

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN SPORT

An Ethnographic Study of Character Development in an Elite Prep-School Basketball Program

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The development of individual and team character was investigated through an ethnographic study of an elite prep-school basketball team. Data were collected over a five-month period using diverse methods, including participant observations, interviews, video recordings, and audio recordings. Content analysis of the data identified emerging themes and categories surrounding the topic of character development in a competitive performance context. Thirteen emerging themes are presented and discussed.

Sports are an important part of American culture. When one considers the sheer number of people who participate in some form of sport, the revenues generated by it, the amount of media coverage devoted to it, and the iconic cultural status of athletes, it is hard to imagine anywhere in the world where athletics assert a larger cultural influence. The sport of basketball, in particular, features prominently in the overall landscape of U.S. sports. With nearly 39 million children and adults playing, basketball is far and away America's most popular

team sport (Sporting Goods Manufacturer, 2004).

Sports are not simply entertainment, however; in fact, they play a particularly prominent role in the culture of American education. From intercollegiate sports, to high school sports, on down through junior high and elementary school, there is a presumption that sports are a "co-curricular activity." More specifically, as Stevenson (1985) notes, "It is the rationale of character building, of moral development, of citizenship development, of social

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development that justifies the existence of physical education and athletics” (p. 287).

Implicit within the educative rationale for sport is the assumption that sport builds character; and yet, as Shields and Bredemeier (1995) note, we are unable to definitively substantiate the claim. Research suggests that sport at the high school level can contribute directly to education attainment (e.g., Jezior-ski, 1994; Power, 2000), generally through the social capital and experience of community. However, research by Shulman and Bowen (2001) at the postsecondary level draws into question the educative contributions of sports. In fact, Schulman and Bowen suggest that when compared with college students at large, student-athletes are more likely to underperform and to rank in the bottom third of their class; are less likely to enter the not-for-profit sector and to work in public affairs; and have no greater tendency to be leaders of schools, religious groups, community associations, civil rights groups, museums, libraries, and soup kitchens. And so the debate regarding the educative potential of sport continues.

The past decade has witnessed a resurgent interest in character development in schools, making character education one of the fastest growing educational movements in the nation today. Character education requirements are now found at district- and state-wide levels, with at least 17 states currently addressing character education through legislation (Partnership, 2000). Since 1995, 36 states and the District of Columbia received a combined total of approximately \$27.5 million through the U.S. Department of Education seed money allocated through its “Partnerships in Character Education Pilot Projects” (Partnership, 2000). National interest in sport and character education has translated into national interest in character development within the sport context. References on sports and character development abound (e.g., Beedy, 1997; Thompson, 1993; Yeager, Buxton, Baltzell, & Bzdell, 2001), and numerous organizations have dedicated themselves specifically to the development of character through sports, including

several prominent national programs (e.g., Sports PLUS: Positive Learning Using Sports, The Positive Coaching Alliance, and Character Counts! Sports). Thus, while the age-old question, “Do sports build character?” has yet to be definitively answered, interest in the question has seemingly grown.

Although the existing programs and literature have undoubtedly contributed to a growing understanding of character development in sport, they are limited in at least three significant ways. First, the programs and literature are generally written for a youth-sport audience. Second, they tend to make general recommendations, which are not tailored to specific developmental and competitive contexts. Finally, these programs and literatures are limited by a dearth of research within this relatively new field (cf. Shields & Bredemeier, 1995), often relying on theory and research not specific to the sport context. And while, on the face of it, the general recommendations put forth in this body of knowledge seem reasonable, when particular values and issues are considered from the different perspectives of competitive context, type of sport, and gender, one recognizes the reality is much more complex than our research and practice currently accommodate.

According to Lickona (1991), “Character consists of *operative values* [original emphasis], values in action. We progress in character as a value becomes a virtue, a reliable inner disposition” (p. 51). Therefore, we define character education as the deliberate attempt to shape educational contexts in ways that help individuals to develop the knowledge, skills, and commitment required for putting values in action. Character education is a complex and multifaceted process that requires attention to the development of the individual and the particular context in which the character education takes place. This study was meant to provide an in-depth, phenomenological investigation of adolescent character development in a competitive basketball context to better understand the shared cultural norms, expectations, and pedagogical practices that enable or

inhibit displays of positive character. Further this study was undertaken to understand character development within a high stakes, performance-oriented environment—where the tension between character development and performance goals is seemingly high. Thus, we feel that this study has transferability to secondary and postsecondary educational environments, which are often marked by a similar tension.

The number of participants in competitive contexts and the prevalent belief that character development is reserved for domains where winning is not a priority suggest important implications from the study findings. The implications of the research are potentially far-reaching, given the popularity of sport generally, and the particular popularity of basketball. Conducted on a population positioned at the gateway between interscholastic and intercollegiate sports, the research sought to offer insights into a complex theoretical idea (character development) applied to a complex context (competitive sports).

METHOD

Participants

Study participants were the coaches and players from the New England Prep¹ men's varsity basketball program. New England Prep had one head coach and two assistant coaches (all Caucasian and male). (The program was also assisted by the previous New England Prep head coach whose role as an "emeritus head coach" involved travel to games and assistance in various day-to-day tasks). The head coach was a 34 year-old, former three-sport, Division III collegiate athlete. Entering his fourth season, he had primary responsibility for recruiting the New England Prep players, for directing the team's offense, and for general oversight of the entire program. The first assistant coach, a high school standout from a nationally recognized high school basketball program, was a former New England Prep player and a Division I colle-

giate basketball player at a mid-major university. In his second year with New England Prep, he was primarily responsible for directing the team's defense. The second assistant (or third coach) was with the team for 5 years and assumed primary responsibility for team conditioning and team management (organization of meals, travel arrangements, etc.).

The team was comprised of 12 players. The ages of the players ranged from 16 to 19. The team was racially and ethnically diverse including 7 Caucasian players, 3 African Americans, 1 player from Yugoslavia, and 1 player from Lithuania. Although New England Prep School features several different competitive levels of sport competition, including a traditional high school varsity program, the New England Prep team, in particular, serves primarily as a single-year, postgraduate experience that prepares student-athletes for the academic and athletic challenges of college life. Thus, the New England Prep team was transient, with the year of the study being the first year for all but two players on the team. The team competed in a highly competitive basketball league, a league that has historically produced numerous elite collegiate basketball players each year.

STUDY CONTEXT

Founded in the early nineteenth century, New England Prep is a boarding school with approximately 300 high school students (Grades 9-13, where the 13th year functions as a single-year precollege experience) and 75 faculty and staff assembled from 30 states and 12 countries. According to its stated mission, New England Prep strives to develop the total human person—intellectually, emotionally, morally, physically, and spiritually. This is the context in which an exploration of character development within the school's most prominent and successful sports program took place. The idea of character development was not new to the coaches and players in this study; rather, the general character culture of the

school influenced the microculture existing within the particular school program of basketball.

Ethnography

The ethnographic design utilized in this study is firmly rooted in the qualitative tradition (e.g., Atkinson, 1994; Patton, 1990; Wolcott, 1994). The study exemplifies the methodological tensions of ethnographic research in the social sciences (cf. Atkinson, 1994). For some, ethnography is an overarching philosophy; for others it is simply a methodology (Atkinson, 1994); in this study, ethnography is probably somewhere in between. Like the ethnographic tradition itself, this study is directly informed by the wider themes that define qualitative research (cf. Patton, 1990): It was meant to present detailed, thick descriptions using direct quotations and observations; it was meant to be natural, real-world research investigating the complex system surrounding a unique case; the design was meant to be flexible, the analysis inductive. Ultimately, concerns for a holistic perspective drove the philosophy and methodologies of this study. The goal of the holistic study, according to Caracelli (1997), is to “highlight the necessary interdependence of different methodologies for understanding a complex phenomena fully ... the cases themselves are not lost, and the approach is analytic, so some generalization is possible” (p. 24). Thus, the methodologies interact—not simply reinforce one another—in order to gain the most in-depth knowledge possible. This interaction is particularly important for examining critical incidents that emerge in the life of teams and individuals. Key ideas or events revealed through one method—interviews or observations, for example—are investigated further in the quest to dig deeper into the realities of the topical area. Wolcott (1994) suggests that focusing on critical incidents is an approach for “doing less more thoroughly” in qualitative research, an important consideration for inductive investigation. In ethnogra-

phy, where everything is important, critical events are particularly effective for understanding and telling the local story.

Data were gathered using various methods, including:

Semistructured Interviews. Interviews were conducted with coaches in November, prior to the start of the season, around a semistructured interview protocol designed to elicit maximum breadth across the character development topic. These interviews explored the coaches’ own sport experience, including influential coaches and life experiences, their coaching philosophy, and their approach to various aspects of character development in sport. As a pilot study, the focus was directed primarily towards understanding character development from the coaches’ perspective. Semistructured, postseason interviews, however, were also conducted with a purposeful sample of players (Patton, 1990) at the close of the season to gain their perspective on the experience of team and individual character development. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Informal Conversation Interviews. Informal conversational interviews (Patton, 1990) were conducted throughout the study with coaches, players, and other individuals associated with the New England Prep program. The informal interviews were particularly effective in getting study participants to offer insights into particular events from throughout the course of the season. As a former high school basketball player and assistant women’s Division III collegiate basketball coach, the primary investigator was able to inquire about game strategy (rationale for substitutions, player personnel considerations, etc.) as well as team character development issues (player-player issues, coach-player issues, etc.). Some informal interviews were recorded and the data transcribed; much of the informal interview data, however, was not recorded given the circumstances of the interview and the nature of the topics being discussed.

Observations. Overt participant observations were conducted by the primary investigator that included attendance of practices, home

and away games, van rides to games, pregame, half-time, and postgame team meetings, as well as observations of meals on the New England Prep campus. A hand recorder was utilized to capture many of the team interactions. Team members were informed of the study and of the investigator's role. In general, the primary investigator was seen and not heard; however, on various occasions, direct informal conversations with players occurred. The investigator also collected observation field notes.

Video Recordings. As part of the ethnographic inquiry, videotape footage of team practices and games was gathered. The head and first assistant coach agreed to wear cordless microphones that recorded their dialogue as a synchronized part of the video recording. The video technology allowed for analysis of video footage synchronized with real time audio from one or both coaches. These recordings were particularly helpful for observing team culture when the investigators were not present in person, as well as for comparing cultural interactions captured on video with in-person observations. In previous seasons the team had videotaped games. They had not previously gathered extensive video coverage of practices; nor had they previously included the sound recording of the coaches, both of which were done specifically for the purposes of this study.

ANALYSIS

In the qualitative tradition, multiple sources of data were gathered and analyzed using holistic analysis. Individual-case analysis and cross-case analyses were conducted. Analyses were informed by a constructivist interpretative style (Denzin, 1994) and relied heavily upon inductive data analysis, where according to Patton (1990) "the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis ... emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis" (p. 390). Thus, the categories presented below represent a

combination of "indigenous concepts," articulated by the individuals in the study, and "sensitizing concepts," as labeled or framed by the investigators. The various analyses utilized in the study supported the desire to understand the process of, as well as the specific issues involved in, character development in an elite performance context. Data were triangulated through varied data sources and data types, as recommended by qualitative researchers (e.g., Creswell, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The Trustworthiness Criteria. The concept of interpretive validity in qualitative research generally and in ethnographic research specifically is a topic of debate that has generated more heat than light. As Altheide and Johnson (1994) state, "The essential reflexive character of all ethnographic accounts renders them not only 'non-objective,' but partisan, partial, incomplete, and inextricably bound to the contexts and rationales of the researcher" (p. 487). This ethnographic account is no different. Undoubtedly, the investigators' shadow is cast across the study; their opinions, biases, and limitations interact with the particular events and people of this context. In this way, the study is limited—or enhanced, depending on the perspective—by all the limitations of ethnographic research, including the researcher's need to enter a culture and build rapport and trust, the researcher's own experience and background, and the researcher's frame of methodologies for gathering, analyzing and presenting the data.

In contrast to the postpositivist tradition, which evaluated credible social science research by its internal validity, external validity, and reliability, the constructivist approach to social-science inquiry (see Guba & Lincoln, 1989) is evaluated by standards of "trustworthiness," a four-component construct that includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Throughout the study, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and "member checks" were utilized (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Member checks included discussions with members of the research team, as well as "external audits" with

coaches and administrators from New England Prep during the analysis and write-up.

RESULTS

Coaches' Preseason Perceptions of Character Development

The following five general categories emerged from the preseason interviews with coaches regarding their role in the shaping of individual and team community. These were necessarily broad in scope, but converged upon a unifying theme; namely, that at the outset, coaches perceived character development as an illusive thing to describe, something that was important but difficult to match with specific practices within the life of the team. The assistant coach, for example, expressed a desire for "kids that are good kids, that have come from solid families, that [already] have some of these traits that I see as quality, moral individuals." The head coach said, "When I say good character, I'm saying they need to be able to get along, they need to be able to follow the rules, they need to be able to go beyond that." The coaches recognized the importance of character and even cited it as a desirable quality for team members to possess; nonetheless, pinning down what exactly character is and how it was developed proved a difficult task for them.

Recruit good people. One thing seemed quite clear about the coaches at New England Prep; character mattered to them—even if they struggled to define it. They explicitly talked about the need to have players with character on their team. For example, the head coach said, "I'm not going to bring in a kid that has a rap sheet of lying, stealing, cheating.... We bring in kids that we don't really have to concentrate on this with." Character was seemingly important to the coaches, but when pressed regarding what, exactly, they did to *develop* character, the coaches returned to the selection factor: you recruit good people. According to the head coach, "A lot of my players don't need that [character develop-

ment]. They already have very high character ... we have a lot of great kids ... we bring in good kids." Again and again, the coaches stressed that they *recruit* good people.

On the one hand, the explicit commitment to recruit good people is laudable, even unusual, some might argue. Certainly, there are plenty of coaches who do not see this as important, let alone a priority. Perhaps if more coaches did, players wanting to be recruited might value being a good person, and not see their athletic identity as separate from their moral identity. Nevertheless, the recruitment approach offers few practical insights for the development of character, especially given that even "good kids" are not presumably fully developed in their character.

Character is caught, not taught. In their struggle to articulate the specific practices for cultivating character, New England Prep coaches indicated that good character was not necessarily something players could be taught. Rather, they suggested players "pick it up" by being around people who set good examples. In other words, according to the coaches, character is caught not taught. For example, one coach suggested that players can catch, or develop, good character from other players with good character: "When they aren't there ['there' meaning when a player doesn't yet demonstrate good character] ... positive peer pressure really affects these kids 'cause it brings them up to their level." Coaches also believed that players catch good character from the examples coaches set. An assistant coach explained, "I want good kids. I want people that'll step off that court and be just as nice to the nerdy, retarded [*sic*] goofball kids ... as they would be to the players on the team.... That's how I live my life and that's how I would expect a group of people that I was working with to live." Finally, coaches described the influence of the school itself: "At the high schools that I've been at and that I work at now, the school does the job [of character development]. You just basically coach the basketball team. Granted, you want to show them [set a good example], give them

resources.” In essence, coaches suggested that players get, or catch, good character by observing the good examples of those around them. Implicit in this belief is the suggestion that any negative character examples are somehow siphoned through a moral filter, and thus, have no influence.

Character is learned through activities outside the sport realm. Although coaches struggled to articulate specific character development practices within the sport context, they began to describe a series of concrete character development activities that existed outside the sport realm. According to the head coach: “Development, maturity occurs in the interactions that I have with the players basically off the court.” Coaches discussed team meals, film sessions, team travel, and other off-court opportunities for character development. There are two equally important sides to this insight: First, it implies that coaches and players draw upon deposits they have made into an off-court moral bank account, which may help explain how players make sense of conflicting moral messages within their experience. Second, it suggests that character is not necessarily developed within the structures and practices of the team, but rather through the off-court opportunities provided for players to develop character, which is important and not to be undermined, but also omits many opportunities within the “on-court” life of the team. For example, the coaches did not describe the collective development of team rules, the team approach to discipline, or even the character developed through the mental or physical approach to the game. Instead, they attributed character development most explicitly to activities outside of sport. An assistant coach said, “I take a group [of players] to a youth center for emotionally disturbed kids.... That’s something that really builds character, to see what really goes on in some people’s lives.” The off-court character development opportunities are not so extraordinary, except in the absence of an articulated repertoire of on-court, or through-sport, character development experiences. If, as the assistant coach

said, “They [players] know when I’m promoting character growth by taking them to a youth center to have them work with little kids who are emotionally disturbed,” then the question is, “What do the players know about character development in the context of the day-to-day experiences of the team?”

“Communication” generally means monologue, not necessarily dialogue. When coaches reflected on how they develop character, inevitably the discussion turned to the topic of communication and the role it played in the character development process. The head coach said,

In the first team meeting I said, “This is the way it is. If I tell you to do something I expect you to do it on the court. If you disagree with that, I want you to do it and then come talk to me afterwards.”... I let the team know that.

Thus, clear articulation of expectations began the season. In a similar way, the coaches were explicit about their specific character expectations:

I take extreme interest in my players right from the start and say, “These are my expectations.” I tell them immediately, “I expect three things from you: That you take care of business in the classroom, that you don’t miss classes, that you’re there, you behave yourself, that they [teachers] don’t have discipline issues with you, that you’re working hard.”

Expectations were also made explicit in the daily routine: “After they [players] stretch, they come in and we talk about expectations in practice, kind of a warm-up of what to expect.” When it comes to more dialogical delivery methods, the coaches were explicit about their expectations regarding when and how this should occur. They would tell their players:

In a practice environment... This is not the place for you to disagree. We are working, we are going to be a team here, but if you disagree, come see me after practice. We’ll sit down, we’ll talk about it and if I agree, we’ll put it in—I mean, I’ll change.

Although opportunities for discussion, debate, and dialogue existed, these generally were not a part of the day-to-day patterns within the team. Even team meetings were fairly structured in their communication style, although the head coach acknowledged that there might be advantages to opening the process up:

Honestly, [the team meeting] is really sort of dictatorial. I mean, it's kind of "this is my view, and my view only." We really don't sit down in a circle and take feedback at that time and I'm not sure I could get it from those guys, but I may. That's something that's outside of my comfort zone right now so I'm not ready to go there yet.

In general, coaches' discussion of "communication" usually implied direct instruction, not discussion; moral monologue, not moral dialogue.

Relationships are the rule. Many character development issues surround the creation and enforcement of rules. But when asked about rules, the New England Prep coaches did not discuss team rules and how they were enforced; rather, they discussed the cultivation of relationships:

I don't have a book of rules, every year is different.... What you do is you set the precedent when you react to it, when someone breaks a rule or expectation or if something isn't going right. It's not a hard and fast rule; [every situation] is different.... I don't want to get into a lawyer type debate with these kids. I'd rather have a relationship debate. "This is your actions that are not going well."

Whereas for some coaches relationships are subordinate to rules (for example, coaches who say "no player is bigger than our rules"), at New England Prep the rules were subordinate to relationships. Coaches cultivated relationships with players by approaching each individual and situation one at a time and by striving to live out their own expectations for players. The head coach said:

I don't sit there and study for hours the X's and O's. I deal more with my players and my family.... I think I get more respect from my players because I'm very good with my family versus if they knew that I was just this driven, workaholic, crazy man.

For New England Prep coaches, character development occurred in the way they "reacted" to problems—that is, in the process by which they tried to understand the root of a problem and communicate their expectations for a different standard. Coaches described bringing in players and talking with them about problems that had nothing to do with winning or losing a game in a given week. And yet, through the process, players saw that the coaches cared about them as people, that they valued a life marked by consistency and integrity. The assumption was that relationships are the rule and that good relationships are developed when players believe their coaches to be fair and consistent in their treatment of players and in realizing the character expectations they set for their players—as much, it seems, as through the coaches' performance competence; that is, their knowledge of the X's and O's.

MIDSEASON PERCEPTIONS OF CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

In contrast to the preseason perceptions, which were drawn primarily from semistructured interview data with coaches, the mid-season perceptions reflect a convergence of multiple data sources (the video/audio recordings of the coaches, overt participant observations, and informal interviews with players and coaches). In particular, the away-game video/audio recordings, positioned directly opposite the team benches at several important away games in the mid-season stretch, made possible the observation of additional team interactions on the bench and allowed for the emergence of numerous rich insights into the character development process.

Four critical themes are shared here. Although framed as “mid-season perceptions,” which is when they emerged, these themes were important recurring issues for the team throughout the remainder of the season.

Team norms and rituals become hollow symbols without a deeper understanding of their significance. The first theme emerged during an unusual loss to Magnesia,² so unusual in fact, that a loss to this school had not occurred in nearly 20 years (on this day New England Prep would lose by 20 points). As the game began, New England Prep appeared sluggish and unable to get anything going. The coaches appeared frustrated, but were composed and said almost nothing regarding basketball mistakes—a blown pass, a missed shot, a turnover. Rather, during timeouts, they stressed teamwork and playing “our game.” With about 7 minutes left in the first half, all 12 players had been in the game. The score remained close, though New England Prep made a run to put them up by 6 points to end the half. The coaches’ usual halftime routine was to leave the players for the first 5 minutes of halftime so they could relax and talk things through themselves. During this time, however, players sat with heads down, in virtual silence. Only two comments were made, one from a player referring to the opposition as a “scrub team” and another from the star player who said, “We should be beating this team by 25 points.”

Things only got worse for New England Prep in the second half as Magnesia continued to gain confidence and New England Prep continued to fall apart. For example, in prefree throw team huddles, designed to promote unity by fostering communication and closeness, players put their hands in the huddle but failed to make eye contact or talk directly to each other. During timeouts, designed to reunify the team in spirit and stratagem, while the coach spoke to the five players currently in the game, several players walked around the outside of the huddle. Looking away from the huddle towards the stands, these players seemed to lack interest in their teammates and appeared

to want to separate themselves from the team. All the while, Magnesia expanded their lead, making unusually difficult shots, one after another. At timeouts they ran to their bench screaming and jumping on each other; and as the impossible began to seem more possible, their fans went wild.

In sports, there are times when no matter how great the disparity of talent, a lesser-opponent triumphs. Rarely is it one thing that leads to the loss; more often, it is the result of a convergence of factors. While the New England Prep loss likely was based on many things (an away game marked by an unbelievably good performance by Magnesia matched by an unbelievably bad performance by New England Prep, overconfidence, etc.), one aspect that seemed especially relevant was the team’s lack of unity. It seemed that team norms and rituals had become hollow symbols, void of any deeper understanding of their significance and importance.

Pregame prayer, team huddles, halftime discussions, and greeting players who come off the court: these are not just rituals and routines; they are the processes by which teams remain unified, especially when things are not going well. Granted, the power of unity is not always enough to guarantee a performance victory (although many times it is), but unity, exemplified in the rituals, can help support and sustain the team, precisely when things are not going well. However, when the team does not understand why they perform these rituals and believe in their efficacy, the team is unlikely to participate in them with the conviction and fidelity necessary for them to be effective.

Leadership is performance-contingent. The Magnesia loss stung the New England Prep team deeply. It was not just the loss, but the type of loss and the way the team had come apart. According to postgame coach perceptions, the team seemed to suffer from a crisis of leadership. In the wake of the Magnesia game, the coaches echoed a familiar coaches’ mantra: “We need a leader to step up on this team.” It was not as though the team lacked players who had been considered leaders on their former

teams. As the head coach said, “Probably ... 80% of those kids were captains of their high school team; they were the leaders—probably because they were the best players.” Inferred from this quote was a recurring theme: on-court player performance is where team leaders are identified.

Player perceptions of leadership as performance-contingent seemed directly related to the crisis of leadership at Magnesia. As key players struggled to perform, their leadership abilities withered, and no one stepped up in their place. For example, the star player, a team captain, had a terrible game performance that was trumped only by his poor attitude. After missing shots, he failed to get back on defense, refused to talk to teammates, and seemed annoyed with everyone on the team. In postgame, informal conversations, one player described his disappointment with the star player, who, despite receiving lots of playing time, continued to pout and whine at the end of the bench when subbed out. When asked, “Why don’t you say something to him?” he explained that as a middle of the road player, who does not play much, he has no right to say something to this player, a clear star, who plays all the time. He said, “I feel like if I probably couldn’t go out there and do it better, maybe it’s not my place to say something.” He indicated that if given the chance to play, he’d step up and be the leader the team needs (in other words, hit the big shot or make the big play), but for now he really couldn’t say anything. And so for performance-contingent leaders, a poor performance (or limited performance/playing time) is like kryptonite, neutralizing their leadership powers. In the face of a bad game, all power to speak up, to reach out and encourage teammates, to have a role in the issues outside of performance heroics that affect the team, all these leadership powers seemed to be stripped away.

Other observations converged upon this shared perception of leadership as performance-contingent: At half-time of a bad game, the star player said nothing and during the postgame meal sat all alone (suggesting that if

you are not playing well, who are you to say anything). Players on the bench did not cheer and support teammates on the court; they did not challenge a player pouting off-court to keep his head in the game. Instead they appeared to sit and think about what they would do if given the chance to perform. And, on a particularly bad night, when everyone was playing poorly, all communication seemed to break down and the team appeared to function as a group of individuals—all playing hard, but few if any playing together. During another game the star player again struggled and had nothing to say at halftime; this time, however, other players challenged him. He responded, “What do you want me to say? I don’t even know why I came tonight. I can’t do anything right,” illustrating that in the midst of a poor performance, even star players do not feel qualified to lead.

Coaches confirmed that players seem to understand leadership as performance-contingent; and yet, in post-Magnesia game interviews, they described a much broader vision of “someone stepping up,” one that had each player “doing whatever it takes” to help the team reach its goal, whether that was making a big pass, cheering from the bench, practicing hard, not letting players pout or whine, or occasionally, hitting a big shot. The discrepancy between this vision of leadership and the players’ apparent understanding of leadership as big-play game performance indicated to the coaches that they could no longer make the assumption that players had knowledge, skills, or commitment to be leaders. Rather, coaches needed to (1) empower their players; (2) make explicit their expectations for them regarding teamwork, communication, hard work, and support for one another; (3) help them to gather the necessary knowledge, skills, and commitment to lead (which was something that previously coaches had not incorporated as an explicit part of their teaching and instruction, assuming instead that players developed these abilities naturally); and (4) encourage them to find their voice within the team, to speak to teammates on behalf of the team’s full

range of interests, so that the players could lead one another—each in his unique time and manner.

Teaching character requires consistent observation of all phases of team life. With the videotape from the Magnesia game in hand and a new understanding of their players' perceptions, New England Prep coaches began to observe their team in a different way. Previously, game tape was analyzed by looking for X's and O's, missed assignments and exemplary sequences—all performance-related. This time, however, coaches used the game film to observe aspects of team culture and breakdowns in individual character that previously had gone unmonitored. Coaches showed video clips of players going from mid-court to the end of the bench and discussed each individual's responsibility to the team, as well as the team's responsibility to the individual. They analyzed the team's demeanor and individual actions during timeouts, team huddles, and team warm-ups. Using their audio recordings, coaches showed players that, as coaches, they did not complain or yell about basketball mistakes, that players were not berated for a missed pass or a missed shot, but that lack of effort and teamwork were important issues that coaches tended to get upset about.

Through this process, leadership was transformed from an individualistic, game-performance notion to one integrally connected to the team's evolving sense of community—that is, how players would support and care for each other, pick each other up, inspire each other, and offer feedback to one another. No longer an illusive catchphrase, leadership began to encompass a body of knowledge and skills that could be used for discussion, practice, and monitoring, including new concepts such as honest communication, personal and team responsibility, respect for teammates, and the courage to do or say what was right, even if it was difficult.

Following the Magnesia loss, New England Prep traveled for another away game. Unlike Magnesia, Weighton³ was a basketball powerhouse; this game would be a tough one for

New England Prep on even its best night. True to form, Weighton got up on New England Prep and never really looked back. (After the first 6 minutes New England Prep was never within double-digits of Weighton.) Nevertheless, the scoreboard was the only thing about the game that resembled the one at Magnesia, everything else felt very different.

Throughout the game, New England Prep players cheered loudly for each other. They stood close together in their huddles and were enthusiastic in their communications with each other. Even the coaches seemed to communicate more with players going in and coming out of the game. At half-time, the coaches again left the players alone, and at first, it looked as though without the coaches present, the players would return to the "leader-less predicament" they would experienced at half-time of the Magnesia game. This time, however, two players spoke up, encouraging their teammates, focusing them on game strategy, and exhorting more effort from everyone. As they spoke, the team's star player, again struggling to turn in a strong performance, sat off to the side and said very little; but this time, several players, including the other team captain and a middle-talent player, confronted him, challenging him to fill his role on the team: "Man, you're not on the team right now. Talk to us." Another player said:

We don't get mad at you. We're trying to get together and come together as a team right now. I don't care how much we're down. When we're winning by twenty, we've always got something to say but when we're down by twenty we ain't got nothing to say. That could be the problem.

They explicitly told him that the team would win or lose based on his effort and that they cared only that he keep trying his best. Next, an injured player, who had been a starter earlier in the season, gave an enthusiastic speech to the team, demanding that they work hard, follow their game plan, and continue to support each other. When he had finished, he told them to "Bring it in!," a routine usually per-

formed at the end of the coaches' half-time talk; they joined their hands in a pyramid and screamed, "Together!" and prepared to head back out to the court. At the door, they met their coaches returning to the locker room. The other captain told the coach they had talked it over and knew what they had to do, and if it was okay, they were ready to go on up. The coaches agreed, and the team stormed back onto the court ready to go.

Unlike what is often portrayed in the movies, the dramatic changes in the team's half-time dynamics did little for New England Prep's actual game situation. They continued to get blown out, and their star player continued to struggle. The game was never really close. Nevertheless, several key differences between this game and the one at Magnesia emerged: Despite their struggles, the team continued to cheer and support each other. The star player, in particular, encouraged his teammates and received encouragement from them as he continued to struggle. In the final minutes of the game, down by more than 25 points, the entire New England Prep bench was on their feet, enthusiastically cheering and supporting their teammates. A spectator, judging from the players' bench, would likely have been unable to tell if the team was up by 20 or down by 20.

Character development essentially involves the "lone fire-fighter approach" (character is not addressed until it interferes with performance). The mid-season critical events revealed an important insight into the coaches' underlying approach to character development; namely, character development was not so much a proactive philosophy as it was a reactive relationship. An overarching philosophy and practical strategies were difficult to access in preseason interviews with the coaches, but they frequently offered concrete examples of specific incidents. They told of especially difficult players and team situations; they told of times when they had felt forced to kick players off the team, and of times when they had been able to make great strides with a

particular player. For example, in a preseason interview, the head coach described:

The year before ... I had a kid ... his character was not good. He was mean, a bully, arrogant, he was a tough player to deal with.... Character development, yeah. I spent a lot of time ... he had an incident where he went after a faculty member who was officiating a scrimmage ... so I told him to pack his stuff, we were going to send him home, that this was not the place for him.... Afterwards, he came back and sat down with me and apologized to me and that's when I think our real relationship building started.

A similar theme emerged at the mid-season, when on several occasions the actions of individuals disturbed the team's unity. At such times, coaches discussed the incident with the individual perpetrator, in effect, employing a "lone fire-fighter approach" to character development. In this approach, character-related breakdowns are be likened to a smoldering fire that quietly burns without overt flame (the breakdowns that resulted in the Magnesia loss had their origins at the beginning of the season). Any sparks that aroused the coaches' attention were stamped out, one issue at a time, one-on-one with each player. The approach is "lone" because the coaches tended to resolve these situations quietly by themselves, without involving the whole team in the prevention and handling of problems. Further, team fires were allowed to burn until they threatened something most cherished by the team: performance—specifically, winning. Until the series of games surrounding the Magnesia loss, the team seemed to share no collective vision for positive individual and team character; rather, coaches used the lone firefighter approach to respond to negative incidents and the team learned through induction where the boundaries were. Only after this series of defeats did coaches make explicit for players what was expected of them regarding teamwork, communication, hard work, and support for one another.

PLAYERS' POSTSEASON PERCEPTIONS OF CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

At the close of the season, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with players to gain their insights into their experience on the team. Specifically, the interviews sought to understand player perceptions regarding individual and team character development. After extensive time interviewing coaches and observing team life, gaining players' insights seemed important both as a validity check on the insights gained, and as a source of emerging data. Numerous themes emerged; four themes are shared here.

Communication of expectations appears through explicit monologue and player inference. Player interviews suggested that coaches were explicit and direct when telling players about the importance of character. For example, players indicated that the coaches told them, "We [the coaches] recruit good kids." In this communication is embedded an inferred identity that "I'm on this team, so I must be a good kid." Players seemed to take this on as integral to their own identity as a New England Prep player. One player said, for example,

This team is very, very unique. I've never been a part of anything like it ... I think there's not a bad person on this team. I mean, everybody has their own problems, but ... everybody is a good person, and that's very unique.

Another player said, "They [the coaches] chose the good kids and they believe they are the best people in the world." In this way, players also took on the coach's or the team's identity; and they perceived themselves and their teammates as "good people."

But what if players are not—or at least previously were not considered by others, or did not consider themselves to be—a good kid? Regarding this, players indicated that coaches told them they were starting fresh. One player said, "[Coach] stresses improvement in all of us ... to go to this school is a clean slate to

prove that you're a good kid, and to prove that you can work hard." From the coach's explicit statements about the opportunity to start fresh, players inferred an expectation that they should remain focused on that opportunity. One player, for example, said,

Everyone who really comes here ... is here for a specific reason. They either have a specific school they want to go to, or they messed up in high school with grades so they need to come here and take care of that ... he [coach] wants people who are going to stay focused throughout the whole year on the reason why they're here.

Thus, players made inferences about certain behavior expectations from the explicit instruction they received.

Perceived character expectations are often vague. In interviews, players consistently discussed their coaches' general expectations regarding character. To a player, they described the importance of being "high character people," "good kids," "leaders on and off the court," and "better people," indicating that the coaches were effective in their efforts to expose players to character-related expectations. Although players could not clearly articulate the general expectations, they were less able to clarify what, exactly, these terms meant for them. Questions such as, "What does it mean to be a 'good kid,'" were answered with, "You know, 'high character people.'" Clearly, players knew the character buzzwords, but their ability to differentiate the various aspects of these concepts was less adept. Their explicit mention of particular character phrases, like "good people," was a positive indication that they had heard the phrases—probably often given their consistency across interviewed players. However, the discussion and explanation of the concepts suggested, at best, a surface understanding, rather than a more complex and distinguished one.

Players can articulate values they perceive as important to the coach, but responses are varied and vague. Although players were fairly consistent across cases (player to player) in their citation of the overall expectations, the

articulation of specific value expectations varied greatly from player to player (e.g., some cited respect, some cited hard work, some cited leadership). Taken across the aggregate, one could assemble a fairly comprehensive list of values; but there was little consistency in articulating the comprehensive list from player to player, and no player articulated all, or even most, of the values. For example, players cited: honesty, responsibility, respect, appreciation, recognition of opportunities, positive attitude, leadership, mental toughness, hard work, and hustle. In general, however, these values were not accompanied by specific behaviors. Rather, players described general behaviors that represented a lived experience of the values. Questions designed to clarify their personal understanding of the values, for example, were answered with “be respectful,” “lead by example,” “be a part of the community,” “give constructive criticism,” “pick people up when they are down,” “participate and don’t just go through the motions,” “treat it [the opportunity to be at New England Prep] with class [respect],” “behave properly,” “do the little things,” “take care of business.” In some instances, players listed the behavioral expectations negatively (e.g., “don’t miss class,” “don’t miss school functions”), but no concrete understanding of what these behaviors entail is demonstrated (i.e., what does it mean to “participate” or to “be part of the community”?). Furthermore, no clear association between the value and the behavior were articulated. In other words, it was not clear that the players associated doing the expected behaviors with having, or demonstrating, the particular values.

Players’ perceptions of character expectations seem confined to the sport domain (and in certain less clear ways, the academic domain). Two particularly interesting aspects of player’s perceptions of character development emerged from this study: first, character development seemed attached to its performance enhancing utility; and second, players expressed a limited view of character development as it extends to other domains of life.

Players’ perceived character expectations were focused on attributes that helped them succeed in their sport, but not necessarily in successful moral functioning for life beyond their sport. For players, character development was a means to a performance end, not a moral one. Character development helped them to be better players; by being better players they could achieve the things they want. One player, for example, said:

When you step on the court, it’s business.... With that in mind, I think Coach just wants guys that are gonna lay it on the line for him. And the guys that are going to do that are obviously high-character guys that are gonna work hard, do the little things.

Players cited the importance of values such as mental focus, hard work, hustle, and giving one’s best, but they discussed these values as if they were always positive, and no player discussed the importance of moderating values (e.g., prudence, humility, fairness) required to live a truly balanced and moral life—in sport and beyond. In other words, they never discussed how their own focus, hard work, and hustle should be moderated by the rules of the game, the needs of their teammates, or the principles of fair competition—to name a few.

The values they did discuss were not necessarily good or bad, except within a consideration of their application. For example, another player said:

[Coach] wants somebody who can be a leader on ... and off the court. On the court ... you pretty much know that ... you’ve got to hustle for everything and you’ve got to have passion for everything.... But you’ve got to hustle off the court also, you’ve got to have passion for it.

But values such as “hustle,” “giving one’s best,” “laying it on the line,” and “leading by example” are not inherently good. (Hitler, for example, was mentally focused, hard working, a charismatic leader, and certainly had passion, but no one would claim that he was a moral individual.) Rather, the values described are

morally neutral until they are applied in a particular way in a particular context. The players' descriptions of the values they deem important suggested a certain naiveté about the nuances or tensions relative to these values.

Players also expressed a limited understanding of character as it extends to domains outside of sport. When asked what, exactly, the coaches' expectations meant for the other domains of their life, player responses become even more nebulous. One player described what he thought the head coach wanted them to take off the court:

He just wants you to be someone who, the things that we take out of basketball are so many things that we would be able to take into life as far as work ethic, as far as what he's [the head coach] instilled in us, whether it's practice, meetings, a mental toughness, mental attitude ... that the whole coaching staff has done this [instilled in us].

As evidenced by this quote, the players seemed less certain about the off-court expectations; their answers were vague, if not confusing. In particular, they made almost no mention of what might be considered the moral domain (treatment of others, responsibilities to the community, issues of fairness, etc.). Off-court expectations and community responsibilities were vague, at best; players said things such as, "Be leaders on and off the court," "Be part of the community," "Participate and don't just go through the motions." Noticeably absent was any specific articulation of *what*, exactly, was expected. Occasionally, the players discussed how hard work and focus also helped them in their schoolwork. But, as one player noted, "The grades, SAT prep courses, whatever you do is kinda towards basketball." Another player said: "I want to be an academic All-American ... and so I want to put myself in the position to graduate with honors and go to a good graduate school, and the classroom is how you get it done." Again, players took the character-to-aid-performance perspective, and not a view of character as inherently good. Furthermore, although one player said that the

coaches' off court expectations were more important than his on court ones, it was still not clear that these expectations were necessarily moral, and no player gave any special importance to the few values mentioned that might belong to the moral domain. As one player said:

Off the court, I think he [the head coach] wants kids that aren't going to get in trouble. They're going to take care of business in the classroom, be leaders....The term would probably be "good kid," but what goes into that is going to class, doing your work, just working hard in the classroom and on the court and just being a good kid.

Thus, from the players' perspective, "not getting in trouble" and "being a good kid" seemed just as important as "going to class" and "working hard." "Honesty" was just one of several values players mentioned; "grades" and "be respectful" were mentioned in the same breath.

DISCUSSION

This study was meant to be an inductive exploration of character development in an elite competitive context. In many ways, the coaches from New England Prep and their circumstances were extraordinary. Nestled within a school that by its stated mission features character development as a prominent feature of its educational experience, these coaches cared deeply about the overall development of their student-athletes. Further, the elite level of their competition, their opportunities to live in residence with (or at least in close proximity to) their players, and their ability to "recruit" players to play on their team placed them in a somewhat unique situation. Nevertheless, the findings from this study do have transferability into other competitive coaching settings, as well other educational settings such as secondary and postsecondary schools, where the pressures for performance are often viewed as an impediment to character development. For example, New England Prep coaches

described a vision of character development that might best be described as “character development for performance enhancement.” That is, they discuss character development as something that is good for basketball specifically, and for success generally. We came to call this *performance character* (defined as the dispositions required for performance excellence, including perseverance, work ethic, tenacity, etc.), as compared to *moral character* (defined as the dispositions required for interpersonal relationships and ethical functioning, including respect, justice, integrity, etc.). In other words, coaches and players bought-in to the idea of character development—so far as they understood it—because they saw it as useful for achieving their performance goals. They believed that if their team worked hard, hustled, supported each other, then as a result individual performance and team performance would be rewarded. However, they rarely discussed, nor did any part of the culture engage, the moral side of character development. Thus, the ways in which personal values like success in basketball, focus, and hard work (performance character) are moderated by moral values such as fairness, honesty, or responsibility to the larger community were never talked about within the team.

Although coaches did make some effort to develop moral character specifically, this occurred only in activities outside the game and practice contexts (e.g., team meals, team travel, volunteer activities, etc.). No doubt, many coaches (and teachers) are similar to New England Prep coaches in their assumption that character development in the sport context will automatically transfer into other areas of life. This study, however, suggests that players are unlikely to make the connection between sport and life in general. Further, players identified a more explicit emphasis on performance character, as compared to moral character. Thus, although they can articulate the on-court character expectations laid out by the coach, character as it relates to their personal success in sport (performance character) remains distinct from character as it relates to ethical func-

tioning in sport and in other areas of their lives (moral character). On the face of it, the emerging themes from this study seemingly articulate a belief system about character development that is not unique to this particular group of individuals.

Although effecting change in study participants was not a goal of this study, as questions were raised, critical thinking inevitably took place and old topics were revisited from new perspectives. The head coach, in particular, began to deepen his vision of character development over the course of the study. As discussed, New England Prep coaches struggled to articulate a specific plan for developing character. In a midseason interview, the head coach expressed a hope that participation in this study might help him do just that: “What I could get out of this study is basically the techniques to help young kids develop good character?” As the season progressed, his understanding of character development began to deepen. Again, in a mid-season interview, the head coach articulated perhaps his best understanding of good character:

What is good character? Good character really is being in a situation and being able to say no. Being able to identify what’s right and what’s wrong, being able to be self-dependent. If you have good character, I feel that you feel good enough about yourself that you don’t have to follow peer pressure.

Here, for the first time in either interviews or observations, the coach described good character in moral terms (i.e., having the self-confidence and the freedom to choose according to what is right and wrong). This statement reflects a broadening understanding of character, one that begins to capture the nuances of what it means to have good moral character.

The head coach’s perception of what good character involved was not the only thing that deepened over the course of this study. By the end of the regular season, New England Prep coaches began to recognize that character was not simply caught, and that players do not simply develop character naturally by being

around good people and positive role models. All phases of team life, not just the X's and O's of basketball strategy, became important, requiring close monitoring and observation. Coaches realized that important aspects of the team must be discussed, aspects such as honest communication, personal and team responsibility, and respect for teammates, for tradition, and for the game. Future research should explore in greater detail the development of coaches as character educators. Additional possibilities for further research in this and similar contexts are numerous.

Qualitative research of the sort conducted in this study has the potential to deepen our theory and refocus our research. The reality of the context within which we explored character development (elite, competitive sport programs) resists neat packaging and easy replication. But, this study suggests that coaches in competitive environments, where performance matters, believe in the power of character. They simply need more help in accessing its potential so that players can begin to develop the knowledge, commitment, and skills required for putting character in action—in sport and in life. Sports do not necessarily build character; but coaches can if they have knowledge, commitment, and skills to create environments that challenge kids to put values in action.

AUTHOR NOTE

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NOTES

1. New England Prep is a pseudonym used to protect the anonymity of the players, coaches, and school featured in this study.

2. Team pseudonym for opponent described.
3. Weighton is a pseudonym.

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