

Promoting Children's Development through the Ministry of Coach Education
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The primary justification for organized youth sports has been—and remains to this day—the development of children's character (Power & Sheehan, 2014). Yet there is no guarantee that simply playing a sport will help a young athlete to become a better person. Research on youth sports indicates that coaches play a critical role in determining whether, in fact, athletes' sport experience builds character (Shields, Bredemeier, & Power, 2001). Research also shows that education significantly improves the quality of coaches' relationships with their athletes and team's motivational climate (e.g., Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2007). Recently, we completed the first study to demonstrate that youth sport coaches can be prepared to be effective character educators. Using the Play Like a Champion Today coach education program that we developed at the University of Notre Dame, we taught coaches how to use team meetings to build moral communities that fostered young athletes' sense of social responsibility.

The Play Like a Champion approach draws heavily on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2007), as well as moral development research (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989; Power & Power, 2012). It focuses on developing athletes' motivation, commitment to justice and care, as well as autonomy and responsibility. The Play Like a Champion youth sports clinic involves coaches in an examination of the following: 1) their role as a character educator (and youth minister in Catholic sponsored programs), 2) the stages of moral development in children, 3) the basics of facilitating moral discussions (Power & Sheehan, 2012a), and 4) principles of building teams as moral communities. Both youth and high school coaches report that the Play Like a Champion clinics have led them to become more committed to teaching moral values, holding moral discussions, and giving athletes opportunities to make decisions (Power & Sheehan, 2012).

The Play Like a Champion clinics help children to appreciate what it means to belong to a group that cares for them. When on a team that is a community, children discover that they are "not alone." The attachment to a community meets deep human longing to belong and to unite with others around a shared purpose. It is in community that they experience the truth of the saying "that in giving to each other, we receive." It is in community that they discover that whatever happens to one, happens to us all. Being a part of a whole helps players take an interest in the common good and to accept the discipline that comes with membership in a group. The willingness to abide by shared norms, which include formal rules and informal expectations, distinguishes a moral community from a group whose experience of unity is limited to a sense of camaraderie or fleeting sense of togetherness after a great win (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Coaches need to harness the power and intensity of team experiences in sports to transform their teams into true moral communities.

To date, over 40,000 coaches from over 1,000 sports organizations worldwide have participated in Play Like a Champion clinics. Our evaluative research shows 90% of these coaches have embraced the ideals and practices that make up the Play Like a Champion approach. Perhaps most impressively, as a result of their participation, almost all of those coaching in Catholic sponsored sports programs at the high school and youth sport level have come to regard themselves as youth ministers called to serve every child on their teams in the name of Christ. Coach-ministers are educated to encourage faith formation and spiritual development through the sport experience. Through deliberate methods these coaches are engaging in the Church's mission of evangelization. While developing high-performance athletes, they are also building athletes of moral character, prepared for engaged discipleship off the field and in our world.