

Athletics

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Morality Play**A U. of Idaho professor says college athletes are ethically impaired, but can be taught to think differently**

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Athens, Ga.

If sports are supposed to build character, recent evidence suggests that college athletics is falling down on the job. Consider this summer, during which at least 25 college athletes have made headlines for various off-field violations.

In June alone, Thomas Clayton, a Kansas State University running back, was convicted of misdemeanor battery after ramming his sports-utility vehicle into a university employee who was trying to place a wheel lock on the illegally parked car. The University of California quarterback Steve Levy reportedly threw a pint glass at a bouncer's face during a bar fight. Avery Atkins, a University of Florida cornerback, was arrested after police said he punched the mother of his child more than a dozen times. And Matthew Thomas, captain of Harvard University's football team, was arrested for allegedly breaking into his former girlfriend's dormitory room and assaulting her.

Together with highly publicized accounts of three Duke University men's lacrosse players arrested in March for allegedly raping a North Carolina Central University student paid to strip for their team, and allegations that dozens of college athletes posted sexually explicit hazing photos of themselves online, the incidents paint a fairly bleak picture of college sports.

In an effort to curb such reprehensible behavior, some athletics officials are intervening in unusual ways. A handful of top programs are spending tens of thousands of dollars a year trying to influence the way athletes make decisions. Some coaches argue that they have long been trying to impart moral values and teach young men and women the difference between right and wrong. If that is the case, why does it seem like so many athletes turn out badly?

Sharon K. Stoll believes she knows why — and she has developed a plan to tackle the problem. Ms. Stoll, a professor of physical education at the University of Idaho and the director of its Center for Ethical Theory and Honor in Competition and Sport, has been studying morality in sports since the 1980s.

During the past two decades, she has measured the moral-reasoning abilities of more than 70,000 college athletes, evaluating their written responses to various scenarios. Her research has found that, on the whole, athletes have significantly lower moral-reasoning skills than the general student population — and she says that is a direct result of the competitive sports environment.

"I always believed that, if athletics has a worth for education," she says, "then we should do something — an intervention — to help the moral reasoning of athletes."

Low Morals

In recent years, Ms. Stoll says, her measurements have shown a sharp decline in athletes' moral reasoning. Team-sport athletes perform worse than any others, with lacrosse players scoring the lowest, followed by ice hockey and football players (see article on Page A34). Players of individual sports like golf and tennis fare better — but still lower than nonathletes. And although female athletes score higher than men, their moral-reasoning abilities have also dropped; Ms. Stoll believes they could fall as low as men's scores within five years.

Athletes are worse at moral thinking for several reasons, Ms. Stoll says. From an early age, many elite players are trained to view their opponents as obstacles to overcome rather than honorable individuals. They also frequently develop a sense of entitlement, are not encouraged to think for themselves, and rarely face consequences for acting irresponsibly. While they may know right from wrong, they often believe they can get away with anything.

When privileged athletes have to pay for their mistakes, as Garret Bushong did this year, they sometimes do not handle it well. Mr. Bushong, a third-string Purdue University football player, pleaded guilty in January to operating a vehicle while he was under the influence of alcohol. Days later he wrote a letter to the student newspaper, *The Exponent*.

"Yeah, I got an OWI, so what!" he wrote. "It's over, and everyone knows about it. It's not like 300 other students on this campus haven't gotten one. If I am not mistaken, you guys go to Purdue, too, and I thought you would have a little more respect for your fellow classmates and the people who bring millions of dollars into this university."

"We run this place and if anyone begs to differ, I'll say what my good buddy [quarterback] Brandon Kirsch once said: 'You know where to find me, locker number three, so come and say what you need to say to my face.'"

What is Character?

Ms. Stoll believes she can help athletes overcome such boorish, self-centered behavior. She has developed a curriculum to teach players how to improve their moral reasoning — and in turn, she hopes, make better decisions off the field.

In the past few years, football programs at six institutions — Arizona State University, Iowa State University, the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, the University of Georgia, the University of Maryland at College Park, and Virginia Tech — have bought her course, paying \$25,000 for a series of morality lessons.

Called "Winning with Character," the course is designed to help players reflect about who they are and think about the influences that people around them can have on their lives, and to provide a forum to discuss how they make — and should make — decisions.

A 59-year-old female professor who specializes in the philosophy of sport might seem completely out of place inside some of the biggest football programs in the country. But Ms. Stoll, a former athlete and high-school coach, knows the turf.

In June she stood before several dozen college and high-school football coaches in a lecture hall at the University of Georgia, training them on how to run her program.

She opened with a simple question — what is character? — and ultimately described it this way: having a strong knowledge and awareness of other people, and learning to value and respect them.

Athletes, she said, grow up being told that they are special, and they rarely think beyond themselves. "Dr. Phil likes to say that teenagers are just greedy," she told the coaches, referring to the celebrity psychologist. "Athlete populations are even greedier — they're all me-focused."

Over the next several hours, Ms. Stoll, a tall woman with an easy smile, commanded the room with her knowledge of sports and ethics. She discussed several core moral principles, including justice and fair play, and coaxed the burly coaches into discussing what behaviors were consistent with those principles. Then she probed to find out how they would respond to hypothetical situations.

A surprising number of coaches admitted that they frequently bent rules and pushed the limits of what was right, often because of the pressure to win games. Even one high-school football coach from Louisiana — whom Ms. Stoll had pegged as the group's moral conscience because of his idealistic responses to certain questions — came clean. He described how he had once sent a player across the field to borrow a tee from the other team, indicating that he planned to attempt a point-after, but instead ran a trick play to win the game.

Ms. Stoll used the story to illustrate that coaches play an important role in shaping athletes' moral choices. "Players are always looking to coaches to see how strongly they feel about the rules," she told the group. "You affect these kids with everything you do."

Providing a Forum

Ms. Stoll's curriculum requires athletics officials to discuss hypothetical dilemmas with their players. In most programs, coaches teach the lessons themselves, usually a 20- to 30-minute class once a week during the academic year.

The classes encourage players to discuss a range of topics — including guns, gangs, drugs, date rape, and how to become responsible citizens. Athletes are also confronted with hypothetical moral dilemmas, such as the following: Say a coach teaches players to hold an opponent — a maneuver that is against the rules — but to do so in a way that referees are not likely to notice. Players are then asked to describe how that situation makes them feel.

Some of the best lessons come when coaches and players describe their personal experiences. At the University of Maryland last year, a football player with two children spoke to teammates about the consequences of casual sex. "That woke some people up," says Kevin Glover, Maryland's director of character education, an athletics-department position that was added recently.

In some sessions, coaches reveal details about themselves to help players feel more comfortable around them.

"On the field, all coaches do is bark and scream," Ms. Stoll says. "Athletes rarely get to sit down with coaches and talk about these issues — life struggles, and what's right, and morality."

Athletes are not always eager to take part. When Danny Verdun Wheeler, a starting senior linebacker at

the University of Georgia, heard that he had to attend character-education class when he arrived on campus as a freshman, he was skeptical.

"I thought, I'm not a rule breaker, I don't need this," he says. As a first-year student, he also felt overwhelmed by all the football and academic activities filling his schedule.

But a few weeks into the program, he changed his mind. During one class, a coach shared a story about his personal struggles with alcohol. The story had an immediate impact on the team.

"Once he told us about his problems, we kind of relaxed and felt like he's human too, he made mistakes," Mr. Verdun Wheeler says. "We knew if someone like coach and his status could get in trouble, we could, too."

The coach implored his players to curb their alcohol use, emphasizing that if they drove while under the influence of alcohol, or got arrested for underage drinking, they could be suspended for two to three games — or worse.

The lesson resonated with Mr. Verdun Wheeler. "Our second game this year is South Carolina," he says, referring to one of the program's biggest rivals. "No one wants to miss that."

Because of the coach's talk, he says, several players have cut back on their alcohol use in recent years, and one or two guys have even stopped drinking.

Mr. Verdun Wheeler says the lessons have also encouraged his teammates to talk openly off the field, sometimes weighing ethical situations: "I've seen some guys actually think before doing things — not just, 'I'm an athlete, I'm a superstar, I'm gonna do what I want.'"

A Lapse in Judgment

At one point in her own career as a coach, Ms. Stoll struggled with an ethical dilemma that still lingers with her. She was coaching high-school gymnastics, in the early 1970s, and one of her gymnasts had just completed a routine.

Her student noticed that the next gymnast, an opponent from another school who was much shorter than she, had not moved the springboard to adjust for her height — creating the potential for a dangerous accident.

"Coach," Ms. Stoll's student asked her, "shouldn't we tell her to adjust the springboard?"

"Get ready for your next routine," Ms. Stoll ordered.

A moment later, the misplaced springboard caused the opposing team's gymnast to slam into a vault, knocking the wind out of her.

Ms. Stoll says she has never forgiven herself for that lapse in judgment and says the incident led her to leave coaching and, later, to pursue graduate work in the philosophy of sport. It also motivated her to do more than come up with theories.

Today she is one of about 120 members of an international group of philosophers of sport, a small but growing field of scientific inquiry. Her hands-on approach puts her at odds with some colleagues, who

question how effective her curriculum is.

Some sport philosophers doubt that athletes can significantly improve their moral reasoning by thinking through hypothetical situations and applying ethical principles they have learned. Moral reasoning, they believe, is best instilled in children by adults who model and have them repeat proper behavior.

Ms. Stoll agrees that those conditions are ideal, but she has also seen college athletes' moral reasoning improve significantly when they are forced to think and talk about moral choices.

Athletics officials express few reservations about Ms. Stoll's work. A few complain that her program costs too much; Arizona State University dropped the curriculum last year in part because of its high price.

But officials there say they plan to bring it back. "It gives you a platform to discuss all kinds of important issues on a regular basis," says Jean Boyd, an associate athletics director at Arizona State. "It's much better than putting on a program one time."

Not every university sticks to the curriculum as strictly as Ms. Stoll would like. Some programs skip lessons or take weeks off when their teams need extra rest before big games.

And the lessons are not for everyone, Ms. Stoll says. "I believe in the essence of sport, that fair play exists, that there are certain standards you should strive for," she says. "Not everyone's going to buy into that. A lot of coaches believe they've got to do what they've got to do to win."

Not a Magic Bullet

At the University of Georgia, character training has provided numerous benefits, says head football coach Mark Richt. It helps coaches identify leaders early, unify classes, and pinpoint students who might need counseling or additional help to overcome problems.

Best of all, Mr. Richt says, the program allows athletes to voice their opinions, hear what their peers think, and talk through situations that might come up.

On paper, the curriculum seems to be working. The team just completed its fourth year in the program, and according to Ms. Stoll's measurements, players have made marked improvements in their moral reasoning over that time.

That is not to say that character education is a magic bullet. While Georgia's program is cleaner than many, three football players have been arrested in the past year on charges of driving under the influence, theft, and giving false information to police.

Still, Mr. Richt believes that the curriculum has helped right the path of many players. "Most of our guys are capable," he says. "It's just a matter of thinking right."

WHICH ATHLETES HAVE THE BEST — AND WORST — MORAL-REASONING SKILLS

In measurements of college athletes' moral reasoning, players of team sports — and in particular, team contact sports — fare significantly worse than those who play individual sports, according to Sharon K. Stoll, a sports ethicist from the University of Idaho.

She believes that is partly because team-sport athletes often do not make as many decisions during games. In basketball and football, for example, coaches call many of the plays from the sidelines.

Contrast that to, say, golf and tennis, where players are given greater responsibility. In golf, players must mark penalties on their scorecards for certain errors, and in tennis, athletes call their own lines.

When athletes are given more individual responsibility, Ms. Stoll says, they tend to have higher moral-reasoning ability and make better ethical decisions.

Athletes who play sports in which players are allowed to make contact have the lowest moral-reasoning skills, Ms. Stoll says. "When you're allowed to hit someone within the rules, you start to view your opponent as an object and not human," she says.

Contact sports also allow athletes more opportunities to break the rules, she says. For example, football players can hold an opponent's breastplate, or lacrosse players can jab a competitor with a stick.

Not surprisingly therefore, athletes who play lacrosse, ice hockey, and football score, on average, the lowest of all college athletes. Golfers and tennis players fare best.

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Section: Athletics

Volume 52, Issue 48, Page A32

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