

One Future for Sport

Moving Toward an Ethic of Care

by Mary Duquin

Dans cet article, l'auteure présente un modèle de partenariat sportif où les participant(e)s mettent l'emphase sur leur bien-être ainsi que sur celui des autres.

Approaching sport from the perspective of an ethic of care means that a priority is established in relation to all the myriad motivations that might prompt engagement in sport as a leader or participant.

If people are surrounded by nurturant institutions, i.e. institutions that are nurturant to people and that reward people for being nurturant, then people will tend to become nurturant; if people are surrounded by institutions that are exploitive, i.e., if people are exploited and are rewarded for exploiting others, then people will tend to become exploitive. (Love & Shanklin)

Ethics surrounding sport are a primary concern for many women. Mariah Nelson (1991), in her book *Are We Winning Yet?*, notes that women often prefer to engage in sport and physical activities that are nurturant and supportive of participants. She describes the development of the partnership model of sport, where participants practice sport guided by values emphasizing the ethic of care for self and others:

Teammates, coaches, and even opposing players view each other as comrades rather than enemies. Players with disparate ability levels are respected as peers rather than ranked in a hierarchy, and athletes care for each other and their own bodies....athletes are motivated by love of themselves, of sports and of each other....partnership athletes maintain that sport should be inclusive; in balance with other aspects of life; cooperative and social in spirit; and safe. (9)

The structure and ideology of these partnership sport models that emphasize the ethic of care offer alternative options for the future of both women and men in sport. Fundamental to developing an ethic of care is the value of nurturance. Nurturance involves an interest in the protection, growth, health, and well-being of self and others. An ethic of care also emphasizes the importance of developing

a sense of emotional empathy and responsiveness to others. Response to human needs, fulfillment of interpersonal responsibilities, and commitment to maintaining relationships are integral aspects of an ethic of care. Ethical behavior is learned in relationships with others.

In our society, the responsibility for nurturance has been socially constructed to reside primarily with mothers and other females. Thus the ethic of care is often associated with maternal beliefs, attitudes, and practices (Ruddick). However, in a humane society the practice of the ethic of care is the responsibility of all members of society. In professions and disciplines that require caring, such as healing, teaching, and parenting, practicing an ethic of care involves demonstrating an interest in the protection, growth, health, and well-being of others. Caring involves developing a sensitivity to and identification with others. As Noddings states, "When we see the other's reality as a possibility for us, we must act to eliminate the intolerable, to reduce the pain, to fill the need, to actualize the dream" (14). The potential for developing powerful relationships in sport between coach and athlete and among athletes gives those participating in sport rich opportunities to experience the practice of caring.

Approaching sport from the perspective of an ethic of care means that a priority is established in relation to all the myriad motivations that might prompt engagement in sport as a leader or participant. That priority is to act in such a way so as to preserve and reinforce oneself as a caring person. The ethic of care grounds moral behavior in nurturance and values the importance of needs and emotions, of social relationships and responsibilities.

Bodily health

Many sport practices today put the health of the athlete at substantial risk. An insensitivity to bodily well-being is evidenced not only in training and dieting regimens but in the valorization of athletes' willingness to sacrifice bodily health for victory. This socialization toward bodily sacrifice has contributed to an increasing rate of sport injuries among youth: annually more than one million in basketball, 900,000 in baseball, 500,000 in football, 110,000 in gymnastics, and 105,000 in soccer (Arnheim). Statistics also show more fatalities and serious injuries ending in permanent disability, higher surgery rates, greater incidence of anorexia and diet-related illnesses, more chronic injuries related to overuse, higher rates of drug abuse, and increased stress-related psychological and emotional problems among young athletes than among other youth ("Study Shows"). More and more sportswomen are asking hard questions about the relationship of sport to their

bodily well-being and the well-being of others. As Nelson reports, women are asking,

Must we play as the men play?...Should we celebrate women boxers? Should we take drugs? Must college athletes suffer so many injuries? What are we doing to ourselves in the name of winning? Are sports still fun? (8)

The ethic of care reflects a respect for the integrity of embodiment, that is, a respect for the athlete's physical and mental health. Caring for the body of the athlete is evidenced by instituting sport structures and engaging in sport practices that protect and enhance the athlete's health and safety.

Emotional receptivity and responsiveness

The ethic of care confirms not only the integrity of the body but also the importance of emotional receptivity and responsiveness. Part of caring involves attending to emotions, being attentive to the individual needs of another. Becoming skilled in the ethic of care requires the cultivation of the caring response, of empathy, of engrossment, and of a willingness to extend to others. Development of emotional receptivity is crucial to the development of the moral self and the ethic of care.



Photo: Courtesy of CAAWS

Most females are given extensive socialization in caring behavior. However, sport environments that desensitize females to their own feelings, or to the feelings of others, sabotage the ethical process. Although sport is a place for the expression of strong emotions, it also teaches a systematic harnessing of certain kinds of emotions. Emotions that might negatively affect competitive performance, be they fear, pain, or empathic identification with an opponent, are often actively discouraged. Disassociation from one's body is a technique suggested by some sport psychologists to block the pain associated with training and sport performance. By not paying attention to their pain, athletes not only repress emotional sensitivity to their bodies but also increase their chances of serious injury.

For many years women emphasized and celebrated the relational nature of sport by sponsoring social events with competing teams. This practice may still be endorsed in recreational sport. However, more and more often females participate in sport environments that value sport and winning over athletes and their relationships. In such environments social distancing between teams is practiced and one's opponents may be viewed as antagonists rather than as cooperating participants. The practice of social distancing between athletes, or between coach and athletes, reduces the emotional impact of human relations and obscures the moral obligation to care. Coaches often engage in social distancing from athletes. Anshel's summary of research on coaches indicates that coaches are often more interested in giving than in receiving information, are selective in soliciting feedback, tend not to view athletes' feelings as valid, are not comfortable allowing athletes input, do not feel obligated to meet certain needs of players, and often do not have personalities conducive to healthy relationships with athletes. This account of coach-athlete relations may indicate the presence of unhealthy leaders, an unhealthy sport system, or both. When sport environments suppress emotional responsiveness, when leaders and participants become emotionally insensitive, and when athletes are desensitized to their own feelings and the feelings of others; the moral climate of sport is diminished and the ethic of care is put at risk (Blinde; Duquin and McGinnis).

Moral reflection

An ethical sense of self is formed through moral reflection, moral dialogue, and moral practice. The automatic obedience to authority expected in many sport contexts undermines the athlete's developing sense of moral reflection. Athletes' obedience in sport is largely a function of their social powerlessness. Athletes obey not only because they have been socialized to do so, but also because they have so little legitimate power to negotiate the conditions under which they experience sport. The autocratic structure of sport suppresses moral questioning and inhibits coach-athlete communication about moral relations and moral issues in sport.

Sport can also undermine the ethical ideal of caring by insisting on loyalty to the organization, creating in-groups and out-groups, and demanding obedience to rituals and rules that separate and divide people into hierarchies. Obedience to rules tends to diminish genuine caring because responses to others become ritualized, formalized, and rationalized (Noddings). In addition, coaches' rules in sport are often applied invariantly, without consideration of individual circumstances. Moral reflection and moral practice involve considering individual needs, abilities, material conditions, and situations. Responding from an ethical ideal of care requires attention to the concrete and respect for connection, particularity, complexity, and ambiguity.

Weaving an ethic of care into sports

What we teach young people to value and the experiences that form their moral character will have profound effects on the quality of life we will experience when they come of age. The goal of developing ethical human beings is not confined to the home and school. The education of youth regarding ethics is the responsibility of the entire community. However, coaches and other recreation leaders have a special opportunity to work with young people in constructing, maintaining, and enhancing ethical ideals.

There is no one structure that will guarantee to promote caring relations in sport, just as there is no one way to demonstrate care. However, sport leaders can structure programs and engage in practices that either enhance or diminish caring relations. While the ethic of care in sport is strongly related to the practices of sport leaders, an ethic of care also stresses the importance of the responsiveness of athletes in helping leaders maintain caring relations. In order to fulfill the caring relation, athletes must recognize and respond to caring behavior on the part of leaders. An ethic of care may be supported in sport in the following ways:

1. Coaches and athletes reflect a respect for the body. Coaches and athletes engage in practices that demonstrate concern for the health, welfare, protection, and enhancement of all athletes.
2. Coaches and athletes confirm the importance of emotional responsiveness by attending to individual needs and emotions and by exemplifying an awareness of the interconnectedness of human relations.
3. Coaches and athletes honor individual responsibility in developing ethical ideals through moral reflection, moral dialogue, and moral practice in the exercise of sport and leisure.

The coach-athlete relationship

Coaches enter into a special relationship with athletes. Both coaches and athletes have ethical responsibilities in maintaining this relationship. Coaches have the responsibility to be models of caring, to help athletes develop ethically, and to be proficient in the art and science of

education. Athletes have the ethical responsibility of responding to the care shown by coaches through questions, effort, commitment, and cooperation. When coaches model an ethic of care, they teach the value and importance of social relationships and responsibilities. A good sport leader is an admirable model of both learning and caring. Coaches enhance the ethic of care when they do the following:

- Show respect and regard for the interests and goals of athletes.
- Demonstrate expertise in helping athletes achieve competence.
- Act on the belief that the athlete is more important than the sport.
- Behave as models of both learning and caring.
- Demonstrate responsiveness to individual needs and feelings.
- Reflect the best possible image of each athlete, finding something admirable in each and communicating this information to the athlete.
- Maintain an open dialogue with athletes.
- Select tasks and engage in practices that maintain or enhance the ethic of care for self and others.
- Support athletes in developing and maintaining an optimal level of health and well-being.
- Communicate the belief that all relationships have ethical importance and consequences.
- Engage in practices that promote caring relations among athletes.
- Work with athletes to establish rules that offer support to and promote caring relations.

The instructional program

The ethical development of participants in sport, recreation, and exercise/fitness programs is affected by both what is offered and how the instructional program is conducted. Although reference is made to coaches, the following guidelines may apply to any leader in a sport or physical recreation program. The instructional and programmatic aspects of sport and recreation work to enhance the ethic of care when the following conditions apply:

- Practices or activities that diminish the ethic of care for self or others are rejected (e.g., sports, such as boxing, that require the infliction of pain or injury on others; practices that involve physical exercise as a form of punishment).
- The sport, recreation, or exercise program is diverse, allowing for individual interest and selection.
- Groups or teams are small, thus enhancing the opportunity for responsive athlete-coach relationships as well as a greater opportunity for participation.
- Coaches and athletes have the opportunity to work together over a number of years.
- The sport program encourages links with parents and other members of the community.
- Opportunities for athletes to practice caring skills are provided (e.g., tutoring less skilled or younger athletes,

aiding disabled or injured athletes, maintaining equipment or facilities, officiating, peer teaching).

- The sport program is sensitive to and inclusive of multicultural diversity.

- The sport program allows for coach-athlete discussion of ethical issues and conflicts as they arise in the practice of sport.

- The sport program provides the opportunity for joy and delight in learning for the athlete.

- The activities selected promote the lifelong health and well-being of athletes.

- The sport program allows athletes multiple chances to learn as well as the necessary time to develop mastery in skills needed for competence.

Ethical areas of concern

A commitment to an ethic of care requires that each teacher, coach, team, and athlete engage in an ongoing evaluation of how the operating social structures and behaviors of people in that particular sport context affect the physical, ethical, and emotional welfare of participants. A commitment to an ethic of care requires that physical, moral, and emotional abuse be resisted and that sporting activities promote health, growth, and the development of people who are able to care. The following list highlights some of the ethical areas of concern for the future well-being of people in sport.

Nurturing the athlete's health and safety: promoting athlete-coach dialogue regarding the use of both performance-enhancing and recreational drugs; restructuring sport programs to avoid violence and physical abuse; instituting policies and procedures that reduce injuries in sport.

Promoting positive emotional experiences for athletes: creating a safe and nurturing environment in which athletes can learn; showing sensitivity to athlete concerns with body image and self-concept; encouraging peer acceptance and sensitivity; encouraging athletes to take risks but not attempting to coerce or control them.

Fostering an appreciation of human diversity; understanding the role of sport and play in bridging diversity; discussing how caring relations are affected by cultural diversity, including the areas of race, ethnicity, religion, physical/mental ability, age, gender, and sexual orientation

Developing positive gender relations: exploring how sport and physical activity relate to the development of gender relations in our society; promoting and modeling of nonsexist attitudes and language by coaches and sport administrators; making possible the experience of coeducational sport activities in a mutually caring and supportive environment.

Improving the quality of the environment: encouraging athletes to explore the relation between caring for one's health and caring for the environment, especially in relation to land, water, and air pollution; discussing nondestructive creative leisure and lifelong health.

Conclusions

Institutions are not ethical; only people are capable of moral action or inaction. All relations are moral relations, and moral relations are reproduced and created anew everyday in the practice of sport. It is ethically crucial that athletes develop the ability to question, on moral grounds, the formal rules and informal norms of sport and that they have the courage for disobedience when institutional authorities threaten the ethic of care. The ethic of care is diminished when sport practices violate the integrity of embodiment, discourage emotional sensitivity to self and others, and block the development and practice of caring relations. Sport structures and practices promote the ethic of care when they preserve health, promote well-being, permit moral dialogue, develop emotional receptivity, and encourage caring relations.

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