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# Statement on Character and Sport

Character and sport are linked; linked in practice and training, and linked more explicitly through the performance of sport and considering how one's motivations for engaging in sport guide their conduct of it.

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This Statement has two main aims. The first is to affirm the character<sup>1</sup> building potential of both participating in sport<sup>2</sup> and consuming sport as part of a broad culture. The second is to provoke further discussion and deliberation across the spectrum of stakeholders with an interest in character and sport regarding the character building capacity of sport, the specific opportunities and challenges of engaging in particular sports with regards to character development, and the importance of profiling athletes, coaches, and sports men and women as role models of good character.

## Introduction

The notion of developing character, and the language associated with it, in educational terms, has seen a resurgence in the UK in recent years (see Jubilee Centre, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015; 2019; Morgan, 2017). However, the notion that educational settings and institutions facilitate the development of pupils' character is no recent idea (see Arthur, 2020). Schools are seen as the traditional hubs, after the home, in which character development takes place, and the educational and recreational activities that schools facilitate are the basis from which pupils develop their character. As the Jubilee Centre *Framework* states, the 'development of character is a process that requires the efforts of the developing individual and the society and its schools. A society determined to enable its members to live well will treat character education as something to which every child has a

right.' (Jubilee Centre, 2017: 1). The idea of 'living well' has obvious links to sport in terms of health and well-being benefits, but character development goes beyond the mere physical.

## Sport Matters

Sport permeates every aspect of modern society – through education, through activity, through coaching and officiating, and through cultural consumption. Participation in sport is something which begins in childhood and continues for many people into adulthood. Physical Education (PE) is compulsory in schools and can be delivered through sport, dance and other physical activities. Sport England believes that 34 million adults in England were 'fairly active' or 'active' in 2018/19 (Sport England, 2019a). Further, 5 million children and young people in England were 'fairly active' or

<sup>1</sup> Character is defined in this Statement in a neo-Aristotelian sense, as in *A Framework for Character Education in Schools* (Jubilee Centre, 2017: 2).

<sup>2</sup> Sport is defined in this Statement as an umbrella term that covers Physical Education, Physical Activity, and competitive sport. Whilst recognising the differences between these three terms, all are seen as means through which character can be developed and practised.

‘active’ in 2018/19 (Sport England, 2019b). Some 12.8 million people in Britain watched the Rugby Union World Cup Final in November 2019, the most watched British TV event of the year<sup>3</sup>; a record 3.572 billion people globally watched the 2018 FIFA World Cup<sup>4</sup>; and in 2018/19, the average attendance at a Premier League football game was 38,168<sup>5</sup>. It is fair to conclude, then, that ‘Sport Matters’.

Participation in, and the consumption of, sport is something that affects us, physically and emotionally, and will at some point impact our character development.

Sport can be an effective and unique vehicle to develop strengths of character, such as determination, justice, and teamwork, which are valued as ‘good’ by wider society. Sport is also a vessel through which we see the physical enactment of these character strengths in others, allowing us to reflect on their performances as well as the degree to which participants, athletes, coaches, officials, and others, do or do not demonstrate strengths of character.

Where a sport is recognised as requiring particular physical athleticism and/or dexterity to perform, the opportunities that playing and practising such sports provide to perform and develop strengths of character are often assumed implicitly, rather than highlighted explicitly. Where they are highlighted, for example through research and practice, it is important that those involved in the delivery of sport as a profession, as education, and in research, understand what is meant by ‘character’ and ‘strengths of character’. Sport as performance allows participants to demonstrate some particular strengths of character more than others. Following the Jubilee Centre’s neo-Aristotelian theory of character, and the typology of virtue outlined in [A Framework for Character Education in Schools](#) (Jubilee Centre, 2017: 5), participating in sport allows participants to practise all types of character strength. Whilst the performance strengths of teamwork, determination, and resilience may be seen as more obvious strengths than moral,

intellectual, and civic<sup>6</sup> elements of participation in, and the consumption of, sport that are both vital to and valuable in understanding the links between character and sport.

## The Value of Sport

The industry of sport is valuable, from grassroots through to elite level, and the ‘value’ of sport is multi-dimensional. Similar to the industries of art, music, and media, ‘value’ is often defined economically<sup>7</sup>, but the social, cultural, political, and character ‘values’ of each of these industries are essential and equally important.

Participation in sport, through competitive and non-competitive activities, aims both to improve skills and abilities in performing the sport, and to contribute to the physical and mental well-being of the individual(s) participating. The benefits of engaging in sport are not limited to health benefits. For example, British Universities & Colleges Sport (BUCS) found that graduates who participated in sport at university earned 18% more per year than peers who did not engage in sport (BUCS, 2013). Further, those that did engage in sport at university reported that doing so aided their ‘employability skills’ such as teamwork and leadership. Yet, participating in sport can negatively affect one’s ability to reason morally when in a sporting context. Kavussanu *et al.* (2013) have explored the concept of bracketed morality in sport, as defined by Light Bredemeier and Light Shields; where students were found to be more likely to act prosocially towards teammates in a sporting environment than to peers at university in non-sporting contexts, and more likely to act antisocially towards opponents than to peers. Sport creates an environment of teamwork and collegiality on the one hand, but also one of competition and division on the other. This reminds us that sport can develop negative as well as positive character traits, and more work is needed to understand how the former can be avoided in favour of the latter. The different roles one can take in sport should also be considered, with the character development potential of leadership and coaching roles being included in discussions.

<sup>3</sup> See ‘Rugby World Cup final’s TV viewing figures hit 12.8m peak – the best of 2019’. Available at: [www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/nov/03/rugby-world-cup-final-tv-figures-yearly-best-12m-peak-2019](http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/nov/03/rugby-world-cup-final-tv-figures-yearly-best-12m-peak-2019) (Accessed 15 January 2020).

<sup>4</sup> See ‘Record audience watched “best World Cup ever” – FIFA’. Available at: [www.reuters.com/article/uk-soccer-worldcup-viewers/record-audience-watched-best-world-cup-ever-fifa-idUKKCN1OK19B](http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-soccer-worldcup-viewers/record-audience-watched-best-world-cup-ever-fifa-idUKKCN1OK19B) (Accessed 15 January 2020).

<sup>5</sup> See ‘Premier League 2018/19>Attendance>Home matches’. Available at: [www.worldfootball.net/attendance/eng-premier-league-2018-2019/1/](http://www.worldfootball.net/attendance/eng-premier-league-2018-2019/1/) (Accessed 15 January 2020).

<sup>6</sup> See the ‘Building Blocks of Character’ in *A Framework for Character Education in Schools*.

<sup>7</sup> In 2017, the Sports industry was valued at £9.8 billion in the UK (excluding broadcasting rights and advertising markets). See ‘Britain’s creative industries break the £100 billion barrier’, available at: [www.gov.uk/government/news/britains-creative-industries-break-the-100-billion-barrier](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/britains-creative-industries-break-the-100-billion-barrier) (Accessed 15 January 2020).

Sport, by nature, is competitive as well as performative, so it makes sense that sport is framed within a language of performance and competition; therefore, the focus would naturally fall on performance character strengths. The Jubilee Centre defines performance virtues as ‘character traits that have an instrumental value in enabling the intellectual, moral and civic virtues.’ (Jubilee Centre, 2017: 5). Performance should not be defined solely in the language of character, but also in aesthetic and functional terms, with instances of exceptional skill, creativity, and other such examples celebrated as much as character. Equally, to define character only in performance terms is limiting and insufficient.

Whilst the body of research evidence linking sport with ‘softer’ outcomes, such as character development, is limited, there is evidence available that advocates for a moral focus to sport (see for example Light Shields & Light Bredemeier, 1995; Light Shields, Funk & Light Bredemeier, 2017; Kavussanu, 2012; Thompson, 2017).

**A moral focus to sport moves both practice and consumption away from mere ‘performance’, and is a way to encourage those practising and consuming sport to find a greater sense of purpose and/or betterment in what they do.**

Treating purpose and betterment as outputs of good character development, broadly, provides educators, trainers, and coaches with a ready-made language to add to their work with those in their care. When applied to sport, such an approach provides a way of ‘doing sport’ which is character-led, seeing sport as the performance of achievement, rather than the performance of winning.

The ‘value’ of sport can be considered differently depending on whether one is talking about grassroots level participation, or elite level performance and/or consumption. Whilst the two, grassroots and elite, are not antagonistic, one very much informs the other, their value, practice, and consumption are very different, and should be treated as such.

## **Sport as Consumption**

Sport is ‘consumed’ culturally, as well as practised and performed physically. The cultural consumption of sport, through attendance at sporting events and matches, through watching on television, and commentating, commenting, and analysing through media, social media, and other outlets, is a universal, multi-billion-pound industry.

Watching sport can aid one’s character development where elite athletes and sporting professionals are seen as role models, positively inspiring them to achieve, develop, and extend themselves in new ways. There is a wealth of literature on character development through role models, and particularly through sporting role models, which can aid character development, increased participation in Physical Activity (PA).

## **A Character Focus**

Where character is accepted as a set of personal strengths ‘that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation, and guide conduct’, then applying such a definition to the field of sport appears, at least initially, to be straightforward (Jubilee Centre, 2017: 2). This can be done from grassroots through to elite level.

The positive potential for sport to build character is often presented to us in the media<sup>8</sup>. Participating in sport offers opportunities to practise resilience, determination, self-discipline, teamwork, and a whole host of other virtues, regardless of the standard at which one participates. This is not tested, it is taken as read. Elite sports men and sports women speak of ‘showing character’ in their performances, and pundits, journalists, and fans comment on the lack of character when it is absent from performances, evident in scandals of questionable behaviour, or through win-at-all-costs mentalities. The character of sports men and women is regularly praised as well as questioned, and the impact of their displays of character (or absence of it) on the watching audience is portrayed as inspiration or discouragement, blurring the boundaries between sport as performance and as consumption.

So what is ‘character’ in sport? Does watching, participating in, and teaching and coaching sport need a moral dimension? How does one learn about respect and fairness? How does one coach

<sup>8</sup> A simple search of the term ‘character’ on skysports.com gives nearly 9,000 news articles containing the term. Many of these articles focus on the instrumental and performance values of character and sport, as resilience, ‘bouncebackability’, in terms of a return to form in the positive, or lacking determination and application in the negative.

See: [www.skysports.com/search?q=character&searchtype=the+site&v=2](http://www.skysports.com/search?q=character&searchtype=the+site&v=2) (Accessed 15 January 2020).

someone the ‘spirit of the game’? Research by the Jubilee Centre has previously found that there was no correlation between participating in sports and developing ‘good’ moral reasoning when presented with moral dilemmas. Whereas there were such correlations linked with participating in drama and choir (see Arthur *et al.*, 2015). However, sport does have a hold over young people in terms of having a positive influence on their conception of what it means to live a ‘good life’ (see Arthur *et al.*, 2017). It seems important, therefore, to define what a moral focus in sport can do to contribute to the flourishing of individuals and communities.

It is important too, indeed it is imperative, that distinctions are drawn between participation in sport at school or elsewhere, to any standard, in teams or individually, and ‘consumption’ of sport culturally, that is watching sport, being influenced by its role models, and allowing sport to impact on one’s conception of living and leading a ‘good life’. Equally, within participation, it is important to clarify sport as PA, and the teaching of PE. The related health and well-being benefits of leading an active, healthy life have links to character development, and the promotion of leading such a lifestyle should be promoted and encouraged by all. In schools and as part of physical education, the focus on excellent teaching practice should not be lost, with pupils exposed to a wide range of activities and opportunities to learn the skills of particular sports. However, the delivery of ‘good’ PE, and practice of PA, in schools and elsewhere, should include an explicit focus on the strengths of character that one learns through participating in sport.

## Character and Sport in Education

Sport is a compulsory part of schooling at both Primary and Secondary ages through the delivery of PE classes. PE teaches young people the functional skills, movements, and co-ordination required to perform different sports, as delivered by PE teachers and additional provision provided through supplementary in and out of school programmes. The delivery of meaningful PE requires properly trained, knowledgeable, and purposeful teachers and assistants. Those delivering a character-led pedagogy in PE should embrace the notion of the performance of achievement and the championing of enjoyment that allows young people to explore and practise aspects of character development through a variety of physical activities. PA is possible with or without directed or meaningful PE, and extends beyond schooling, both out of school and after one’s schooling has ended. PA also covers solo and individual activities, such as running or swimming, and team-based sports, such as football, rugby, and cricket. Meaningful delivery of PE

allows teachers and coaches the opportunities to teach pupils how and when to apply the strengths of character that PA enables, such as negotiating instances when character strengths come into conflict, or reflecting on the importance of fairness, honesty, perseverance, etc. Sport, then, can be seen as the practice of PA and opportunity to demonstrate and develop strengths of character, with practitioners and coaches encouraging participants to seek purpose and achieve personal betterment through sport, before training participants to perform and win.

## Character and Sport Research

Research that directly and positively links character and sport is somewhat sparse and limited. There is research that indicates participation in sport (particularly contact team sport) is inversely associated with morality (Kavussanu and Ntoumanis, 2003). Research that does draw links between character and sport often focuses on team sports rather than solo endeavours, or considers the psychological sides of both sport and character development (see for example Brady & Grenville-Cleave, 2018). Further, research that concentrates on the moral aspects of sport is often couched in opposition to immoral activities and behaviours, such as doping, or other antisocial behaviours (see for example Boardley, *et al.*, 2018; Light Shields, Funk & Light Bredemeier, 2017). This Statement calls for the collection of further evidence that can help illuminate, articulate, and explain the benefits of developing character through sport, how sport can act as a vessel through which both participants and consumers can ‘better’ themselves, and which highlights acts of good character to a wider audience.

## Character and Sport in Culture and Society

As this Statement has attempted to articulate, sport is consumed culturally, as well as practised physically. Young people and adults are influenced by sport and its key protagonists, seeing athletes, players, and coaches as role models to be inspired by and learn from. Therefore, the professional bodies and organisations that deliver sport, from professional to grassroots levels, and manage the consumption of sport culturally, live, on television, and via other media, should reflect on the ways in which character is promoted within sport, and what type of character is being valued.

Equally, for the many community-based projects and programmes that deliver sport within the local community to young people inside and outside of formal schooling, a prioritisation of character as both an aim and an outcome of the programme

and a lens through which the programme can be delivered, can supplement and add value to the character education taking place in schools, within PE and other subjects, or compensate for an absence of it.

Sport holds a unique and special place in culture, and holds an influence over a huge number of people. Questions remain about precisely what that influence is, how to harness it for individual and social betterment, and how to convey the importance of the intellectual, moral, and civic aspects of sport. With this in mind, this Statement calls upon the chief actors involved in the promotion and delivery of sport in the community, in schools, and culturally, to join the discussion and support the messages contained within these pages.

### **The Importance of Character and Sport - Conclusion**

This Statement is an attempt to articulate the importance of building and showcasing good character through sport, both in participation and cultural consumption. Its purpose is to disseminate the language of character, the benefits of good character, what character is, and how sport may provide opportunities to both display the actions of good character and develop the strengths that make up one's character.

This Statement is also a call for support, to engage in further conversations, and for more research and evidence that supports the notion that sport builds character.

### **Some Questions for Further Discussion and Deliberation**

- Can sport develop character?
- What are the common values of sport?
- Does sport prioritise a performance-led version of character?
- Does sport have a responsibility to develop 'good' character?
- Is it important to differentiate between 'participation' and 'consumption' when considering character and sport?
- What responsibilities do schools have to develop character through PE and competitive sport?
- Do the processes for, and outcomes of, character development differ between grassroots and elite levels?
- How can increased participation in coaching and officiating roles help young people develop their character?

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Dallaglio Rugby Works  
Invictus Games  
Liverpool Hope University  
Loughborough University  
Premier League  
Premiership Rugby  
ReachOut  
Saracens High School  
Sports Leaders  
St. Mary's University, Twickenham  
University Academy 92  
University of Birmingham  
University of Birmingham School  
University of Essex  
University of Warwick  
Youth Sports Trust

For more information about the Statement please contact:

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues  
w: [www.jubileecentre.ac.uk](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk)  
e: [jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:jubileecentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk)  
t: 0121 414 4875

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BIRMINGHAM



THE JUBILEE CENTRE  
FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES