



**Does sport
build
character? ▶**

◀ **D**r. Stuart Robbins, chair of the School of Physical Education at York University in North York, Ont., says that sport is inherently neither good nor bad. The positive and negative effects associated with sport do not result from participation but from the *nature* of the experience.

In the hands of the right people with the right attitudes, sport can be a positive, character-building experience. It provides one of the best opportunities for children to come in contact with rules and social values. It defines the need to get along well with others and be accepted as part of a team. It plays a prime role in promoting values such as tolerance, fairness, and responsibility.

With proper leadership, sport provides the opportunity for children to

- acquire an appreciation for an active lifestyle
- develop a positive self-image by mastering sport skills
- learn to work as part of a team
- develop social skills with other children and adults
- learn about managing success and disappointment
- learn respect for others.⁴

The idea that sport builds character comes from 19th-century Britain where many believed the playing fields were the training ground for the discipline necessary to produce leaders in adult life. Physical activity, they thought, was a social experience that powerfully influenced attitudes and values.

The key virtue the British tried to instill in young people through sport was a sense of fairness and justice. Following rules, respecting your opponent, not cheating, and learning how to be good winners and losers were considered by headmasters to be part of what it meant to be a good citizen. Their philosophy was not to play for external rewards like money or fame, because that would tend to make one act unfairly.⁵

The notion that sport builds character does not sit well with today's critics of competitive sport. The external pressures of high profits and high salaries have often led to the corruption of these ideals. Instead of building character, competitive sport, which values winning above all else, challenges this notion. The more important winning becomes, the more the rewards for fair play and other values are likely to be diminished.