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True Competition Book Critique

The book *True Competition* focused its time between two different types of athletes: competitors and decompetitors. While at times this can appear to make for a cut and dry, black or white athlete, there is gray area to be explored and reviewed. For my own professional development and for the sake of understanding positive youth development through sport, there will be personal reflection and possible application of the theories and ideas presented in the text. For the sake of this discussion, I will rely on my only coaching experience with an eighth grade girl's volleyball team and possible coaching options with them in the future. Overall, it is clear that the most important values to instill within youth development revolve around the positive aspects that can lead to true competition.

One aspect to really dissect within a personal coaching philosophy is the concept between competition and decompetition. The book used these two concepts throughout the book as the basis for a guide to pursue excellence. The main issues to think about are the principles behind striving with the opponents or striving against the opponents (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009). The book is broken down into very specific subsets and attributes for both sides. For the girls I would coach, it is a crucial time in their stage of life to continually focus on the development aspect during sport and lay down the foundation for the athletes to strive to be competitors, not decompetitors. Within everything being accomplished as a coach, it is important to focus on the opposite outcomes that Kohn suggests could occur through competition (really, decompetition): we want to see the positive aspects of our opponents, act in compliant and cooperative ways, and ultimately exhibit a higher level productivity when the game has ended (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009, p. 14). To help my athletes, I want to make sure that my own concepts of competition and decompetition are aligned appropriately. Before coaching and helping to develop the youth, I need to make sure my own philosophy is where I want it to be and I can say for myself that I

have what it takes to be a true competitor. It will be crucial to make sure there are clear objectives for the season.

For athletes to become true competitors, it first has to be intentional. As human beings, it can be easy to jump to our first emotions when faced with a difficult decision. “Our immediate impulse may not always be to do as we ought, and yet we may consistently act with integrity because we commit ourselves to core values” (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009, p. 56). When we can teach our athletes about character, moral choices, and playing with the right intentions when they are very young, this can set the stage for them long term for both their athletic career and for their lives. For coaches working with young athletes, the foundations are key: the skills, physical development, and moral characteristics. The coach must set the stage between what will be accepted, expected, and define the differences in completion and decompetition. One can recognize that the motivation to play at any age group can be all across the board, so it can be helpful to determine what those motivations are to assist each individual athlete. In coaching eighth grade girls, this a crucial time in their lives where they are really trying to determine who they are as individuals, they face peer pressure, and earn to be accepted. Applying the principles set forth of a true competitor help the athlete to see what is expected not as they continue to develop as an athlete, but also as an individual in life. To be intentional with the athletes, there must be a focus on the process, pursuit of excellence, and overall commitment to respecting the game. “The temptations that are most likely to snag us are those that we fail to recognize” (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009, p. 83). The coach and athletes must also know what can threaten their intention to true competition. Being proactive instead of reactive can make a huge difference.

While there are multiple avenues that can derail a path to true competition, the book focuses on cheating and aggression a good amount. Overall, there is a negative aspect to a decompetitor's philosophy in needing to do whatever it takes to win. The want to win is not in itself a negative desire. It is the means to getting there that can play the part and determine whether an athlete is a competitor or decompetitor. In the review of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, it can be seen that intrinsic motivation lines up with a competitor and extrinsic motivation lines up with a decompetitor (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009, p. 62). When the decompetitor seeks fame, glory, and selfish goals to the game get sidetracked. There is less and less desire to improve one's abilities, but more on seeking the triumph of the game and scoreboard. Ultimately, the coach needs to see what is motivating an athlete. The purpose that is driving the athlete to play will determine their motivation and goals.

One avenue that the book somewhat ignored was the aspect of sport for fun. In their book on "pursuing excellence in sport and society," the section on enjoyment seemed too forced and processed. While a lot of what we have discussed does need to be taught or a coach has to be intentional, sometimes fun should just occur on its own without it being on the schedule. There is even mention that fun can be over-emphasized in sport (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009, p. 72). While it can depend on the league, age, and purpose, fun should always play a role and helps to promote positive youth development. When the fun is gone, helping our athletes strive for true competition is that much more difficult. This is one goal that I really sought to accomplish with my middle school volleyball team. With all of the drama these teenage girls thought they had going on in their lives, I wanted the few hours a week I spent with them something that they cherished, appreciated, and grew from. To incorporate fun into our season, we had game nights, dress up days at school, variety in practice, and a team song. More than anything, I wanted to

remind our team that yes, volleyball is just a game. They are learning more than the sports skills during the season and while we can strive to win, we want to improve and have fun along the way.

On the other side of fun is winning. The book spends a great deal of time addressing thoughts on winning from both angles. From the true competitor's side, winning can be a goal, but it is not the main purpose for play. "Winning is great when it happens, but what's most important is the striving" (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009, p. 167). For the competitors, it is more about the process and individual development. We want to see our athletes be better than they were the day before and be able to think creatively to help them achieve their own individual goals. When the team can see more individual goals and less team goals, it sets the stage for long-term thinking across the span of a season. For the decompetitors, on the other hand, their main goal is to win and do whatever it takes to get there. "In contrast, like a reader who sees in poetry only the literal meaning of the words, the decompetitor reduces the contest to the scoreboard, collapsing all values unto the single goal of defeating others" (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009, p. 166). In order to inspire positive youth development, coaches must address the issue of winning. While that can be one of the goals, it should not be the main goal. When the players reach their full potential, the winning and accomplishment will take care of itself.

One of the main themes that can be supported throughout the book is the theme of leadership. The book addresses leaders and this can be seen as coaches, team captains, and individual players on the team. The principles of competition can be addressed to each subset differently. For coaches, the principles can be applied for themselves as individual leaders and also a broader philosophy for their teams. For team captains, the leadership philosophies can be applied as they lead their teams and set an example to their peers throughout the game. For the

individual players, each player is a leader in their own respect and plays an important role on the team. To understand positive youth development through sport, leadership is at the core of those who truly seek true competition. “The leader is in a position to lift up the opportunity for growth that the opponent has created” (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009, p. 119). The leader, regardless of position in the season, has the unique chance to see the positive in every situation and make the positive choices within the team.

One thing the authors did not give was specific examples on how to apply these principles for separate age groups. Determining motivation and setting goals will look very differently for five year olds versus freshmen in high school. While the text was meant to be an overview of pursuing excellence in athletics and in life, it is up to the individual readers to determine how to apply the doctrines to their specific situations. It would be helpful as a new coach to see some examples on how to intentionally implement the ideas. On the other hand, it does leave room for creativity and for the coach to build on his or her own philosophy without being hand-fed a belief system. Applying these principles to a group of teenage volleyball players would require a lot of patience and trial and error sessions.

As someone who is just beginning to learn the theories behind positive youth development, this book as a whole provided good information to stir thoughts and emotions. While we discuss content further, the style of the book also held my attention. For up and coming leaders in this field, a book like this is very content and text heavy with very few pictures, graphs, or charts. To hold the attention of a younger generation, there will need to be more colors, pictures, and graphs. The book did provide websites and organizations should the reader want to pursue further interests, and this was appreciated, but could also be improved. One style throughout the book that proved helpful was the examples. While they were cheesy at

times, it helped the authors to get exactly what they meant across to the reader. Another style that was helpful was how each chapter was chunked into sections. This made it easy to follow along, stay on topic, and focus on one specific area. Overall, the book was an easy read, but could be changed slightly to attract the full attention of a young generation.

Immediately, the book taught me to separate what true competition and decompetition looks like. First, I will put into practice changing my verbiage to mainly positive words. Speaking words of life into the athletes will help to empower them and grow in the aspects they are good at. Second, I will correct behavior that will not lead athletes to competition. Redirecting behavior will help to remind the athletes why they are playing in the first place and how being a true competitor can help them reach their goals. Lastly, I will help my players set individual goals that they can achieve throughout the season. They will not need to rely on anyone else to reach them. Intentionally showing the team the positive differences between competition and decompetition will set the foundation for the season and remind the team why we play sports in the first place. The coach plays a huge role in the lives of the athletes and it is important to maintain the belief system in striving for true competition.

References:

Shields, D. L., & Bredemeier, B. L. (2009). *True Competition: A Guide to Pursuing Excellence in Sport and Society*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.