

The Ethics of Coaching Sports: Moral, Social, and Legal Issues

By Robert L. Simon Ed. Westview Press, Boulder Co. 2013. Paper (ISBN: 978-0-8133-608-3) 312 pp.

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Robert Simon has assembled an interesting and provocative array of essays focused on ethics in coaching. He front ends the collection with thought provoking philosophical questions to consider as one navigates the various authors' writings. Along with Jan Boxill, Simon calls on us to consider the historical progression of sports and the evolutionary role of coaches as moral entities responsible to their athletes for more than skill instruction; indeed, the coach-athlete interpersonal relationship dynamic requires coaches to display a high level of ethical conduct. The book is organized effectively to take the reader through important facets of sports participation from multiple perspectives. Beginning with an exploration of philosophical underpinnings of the coach's role to lively applications of these philosophies in the competitive arena and concluding with important discussions of the legal underpinnings of coaching, Simon provides a coordinated collection of essays useful for novice through experienced coaches.

Heather Reid's exploration of virtue from Plato's perspective provides a strong rationale for the inclusion of sports in educational institutions; however, she is concerned about student athletes "spending their virtues on sports" rather than academics. She suggests that coaches are responsible for modeling and promoting the virtues of respect, moderation, courage, justice and wisdom—a tall order for anyone. Simon follows this essay by proposing a broad interpretation of sport and use of "internalism" as a philosophical framework in response to Kant's categorical imperative or use of more practical wisdom. His perspective is scrutinized by other authors in this collection and most closely by William Morgan, who suggests that removing social, cultural, or historical features of athletic participation from the discourse would be an error. His perspective on amateur athletics is well considered, and he raises the concern that too much strategizing and manipulation of the rules is detrimental to sports participation particularly at this level. At the conclusion of exploring the coaches' role, Hochstetler strongly advocates for development of a coaching philosophy based on Bugbee's work related to certainty. The take away message here is that coaches take risks, exhibit humility (flexibility), and must be attentive to the athletes with whom they work. These essays establish a framework through which the ensuing section on the ethics of competition is viewed.

In what is perhaps the strongest section of the essay collection, the authors explore ethical conduct in competitive situations arriving at sometimes surprising

conclusions. Russell proposes what are possibly the most controversial of conclusions, as he debunks the notion that coaches should ignore erroneous official calls if they are favorable to their team. He provides interesting counter arguments to the ideas of calls “evening out” and “innocent advantage” accruing to one side being acceptable. Instead he calls for self-officiating as a type of corrective justice. Kretchmar explores the coach’s moral obligation to play bench players out of duty rather than strategy particularly in youth sports. Playing experiences for young athletes he notes can promote lifelong physical activity. The important outcomes of sports participation particularly for youth are further highlighted in the final three essays in this section.

In a timely essay exploring gamesmanship in sports, Hamilton clarifies the difference between intensity and bullying. In 2012, a YouTube video of Mike Rice at Rutgers University received much attention and resulted in his being fired for abusing his players. Hamilton suggests that appropriate gamesmanship improves all participants rather than a select few and that bullying behavior serves to dehumanize sport. The Rice video is an example of dehumanizing coaching behavior. A further discussion of harmful practices from a neuro-ethical perspective is the subject of Fry’s essay. He provides an interesting comparison between the coaching styles of John Wooden and Bobby Knight relative to mind set, comparing a fixed (Knight) to a growth (Wooden) mentality. Fry posits that coaching behaviors may subtly alter an athlete’s brain particularly during adolescence. Following up on critiques of youth sports, Torres and Hager focus their attention on competition, suggesting that “a cult of excessive advantage seeking” exists in youth sports. Torres and Hager provide four powerful recommendations for improving the moral accountability of sport. The most important of these recommendations, from my perspective, is to promote the autonomy of the athlete in which they develop an authority over themselves. As the concluding chapter in the ethics of competition, Torres and Hager provide a vision of potential positive outcomes for sport participation—one coaches should embrace.

In the concluding section, three essays expand on the moral dimensions of legal compliance. Sport is governed by a variety of laws, some at the federal or state levels while others are at the governing body (NCAA) level. Laws are designed to make sport participation both fair and safe. Coaches and others reading this book must view this section as critically important because of its relevance to the welfare of athletes. An examination of Title IX presented by Nancy Hogshead-Makar is useful for its inclusion of legal guidelines contained in the law and also for her admonishment to coaches to advocate for gender equity, establish boundaries for romantic relationships and support those who file complaints regarding equity issues. Mitten provides an in-depth look at the concept of “foreseeable harm” as it has played out in a range of court cases involving negligence suits against coaches. Finally Davis explains the coach’s and athletes’ obligations to each other in recruitment scenarios. The competing pressures on the coach and athlete make the recruitment process fraught with perils. While institutions seek winning teams, athletes seek exposure and opportunities to advance to a professional level of play creating a perfect storm for abuse. Davis ensures that the reader understands the moral obligation of the coach due to the relationship aspect of recruitment and problematizes oral scholarship offer practices.

Overall the essay collection in this book provides a range of ways to think about the moral and ethical ramifications of coaching decisions and behaviors. Each chapter concludes with questions for review and discussion allowing the book to be used as a classroom tool for future coaches or as a way for current coaches to discuss the issues relevant to their current positions. The essays are well written and enable the reader to consider alternative perspectives in the pursuit of an ethical coaching practice.