

The Long Term Benefits of Military Sports To Society

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The short-term benefits of Sports to the active duty Military are obvious. Even with the explosion of computerized equipment, today's Military still requires a level of fitness comparable to the foot soldiers of the previous centuries. Participation in sports provides a venue to keep our military physically fit, while providing a much needed outlet for the rigors of daily duty. Additionally, team sports provide a basis for team work that is needed for units to be able to function with a cohesion that is often called upon during both peacetime and combat operations.

These same benefits follow our military members outside the confines of the military installations. In the United States, we have many military installations that are remotely located from major metropolitan areas. Military sporting events provide a way of bridging relationships with the local communities, as well as providing world class entertainment that would not be readily available to these communities. An example of this would be the recent CISM Volleyball Championship held at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona, where residents of this isolated portion of the Southwestern United States had the opportunity to watch a major international competition on their home turf. The event itself bolstered the relationship between the military installation and the local community.

Media coverage of our CISM events in the local communities not only adds entertainment value to the evening news, but sends a positive image of our military forces through all the media sources. Too often today, sports stories are headlined with incidents of athlete violence, performance drugs, and the trade of fair play for high salaries. Our military athletes show the positive side of sport – sacrifice before personal gain, loyalty to the team and to the nation, accepting responsibility for their own actions, and those entrusted to their care, finding opportunities to improve oneself for the good of the group, consideration of others before self, discipline and self control, and the ability to face fear, danger, or adversity with physical and moral courage.

But what about the long term benefits of Military Sport on Society? Although some may argue that there is no relationship between playing on a volleyball team, and holding a seat on the city council, research has shown that there is an indirect positive correlation between team sports participation and civic engagement. Participation in sports has also been proven to instill positive social values such as cooperation and a drive to succeed.¹

Baron Pierre de Coubertin made a direct correlation between the impacts of sports on the military when he founded the Modern Olympics in 1896. "Coubertin was inspired by the classical Greek ideal of a sound body and mind, and the importance of physical training in building a strong nation and individual. He was moved to action by his dismay at the poor physical condition of his fellow Frenchmen, and the belief that this lack of fitness had led to France's humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. In the turbulent years that followed, France suffered low national esteem and a depressed economy, while the fortunes of England and Germany prospered."² Armed with this inspiration, Baron de Coubertin pursued his dream of a rebirth of the ancient Olympics that has now expounded into an international event occurring every two years.

Baron de Coubertin's sentiments were echoed in 2005 by Mr. Adolf Ogi, the UN Secretary-General's Representative for Sports and Development. "I have witnessed so many impressive examples of how sport can improve peoples lives. On one hand sport can be used to contribute to peace-building, reconciliation and healing in post-conflict societies, on the other hand it can prevent conflict for many reasons, particularly because it brings people of different origins, religions and races together."³

It is not difficult to link military sports and community commitment. Although there has been no research found in this area, intuitively, participants in military sports are inclined to build relationships with teammates more quickly than their civilian counterparts, due to the emphasis on teamwork involved in their military professions. Participants in sports also find a connection to their supporters – many of the people in the stands are also from their military units and their families, but many are from the civilian community. This forms a conduit between the participants in the Sport, and the community around them.

They, in turn, may feel compelled to reciprocate support to the surrounding community, through volunteerism and other forms of community service.

Sociologists maintain that sports have a tremendous socializing effect on the participants. Consisting of certain sets of ideals specific to the activity, sports emphasize these respective attitudes and behaviors on participants. The values imbued on the individuals are representative of the particular sport and of society as a whole. The sociological study of sports seeks to understand the individual and group relationships and how these dynamics interact and are manifested in society. Studies indicate that what is learned in sports whether it be active participation or by observing others, contributes positively or negatively to the development of one's identity and personality. Sports instruct participants and observers in how to deal with personal interactions as well as how to relate to a social group and conform to problematic situations.¹ The socializing quality of sports teaches values to its participants, which can lead to an increased likelihood of active involvement in community activities.

Sports has the capability of bringing people together. In addition to promoting health and fitness at the local level, people run and walk to raise money to fight diseases. Participants of military sports are more inclined to continue with these types of special programs long after they retire from their military careers and settle into their civilian lives.

Studies have also shown that sports can provide a sense of affiliation, self confidence, appreciation for one's health and fitness and the development of social bonds with other people and institutions.⁴ The same psychology of motivation that it takes to move a team to victory can be transposed into moving a community and a society to a positive goal. Sports challenge us to reach beyond our expectations, to reach for goals that many consider unattainable. That same mentality is needed to progress a society through the rough and broken times.

Sports also have an impact on the cultural characteristics of a society. Characteristics of sports participants such as a drive for success or competitive individualism also reflect the values in the American culture, as well as many other cultures.⁵ These cultural imprints continue to manifest themselves on the individual as he or she leaves the field of play, and pursues life in the field of society.

We can conclude that sports have a lasting effect on the social, emotional, and development of an individual, especially in the early adult years. By fostering the participation in Military Sports, we are developing a life-time of positive social skills in our young Servicemen and Women that will not only define their role in the Military Society, but in the Future Society as a whole. It is imperative that our military personnel continue to spread the goal of "Friendship Through Sport" to the next generation. I'd like to end by quoting Plato, "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation." I applaud all of you as leaders of military sport in your individual countries. You hold the keys to the future in your hands through your continued support of these vital programs.

References:

- 1) Ritz, Ian, "Playing for an Active Community: Sports Participation and Civic Engagement", 2006, web-based
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- 3) Ogi, Adolf, "International Year of Sport" 2005, web-based.
- 4) Ewing, Martha E., Gano-Overway, Lori A, "Paradoxes of Youth and Sport", 2002.
- 5) Bryant, James; McElroy, Mary, "Sociological Dynamics of Sport and Exercise", 1997.