

HARVARD POLITICAL REVIEW

Sports vs. Education: A False Choice

By Erin Shortell

October 23, 2013

"Me and my four or five friends took academics very seriously," says 2010 Harvard graduate J.P. O'Connor, musing about his high school experience. At a school like Harvard, such a statement is not uncommon. However, beyond the intricately-wrought gates of Harvard and other such American universities, all too many American students are less concerned than they should be with academics. Even in high schools-especially in high schools-academics usually fall by the wayside, pushed to the periphery of students' consciousness by a culture that simply does not value education enough.

This pattern may be traced to a misguided belief in the mutual exclusivity of sports and academics. Few Americans would openly subscribe to such an over-simplification. However, a closer look at American culture reveals a tug-of-war between sports and school, in which school is losing sorely. "Me and my four or five friends took academics very seriously." J.P. finishes: "We were the exception."

Too Cool for School?

In popular culture, nerdiness equals funniness. Considering the accessibility of TV and other sources of mass culture, it makes sense that TV portrayals of academic intelligence would silently extend into the American psyche. Sheldon Cooper and his 187 IQ make *The Big Bang Theory* one of this fall's most popular TV shows. Brick Heck, the über-nerdy middle school student who reads novels with which Albert Einstein would have struggled, adds immeasurably to the comedy in *The Middle*. And who can resist laughing at *The Office*'s Dwight K. Schrute, the nerdiest paper salesman conceivable?

In addition to nerds, athletes are a mainstay of popular TV shows. The two groups are almost always distinct: nerdy athletes and athletic nerds are virtually nonexistent. Moreover, on shows

in which one character fits the nerd paradigm and another fits the athlete paradigm, the two characters sometimes blatantly clash.

In *The Middle*, Brick fights constantly with his brother, Axl, a high school football star with a college athletic scholarship awaiting him. In *The Office*, Dwight's geeky habits consistently provoke the tall, lean, former high school basketball player Jim Halpert, who in turn spends more time brainstorming pranks to play on Dwight than selling paper.

In the nerd-athlete clashes, the athletes usually win in the court of public opinion. Though occasionally dumbed down, they typically have redeeming qualities. Axl can be a loving big brother, while Jim is a doting boyfriend and charismatic salesman, when he actually works.

The nerds, however, tell another story. They are often so ridiculous that they cannot possibly be taken seriously. Instead, they become the laughing stocks of their respective shows, the best source of comic relief. For example, there is nothing endearing about Dwight K. Schrute. Even when comedy TV's nerds are shown to possess at least some personable qualities, they are still primarily a source of comic relief and a foil for the more popular athletes.

Of course, most people take popular culture with a grain of salt, enjoying the entertainment but not necessarily accepting every idea presented by it. Americans who watch shows like *The Middle* and *The Office* generally do not consciously agree with the stereotypes that these shows present. However, even without openly accepting such stereotypes, they may inadvertently internalize them. Merely by consuming popular culture, Americans may come to believe that people who succeed in school cannot succeed on a sports team, and that they should emulate the athletes instead of the nerds.

The American obsession with televised sports further exacerbates the problem. Over the seventeen days of the 2012 summer Olympics, NBC drew a daily average of 31 million American viewers. Total online streams reached 160 million in the U.S. alone, more than half of the U.S. population. Since CBS, ABC, and Fox also broadcast the Olympics, NBC's viewership represents only part of the total Olympic viewership. Meanwhile, nearly 110 million Americans, more than a third of the U.S. population, tuned in to the 2013 Super Bowl. Most likely, the upcoming 2014 Winter Olympics and the 2014 Super Bowl will attract equally impressive ratings. Wide viewership is not limited to big athletic events: even regular baseball and football games receive plenty of attention. After all, sports understandably make for fantastic TV.

The implications of America's enthusiasm for televised athletics extend far beyond the entertainment industry's domain. Children grow up to admire the hoop-swishing basketball players and the homerun-hitting baseball players that they see on TV, while they complain about school. Sports are a hobby; school is a job. Combined, pop culture and televised sports form a lethal cocktail. The result is a belief in the mutual exclusivity of athletics and academics, and, more worrisome, a clear tendency to prioritize athletics.

A Report Card to Keep off the Fridge

In the 2010-2011 school year, 7.6 million American high school students played sports. For the 2011-2012 school year, almost 4.5 million boys and about 3.2 million girls—a total of roughly 7.7 million—participated on high school sports teams. This increase from 2010 to 2012 is no outlier; athletic participation has increased for twenty-two consecutive years.

While sports participation has risen, American educational rankings in comparison to other countries across the world have troublingly continued to plummet. In the 2012 Summer Olympics, the U.S. walked away with more gold medals than any other country. Yet Americans accept not first but 31st in global math education, 23rd in global science education, and 14th in reading when compared to these global competitors.

It is more fun to sit back and relax with a cold beer on Super Bowl Sunday if one is not worried about the fact that only 77% of American students graduate from high school and that six other countries have higher graduation rates. It is easier to cheer for a favorite basketball team than to acknowledge that 24 countries currently outpace the U.S. rate of educational improvement. As long as this attitude persists, America's academic standings relative to other nations show little promise of rebounding. American children are increasingly falling behind as their international competitors in today's globalized world pull ahead.

Of course, the surge in high school athletic participation and the decline in high school educational success may not be directly related. Correlation does not ensure causation. However, given the modern American cultural environment, it is at least plausible that Americans prioritize athletics over education and in doing so hold themselves back academically.

Time Out

Contrary to cultural undercurrents, sports participation and academic success are not mutually exclusive. The education attainable through sports can be incredibly valuable in other arenas of life. As Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, told the HPR: "There is some good evidence to suggest that we culturally focus maybe too much on sports, [rather] than on academics. But, that said, we don't actually know that the values you learn [in sports] don't ultimately help with being successful in life." In an interview with the HPR, New York middle school teacher and softball and bowling coach Marni Torgersen listed the skills learned on sports teams that, in her experience, translate into success in the classroom: leadership, resilience, self-discipline, patience, persistence, time management, and self-esteem.

Sports participation is an incredible opportunity, as long as it is balanced with concern for academics. If Americans viewed sports not as an alternative but as a complement to education, then the two enterprises might excel simultaneously. Former Harvard Graduate School of Education professor Eleanor Duckworth believes that athletic participation can improve academic performance: "People can be very fascinated by academics and intrigued by athletics and good at both. They enhance each other."

It is not always easy to strike that balance. Giovanni Galvano went on to play soccer in Italy following his graduation last June from a New York high school. Discussing the challenges of

balancing school and soccer, the 18-year-old Galvano says, "When work gets heavy with soccer it's easy to have work in class become insufficient and vice versa, but that could be avoided. It then becomes a time management challenge." Although Galvano was extremely passionate about soccer and knew that he would pursue athletics after high school, he challenged himself academically by taking college-level courses.

Obviously, people can have multiple talents, and deciding which talent to pursue beyond high school rests with each individual. Yet, as Galvano exemplifies, having one's heart set on a sport does not preclude nurturing one's other potential talents as well. People like Galvano need not be exceptions; they should be the norm. Athletic success and academic success are not incompatible; rather, they are intertwined.

Take, for example, our Harvard graduate J.P. O'Connor, who won countless distinctions in wrestling, including that of 2010 NCAA champion. Meanwhile, he excelled academically, completing a Harvard College degree in human evolutionary biology. "If you want to be an NCAA champion wrestler and a successful premed student, you can succeed in both of those ventures," J.P. told the HPR. "It's not this mutual exclusivity, it's not one or the other. It's 'be great in every aspect of your life.'"