

*Assessing the
Negative Aspects of
Interschool Sports*

By William G. White, Jr.

Hot Boudin, Cold Cous- Cous

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Recently I laughed as a New Orleans coed illustrated linguistic differences that separate north and south Louisiana. She asked me to complete the last two lines of a Louisiana State University football cheer that begins, "Hot boudin, Cold cous-cous." While I knew that boudin (bōō'dan) was highly seasoned Cajun sausage and that cous-cous (cōōsh-cōōsh) was a cross between cornbread and cornmeal mush, I had no idea that the last two lines were "Come on Tigers, Push (Pōōsh) push push!"

While many institutions are known best for their athletic teams, the *absence* of interschool sport has been a distinctive feature of Adventist schools for more than a century. We have wanted them to be known for their spiritual and academic traits, not for their competitive sports. However, some in the Adventist educational system feel that distinctive feature is no longer advantageous; officially sponsored or tolerated interschool sport programs have appeared on a number of campuses. The General Conference will discuss this matter at its Annual Council in Nairobi in October 1988.

Beginnings of Intercollegiate Sport

The period from the Civil War to World War I witnessed many changes in the American college. Many students lost sight of serious and intellectual goals as their interests became increasingly materialistic and anti-intellectual. Faculties relaxed

paternalistic control of students but failed to substitute positive guidance for student activities, so young people improvised their own extracurricular activities that included clubs, fraternities, publications, and intercollegiate athletics.

The year 1880 is considered the dividing line between the informal period of college athletics and the rise of highly organized intercollegiate athletics, which by the turn of the century had become highly commercialized, overemphasizing winning and promoting a false set of values.¹

The Adventist Experience

During this period of fundamental change Adventist higher education was born. By the 1890s the athletic revolution that had swept American colleges was catching on at Battle Creek College where reduced work opportunities provided time for sports.

Young men played seasonal intramural ballgames, as well as football against teams from the community, the public high school, and occasionally other colleges. The games sometimes proved a bit too exciting. Tempers flared at a football game in 1893 between American and British teams that the local newspaper described as the "Great International Football Game." A student sent a copy of the paper to his parents in Australia, who passed it on to Ellen White. She was distressed that such an item could originate from an Adventist college.

Writing to Battle Creek College President W. W. Prescott, she said,

This is no time to foster pleasure loving by providing the youth...with facilities for the playing of games which are a snare to all who engage in them...They act as if the school were a place where they were to perfect themselves in sports, as if this was an important branch of their education...This is all wrong.

Amusement that serves as exercise and recreation is not to be discarded; nevertheless it must be kept strictly within bounds.

A great mistake has been made in following the world's plans and ideas in recreation in indulgence and pleasure loving.²

Her letter advised against playing "match games of football," which she subsequently explained did not exclude all games, only those that resulted in a massing of strength against strength so that the excitement of participants would be raised to an unnaturally high pitch.

Prescott immediately presented the matter to faculty and students, who decided to cancel the games between college teams and those from the community or other colleges. Prescott wrote Mrs. White, "Our recreation will be planned in such a way as to give the physical benefit desired without arousing up a spirit of contest, and without having it on the basis of

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athletic sports."³

Ellen White went on to pen a number of counsels regarding athletics. While advocating vigorous exercise for students, she expressed concern about the distracting influence of sport both on their academic progress and preparation for life.⁴ She criticized the excitement and emotions associated with athletics and warned that a consuming interest in athletic games crowded Christ out of students' minds.⁵

Mrs. White clearly felt manual labor was superior to excessive involvement with games⁶ and bemoaned the neglect of useful labor and the substitution of games of amusement on Adventist campuses.⁷ Even her beloved Avondale School had to be admonished in 1900 that some of the games and sports in which students participated were "frivolous, rude, and grotesque."⁸

As we examine Ellen White's comments regarding athletics and sports to discover underlying principles or philosophy, we find that she accepted, even encouraged, appropriate recreational activities, and did not exclude organized intramural team sports. But there also seems to be a clear message that interschool sport is inappropriate because it produces rivalries that are carried to extremes, competition that becomes too intense, and emotions that run too high. It distracts the attention of students from the real purposes for which they are attending school.

The brief Battle Creek experiment with interschool sport ended abruptly. It provided sufficient evidence to convince Adventist schools that they were better off without such programs, a conviction that remained unchallenged for nearly a century.

Five Areas of Concern

A review of the literature suggests five basic areas of concern⁹ which, when examined, yield ample evidence to support the church's traditional position of excluding interschool sports from Adventist campuses.

1. *Interschool sport distracts the attention of athletes and other students from academic activities.* Despite claims to the contrary, research has not shown that athletic participation actually produces positive academic experiences¹⁰ or that the motivation, hard work, and efficiency required in sports spill over into students' academic work.¹¹ Athletic eligibility requirements have been shown to motivate only a few marginally eligible students but to have little effect on others.¹²

Although some have argued that sport participation provides opportunities for success that lead to positive self-concepts necessary for academic success, sport also provides abundant opportunities for feel-

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ings of failure.¹³ Beisser found that "even successful athletes have self-esteem problems."¹⁴ More alarming is the finding that "a strong negative relationship exists between athletic achievement and intellectual self-concept."¹⁵ Researchers suggest that physical prowess is so important in the status hierarchies of young people "that it actually interferes with academic commitments necessary to build a strong intellectual self-concept."¹⁶

The most likely explanation for the slightly higher grades and educational goals of athletes is that interscholastic sport, like other extracurricular activities, tends to attract self-confident students with above-average abilities and positive attitudes about school. It is usually accompanied by prestige, preferential treatment, and academic support and encouragement by important persons.¹⁷

Whatever positive benefits interscholastic sport provides, its distracting influence has a negative impact not only on participants but also on nonparticipants. Athletic-related absenteeism due to travel or infringement of athletics on academic time, physical exhaustion of players following practices and games, and the emotionalism that tends to accompany interschool sport disrupt the academic process and can be an unsettling influence on the school. Win-loss records of athletic teams often eclipse legitimate educational concerns.

There has been no definitive research

indicating any positive impact of intercollegiate sport on student athletes' grades. There is, however, ample evidence of significant role conflict experienced by students on athletic scholarships who find it difficult to meet both athletic and academic expectations successfully. News media have documented the fact that most coaches are much more concerned about player eligibility than about learning and graduation. The demands of athletic scholarships and the appeal of lavish perks that often accompany them are so great that few college athletes put as much emphasis on academics as on sports.¹⁸

Undesirable Attitudes

2. *Interschool sport, rather than building character and preparing students for success in life, actually perpetuates dependence and immaturity and focuses attention on a set of values that are no longer appropriate in the context of contemporary society and not in harmony with the Adventist philosophy of education and life.*

One still hears the old axiom "sport builds character," but former athletes like Merlin Olsen and Chris Evert-Lloyd and current research findings dispute it.¹⁹ Dorcas Susan Butt, a clinical psychologist and former number-one ranked Canadian tennis player, reported in *Psychology of Sport* that sport is not the way to build character.²⁰ A few years ago a group of researchers concluded that "There is little, if any valid evidence... that involvement in sport teaches or results in... character building, moral development, ... good citizenship, or certain valued personality traits."²¹ Coakley reported in 1986 that there are "no studies that would lead [this conclusion] to be revised."²²

Competition

Competition is too complex to be thoroughly discussed here, but athletically it can be defined as "a process through which success is measured by directly comparing the achievements of those who are performing the same physical activities under standardized conditions and rules."²³ Competition is also a reward structure that sets the rules by which rewards are received and outlines the relationships between participants in a given situation. Rewards held out to competing participants are mutually exclusive. Achievement means overcoming others; success depends on the failure of opponents.

Competition can also be thought of as a personal orientation that is incompatible with cooperative or individualistic orientations. Competitive people judge goal achievement by demonstrating

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O F I N T E R E S T O T E A C H E R S

Students Learn to Write— for Businesses

• “Local businesses were invited to sponsor individual students as writers of advertising in Jasper County, GA., with the cooperation of the local newspaper, the *Monticello News*. During a ‘Writing Festival Week,’ businesspeople visit classrooms to meet students, participate in writing exercises and tell young writers about their businesses. The youngsters took notes, and then developed ads for the participating businesses. Teachers took the finished ads to the businesses and collected \$20 each to pay for placing the ads in a special section in the newspaper. More than 40 businesses and students participated. After covering its costs for printing, the newspaper refunded \$120 to the schools to continue the project. Curriculum Director Mary Lou Jordan noted that the program was an application of the philosophy that ‘the

way to teach writing is to let the students write.’”—*It Starts in the Classroom*, September 1984.

Hospital Adopts School

• “When a school is ‘adopted’ by a hospital, there are some side benefits. When Riverside Hospital joined with Warwick High School in Newport News, VA, in a cooperative effort to boost the instructional program, it enabled the school to tap into the hospital’s diverse staff. Activities include student visits to study computer applications, guest speakers on alcohol and drug abuse, and a Health Fair that includes blood typing, blood pressure readings and body fat measurements. All that plus a special bonus: a stress clinic for teachers.”—*It Starts in the Classroom*, March 1985. □

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superiority over others rather than by working with them. A cooperatively oriented person defines rewards in an activity in a way that makes them available to everyone and sees goal achievement as maximizing rewards for all participants through coordinated action. Individualistically oriented persons see rewards as unrelated to the behavior of other participants and goal achievement as how well one’s behavior measures up to standards based on personal criteria.

While many believe that success in life demands a competitive orientation, a person who combines a strong desire for achievement with a cooperative or individualistic orientation is just as likely to be successful.²⁴ Life is really more cooperative than competitive. Sport sociologist George Sage argues that sport provides a poor preparation for life. The widespread incidence of deliberate rule breaking may encourage and reinforce attitudes, values, and behaviors that flout society’s norms.²⁵ Success achieved through cooperative or individualistic methods is certainly more in harmony with the Adventist view of life and the needs of the world in which we live.

Competition usually leads to conformity among competitors and stifles crea-

tivity. Losers may subsequently face life with the disadvantage of a poor self-image.²⁶ Competitive relationships also generate hostility among those involved. However, this can be avoided if participants share a common goal that supercedes that of competitive success.²⁷

Although competition is an inherent part of sport, opportunities for combining competitive with cooperative and individualistic reward structures do exist. For example, a sport activity can be structured so that competitive outcome is not the only basis for defining success or failure. Recognition or rewards can be given to participants for personal achievement irrespective of winning or losing. This can be accomplished when participants are primarily interested in enjoying a group experience or developing personal skills. While not eliminating competition, this method redefines it through the use of cooperative and individualistic orientations.²⁸ It is impossible to design such a setting for interschool sport, but it can work in an intramural program.

An Undemocratic Program

3. *Interschool sport is elitist by nature.* Only a few can participate while the majority of students are relegated to the role of spectators. Intercollegiate athletics frequently monopolize physical education personnel, resources, and facilities that could be used by all students in physical education, recreation, and intramural sport programs. One of the best things about intramurals is their democratic

nature; all students can participate and enjoy wholesome recreation. As an added bonus, intramurals are relatively inexpensive and safe for participants.

Sports and School Spirit

4. *Despite proponents’ claims, interschool sport does not really generate wholesome school spirit and unity.* In reality, it tends to create among students a superficial, transitory spirit that subverts the educational goals and objectives of the school. Interschool sport undeniably generates spirit, but is it really the best spirit for a school, particularly an Adventist school? Does the spirit generated by interschool sport really have any relationship to the quality of the rest of the school program? Research suggests that it does not.²⁹

Interschool sport is not the only, nor the best way to promote school spirit. English sport sociologist Anita White said,

[T]here are other equally effective mechanisms for generating and maintaining a corporate identity, for example, community aid programs, fundraising activities for school projects or charitable causes. Any activity in which individuals from a school corporately engage, representing the school as a unit, which is recognized as worthwhile by significant others inside and outside the school, can fulfill this integrative function. Sport is not the only integrating force, and other activities which involve more genuine participation [than cheering a sport team] may be equally if not more worthwhile.³⁰

The importance of athletic achievement in the social organization of high

schools with interscholastic sport programs has been well documented by a number of studies.³² Such programs affect not only the status structures of high school students but also the daily operation of the school. The effect is disruptive to the educational program and may even result in less-effective school leadership, since male coaches are often viewed as good educators and candidates for administrative positions.³²

Funding Problems

5. *Interscholastic athletic programs deprive educational programs of resources, facilities, and staff and could seriously affect the support of the Adventist community for its schools.*

The actual cost of interschool athletic programs is difficult to assess because public and private schools have different sources of income. For church-related schools and colleges, funding sources are limited to tuition, fees, endowments, denominational support, gifts, and gate receipts.

The costs of an athletic program include the expense of erecting or preparing buildings, fields, and tracks, upkeep, coaching salaries, equipment, travel, insurance, substitute teacher salaries (at the high school level), salaries of athletic and academic support personnel (at the college level), and scholarships. The belief that intercollegiate athletic programs can be self-supporting is a myth; they are, on the average, "excessively deficit producing."³³ Cheerleaders, drill teams, marching bands, and pep squads can add significantly to the total cost.

Money consumed by athletic programs deprives academic and other legitimate educational programs of needed resources, facilities, and personnel. In many institutions adequate physical education and recreational facilities are sacrificed for athletic facilities, and academic personnel are sacrificed to employ coaches and their staffs.

While college coaches tend to be full-time, nonteaching personnel, high school coaches are frequently full-time teachers who receive additional salary for coaching responsibilities. Ben Harris decries

the excessive number of [high school] coaches required to administer the . . . athletic programs who must also teach classes. This situation can, and usually does, result in problems. Finding a person who is qualified to coach girls' volleyball and also teach general science can present problems. This situation tends to "load" a school with persons who place most of their energies and time on the coaching responsibilities of the job rather than on . . . teaching.³⁴

The financial stability of most Adventist colleges and secondary schools is a critical concern to the church. Few parents or students would be willing to pay addi-

tional tuition and fees to support an interschool athletic program. Only a handful of students would be recruited or lost because of the presence or lack of interschool sports. And it is unlikely that the church would fund such activities. In fact, the presence of such programs on Adventist campuses could have a negative impact on levels of support.

Adventist schools have provided wholesome recreation for their students for nearly a century. These intramural programs reduce the competitive aspects of sport, are relatively inexpensive to operate, and are reasonably safe. Nor do they disrupt the academic program.

It seems strange that at a time when escalating costs and other concerns are causing many public, private, and church-related institutions to eliminate such programs, some in our church would have us consider reversing our historic position opposing interschool athletics. □

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FAMILY FERVOR

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piece of the New Christian Right, assails the moral relativism of the nation and indicts family brokenness as one of its