

Why Sports Matter

Sports are part of our hopes and dreams, how we define ourselves at all levels of society, and athletes have had a tremendous impact throughout history. Early Olympians were memorialized as statues, on Grecian urns and in the epic poems of Homer. The adoration of athletes has continued to this day, and while its propriety may be debatable, there is no modern political leader who has held our imagination quite so long as either Babe Ruth or Joe DiMaggio.

On the surface, sports may seem nothing more than entertainment and a diversion from the more pressing issues of the day. But on a deeper level, sport becomes a metaphor for life, a font from which the virtues we value as a people are learned and expressed: dedication, loyalty and hard work; sportsmanship and fair play; setting and achieving goals; overcoming adversity and dealing with loss.

Certainly the athletes whom we most admire are in their prime, but sports matter at every stage of life. The very young benefit from learning the joy of physical exercise as their muscles and bones gradually strengthen. And with the incidence of obesity, high cholesterol and heart disease being found in even elementary school children today, exercise becomes critically important if they are to have any hope for a healthy adulthood.

Adults often look for one little pill to cure everything but the secret to good health is clearly exercise. From insomnia, back pain and arthritis, depression to heart disease and high cholesterol, exercise has been proven beneficial, and much cheaper than anything modern medicine has to offer.

Research has also found that sports have a healthy developmental impact on young children. It promotes cooperative play, teamwork, and good sportsmanship while helping to refine motor skills, strengthen bones and muscles and improve flexibility, mobility and coordination. Plus, participation in sports and physical activities boosts mental health, self-confidence, and self-esteem while reducing the risks of dropping out of school or acquiring unhealthy habits.

With proper coaching, doing the right thing also becomes second nature. At a recent state track meet in Washington State, Tacoma runner Nicole Cochran won the 3200-meter event with a dominating performance but was disqualified for running out of her lane. However, a video of the race clearly showed a teammate as the culprit. Case closed, right? Wrong. Rules prohibited the use of unauthorized video to review performance and, therefore, meet officials refused to reverse her disqualification.

But the other runners were adamant that Cochran had done nothing wrong. She had won the race fair and square, they said, and so they took matters into their own hands. At the awards ceremony, official winner Andrea Nelson of Spokane walked off the podium and gave her gold medal to Cochran. Then the rest of the top finishers all passed their medals on to the person who crossed the finish line ahead of them. "The kids got it right immediately," said Cochran's coach.

Former Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren once remarked that he always began the day by reading the sports pages of the newspaper. When

asked why, he replied, "The sports pages are a record of accomplishments; the front page, nothing but failure."

In Washington State, a record of accomplishment indeed.