to team and individual sports make youth athletics divisive, with sports like fencing being reserved for wealthy children whose parents can afford the expensive equipment and transportation time necessary for their child's participation, and team sports, whose games can be thrown together by children themselves in their downtime, are left for those with a lower socioeconomic status.

Team Versus Individual Sport Athlete Mindset

Participation in sports has psychological advantages. Rakesh Ghildiyal, psychiatry department head at Mahatma Gandhi Mission Hospital, advocates for the fact that playing a sport, "builds character, teaches and develops strategic thinking, analytical thinking, leadership skills, goal setting, and risk taking" (Ghildiyal, 2015). In the last few decades, experts in developmental psychology have further worked to evaluate the extent of the intersection between participation in sports and mental growth. In 2014, professors from the University of Massachusetts and Arizona State University strengthened Ghildiyal's claim when they collaborated to examine this relationship. Researchers used self-report questionnaires to collect data from study participants, finding support for, "a model of reciprocal relationships between participation and motivational beliefs in organized and informal sports activities" (Dawes et al., 2014)- athletes hone their cognitive processes as they work towards skill improvement in their elected sport.

While sports in general develop young minds, there are key differences between sports that lead to different mentalities. Injury risk is different in team and individual youth sports, as found by experts from Luxembourg Public Research Center for Health, Luxembourg Hospital Center, and the University of Liège in their 2013 sports medicine research. The study concluded that, "team sports participation entailed a higher injury risk [than individual sports]" (Theisen et al., 2013), demonstrating that there is a discrepancy between the stakes in the two kinds of activity. Differing hazard levels develop a young athlete's sense of accountability and shared responsibility varyingly. When a teammate is injured in a team sport, other players have to step up to fill their spot and encourage that teammate to get back in the game; team sports athletes understand the actions or injuries of others pose consequences for the entire team and have opportunities to practice backing peers. In individual sports, injured athletes must recover alone, which teaches them about having thick skin and unwavering determination. For a young minority athlete that may need to fend off racism throughout their life, building a tolerance to it in order to avoid limiting themselves, playing an individual sport where they must endure, "the daily grind of being rendered invisible, or being attacked, whether physically or verbally, for being visible" (Rankine, 2015) alone can strengthen tenacity and resolution. It can help them refuse to be the version of themselves that white Americans recognize in adulthood.

Another example of how team and individual sports foster different mindsets can be seen in the research of Marshall B. Jones, psychology Ph. D, which discusses how, "home advantage is not a major factor in individual sports, much

less does it play a role in individual sports comparable to its role in team sports.” (Jones, 2013). This means team sport athletes learn to appreciate the comfort of familiarity in their athletic environment, as it can be the same for games and practice. Individual sport athletes cannot allow themselves to become too comfortable with their home conditions, since sports like gymnastics cannot be competed in a practice facility. When teams travel to away games, they bond and get more out of the experience than just competition. Individual sport athletes compete with less outlets, remaining hyper focused on their athletic event and tolerating high stress alone. Young minority athletes in individual sports, learning to assert themselves in non inclusive environments and tune out negativity while competing to achieve their goals, can prepare for facing hate in adult life, becoming equipt to, like Serena Williams, provide, “a new script, one in which winning doesn’t carry the burden of curing racism” (Rankine, 2015).

Difference in injury risk and in application of home advantage between team and individual sports demonstrates how solo sports can help minority youth strengthen their mindset for personal gain more effectively than team sports. Unfortunately, most minority children are not able to play these sports or benefit from the character development they promote. A wealthy child has the capacity to participate in a team sport, learning that individual advancement oftentimes requires the uplifting of others and that one must recognize one's faults in order to improve upon them for the benefit of a group, gaining humility. However, a child from a humble background, accustomed to facing hate, may not have the opportunity to play an individual sport, thus improving their self assurance and encouraging their focus on personal development regardless of external barriers. The wealthy child has access to the best suited sport for them, and can reap the developmental benefits, becoming more well rounded and prepared for adulthood. The less affluent, rurally based child is barred from participating in potentially determinative individual sports, through no fault of their own, missing out on valuable growth opportunities for their future.

Conclusion

There is no overnight solution to America’s racism problem. Therefore, empowering minorities is a valid way to ensure they are heard. Minority children should not be sheltered from outside hatred, remaining isolated in their communities. Supporting their participation in white dominated individual sports can expose minorities to hate in their youth, giving them time to practice brushing it off and persevering before reaching adulthood. Children playing an individual sport, without support from teammates, occasionally have to serve as their own motivator; they learn that they are their most reliable resource, and can succeed, overcoming obstacles, without approval from others. The more a child is exposed to non-inclusive environments, the better they will become at staying true to themselves when out of their comfort zone. This can help them persevere to reach their goals in adulthood, having started building endurance to hate which “wears a body down” (Rankine, 2015) early on.

Improving accessibility to individual sports for minority youth can nurture a necessary level of entitlement for being a strong self advocate. Individual sports should be offered and incentivised in schools with a minority concentration. To make this possible, high-minority school districts should receive more federal funding that could go to sports equipment, facilities, and coaches, rather than having to rely on local tax revenue. Since education funding is discretionary, this adjustment would be made by members of congress; there would not need to be more funding collected from the American public, but rather the redistribution of funding already received by the government (areas with high local tax revenue should mostly fund their schools from that, allowing federal taxes to aid less affluent communities).

Some athletes may not be able to assume the cost of traveling to compete in their sports. To combat this, rural, low income, high-minority school districts could host home games rather than travel. This way, their athletes can benefit from challenging individual exposure to and socialization with youth of other demographics without creating any financial burden on their families. Promoting intersectionality from a young age and empowering minority children is as important for combating racism as teaching white Americans about discrimination and inclusion. Just as society must lay the foundation for minority voices to be heard, it must prepare those voices to speak when they have America’s attention.