

Opinion Piece

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Peterborough, along with many other communities, is in the midst of a discussion about the nature and values of sport. In Peterborough the issue has been equal playing time in high school sport, at the University of McGill the issue has been the elimination of degrading hazing rituals, and in elite baseball the question has concerned the suitability – or otherwise, of Mark McGuire for admission to the Hall of Fame. The issues and the contexts are all different, but one question unites them all – what is the sport we want and how do we achieve it?

Few would argue that in sport we all want 'fair play'. Many of us however it would seem cannot agree on just what exactly that means? In sport, 'fair play' in fact means respect for the game. 'Fair play' recognizes that all sport is competitive with a set of prescribed and agreed to rules. These rules give each game its character and define the valued skills of the particular game. 'Fair play' means respecting the game and respecting the rules, the spirit and the traditions of the game. 'Fair play' means respecting oneself, one's team mates, the coaches and the officials – all that are involved in the game.

This definition of 'fair play' tells us many things about the attitudes we should bring to sport and about the types of behaviours that are acceptable in any sport context – from the sand-lot pick up game to the highest level of elite competition. To return to the issue under debate in Peterborough it is clear then that 'fair play' does not tell us whether high school sport should have a policy addressing equal playing time for all participants.

The Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES) is encouraged by the discussions that are taking place in our communities. We believe this is a further demonstration that Canadians are engaged in the critical debate about the sport they want and the belief in the intentional use of sport to do good.

The debate about equal playing time is in fact a debate about the value of 'inclusion' in sport. At the heart of the value of 'inclusion' is the belief that anyone who wants to play sport should have the opportunity. This would include access to fair try-outs, equipment, facilities and teams. Any version of fair sport requires that each participant gets fairly considered based on his or her merits. Within the value of 'inclusion' sits the issue of playing time. One way of being inclusive is to ensure that all team members play the same amount of time in a game or, alternatively, over the course of a season all team members have roughly the same amount of playing time. That is, in both instances if you make the team you get to play.

Perhaps what we are witnessing here are members of our communities deciding that there is a better way to play sport. That by advocating for 'inclusion' through the expansion of the opportunities for children to participate in sport within the school systems we would be providing a more inclusive environment full of rich lessons and memorable experiences.

The CCES believes that these debates have created an opportunity for Canadians to advocate for the expansion of sport within our school systems in order to provide more opportunities for children to participate in sport at a level commensurate with their abilities.

If we believe in the power of sport to teach our children positive values then perhaps we should be advocating for a vision in which sport provides a seamless progression of sport opportunities in which our children can challenge themselves in their pursuit of excellence.

The lessons of sport are best learned as young people strive to be the best that they can be – competing against others at the same level. Riding the bench does not achieve that, but nor does being thrown into a competitive situation where one is outclassed. What is required is a mixture of competitive opportunities that allow children to compete and play at whatever level they are suited to.

Imagine the possibilities...More children having fun. More children discovering how good they can be. Healthier children who respect their team mates, competitors, officials, coaches on and off the field. And, more children who play fair – obeying the rules and playing honestly. More children benefiting from the positive power of sport.

By upholding a vision in which sport provides age and skill appropriate opportunities for kids to participate, communities and school systems are recognizing sport as a valuable community asset. Implementing this vision would bring us one step closer to the sport we want in Canada.

The CCES is a non-profit organization which fosters ethical sport for all Canadians. We are committed to a sport system that is available and accessible to all Canadians and one that values excellence, fairness and the intrinsic joy of playing the game.