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WHY WE NEED TO THINK SERIOUSLY ABOUT SPORT

This September I'm off to Los Angeles to attend the annual conference for the International Association for the Philosophy of Sport. Yes philosophers are renowned for thinking a lot, talking a lot and doing very little, and I'm always the butt of my friend's jokes that I don't actually work for a living! But philosophy is important and hopefully by the end of this short article, I'll be able to explain why.

Essentially philosophy is about thinking... really hard! It is about asking questions that other people don't ask, or questioning assumptions that everyone else takes for granted. Its purpose? To try to identify problems and to find effective and justifiable solutions. In this sense, the best sports players, athletes and coaches are philosophers at heart. They're able to break down and analyse problems clearly. They're able to separate out peripheral and trivial issues and work out what is important. And they're able to weigh up and identify possible solutions. Finally, they're able to take others along with them and persuade them of their ideas. That is the same for philosophers. Philosophers have been criticised in the past for locking themselves away in ivory towers and only talking to each other in a language that no-one else understands, but that shouldn't and isn't always the case. I'm fortunate enough to be a professional philosopher in a multi-discipline department which means I have to keep my feet firmly on the ground. It also means that I can influence those that are going into sport, whether as athletes, development officers, coaches, or sports scientists. I certainly don't have all the answers (if any!) but I can get my students to think. And it is these critical thinking and analytical skills that helps enable success, in all walks of life.

So my paper at this conference in September will consider whether coaches have a responsibility to develop not just good athletes or players, but good people. There are countless examples of the 'bad guys' of sport and many examples where players have been sanctioned for morally questionable off-field behaviour. We have this odd phenomenon in sport where athletes are held up as role models whilst we seem to set lower standards for other 'entertainment' trades such as music or acting. In this respect, there seems to be a greater onus on sports coaches to ensure that their protégés are not only good at their sport but also good, morally virtuous people too. So my job, as a philosopher, is to question these assumptions. If a rugby player, for example, goes out mid-week, gets blindingly drunk, and gains a reputation for sleeping around, BUT still plays exceptionally well on match days, are we rightly outraged that this athlete is not living up to their duty to provide a good role model? And is it up to the coach or management to discipline them? I am going to try to present an argument that we need to reassess our expectations. The coach or manager's primary priority is that they have a successful team or athlete. If it can be shown that a player's personality or vices has an

adverse effect on their playing performance, then the coach may intervene, but they don't have a professional duty to also make that player a better person. In the same way, a manager of a musician might be concerned that their act's wild ways might prevent them from performing well on stage, and so will try to control their drinking habit, but they have no professional obligation to turn them tee-total.

Unfortunately, and mainly due to historical reasons associated with the English public school system where much of today's sport originated from, sport is held up as a moral educator in a way that no other (non-religious) practice is. And there is an expectation for sport coaches to continue in this vein. That is not to say that coaches shouldn't genuinely care about those they coach and consider their welfare. But that is no different from the way that we should treat each other in any other sphere. Despite all the claims to the contrary and what you might hear in schools and sports clubs, *there is nothing intrinsic to sport that produces good character*. You don't have to look far for examples of selfish, egotistical, arrogant, over-competitive athletes to see this. Sport can be used as a moral educator but only in the same way that other human and social activities can be used. We should not therefore have a higher moral expectation of athletes to others in the public sphere. We also should not place added responsibilities on coaches to look after the moral education of their athletes, unless we are also prepared to do so to all others in similar managerial positions.

You may well (if you have read this far) be asking, why does all this matter? (Other than the fact I get a nice trip to California to talk about it!) It matters because questioning assumptions and considering different questions can ultimately affect perception and practice. Governing bodies design coaching qualifications and set expectations and standards and these filter down to the practices we see daily on a sports pitch, athletics track or swimming pool. These don't appear from thin air, someone has to sit down and decide what is required to be a coach and how to assess it. And they need to be justified in the approach they take. Casting a philosophical or critical eye over these processes ensure that they are fit for purpose and they have a rational basis. I may well be deliberately provocative in my questioning but the reason being is that it ensures clarity of thought and quality of debate that will ultimately lead to sound practice in the sports arena. That is why we need to think seriously about sport.

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