

# 1 What Is the True Athlete Philosophy and Why Is It Important?

## **The Burning Platform for Drastic Change in Sport**

*I saw first-hand the power of our example exerted on the hearts and minds of people around the world. But with that came a corollary lesson: an awareness of what we risked when our actions failed to live up to our image and our ideals, the anger and resentment this could breed, the damage that was done.*

— BARACK OBAMA, A PROMISED LAND

Sport *could* be an unequivocally positive force for physical and mental health, creating moments of flow and exhilaration and instilling a joy of life-long learning. It *could* benefit communities and society in general. It *could* bridge social divides and bring people from every walk of life together under a universal language. It *could* provide inspirational role models for everyone. The Olympic Charter points emphatically to this vision for sport:

*Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of*

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*good example, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.*

However, the reality looks depressingly different.

Sport at all levels is rife with unwanted and destructive side-effects, including stress, anxiety, depression, burn-out, bullying, discrimination and corruption, to name just a few. Sport has not come close to delivering on its potential for making the world a better place, neither for those involved nor for society as a whole. From grassroots all the way up to the Olympic and Paralympic level, there are valid concerns with how sport is organised and how athletes are trained and treated.

Jules Boykoff, a former US national soccer player, professor of political science at Pacific University and author of *Power Games: A Political History of the Olympics*, puts it starkly:

*In recent years, elite sport has morphed into a vortex of corruption, a regime of enrichment for the already affluent. All too often, human rights and fairness take a backseat to exploitation and inequity. Healthy competition has become hyper-competition. Rosy legacies for sports mega-events have become cagey ways for the rich to pad their bank accounts. Trickle-up economics has colonized the sports world. We can – and must – do better.*

The experience of sport at the individual level is often strewn with dispiriting or damaging moments and events. Sport is de-prioritised by the education system, leading to limited options, poor facilities and sub-standard teacher training and support. Increasingly serious competition at youth levels incentivises the treatment and training of children as if they were small adults. This sporting landscape has led to a truly worrying trend of children dropping out of sport in their early teens, never to start again. According to the National Alliance

for Youth Sport, of the 40 million children who participate in organised sport in the United States, 70 per cent will drop out by the time they turn 13. As part of the same survey the most common reason given by kids giving up is ‘it’s just not fun anymore’. In the UK, in 2019, more than half of children and young people were not getting the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity per day, according to Sport England’s *Active Lives Children and Young People Survey*.

Considering the untold benefits – physical, mental, social, societal – that are potentially on offer from a lifetime engagement in sport, we should be desperately looking for ways to ensure that sport stays fun throughout children’s formative years and beyond. What constitutes ‘fun’ changes as a person gets older, but we have all the knowledge we need of how to motivate and inspire people of different ages. One such example of our current understanding in this area is Self-Determination Theory, the brainchild of psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, which proposes that an individual’s motivation is highest when the conditions support their experience of competence, autonomy and sense of connection to others. It is a travesty that our sport and education systems are lagging so far behind, providing the polar opposite experiences to participants.

At the elite level, there is a growing body of evidence of the harmful cultures that masquerade as high-performance environments, with national and international organisations around the globe having been shown to foster or cover up the physical, psychological, emotional or sexual abuse of athletes. The scandals that were unveiled in both the United States and Great Britain (GB) Gymnastics federations – with streams of current and former athletes speaking out about the mental, physical and sexual abuse they suffered at the hands of coaches and officials, abuse which was often then dismissed or covered

up by those in positions of power – being just two of a long line of abhorrent revelations. A lawsuit filed by 17 former gymnasts in the UK in 2021 claimed widespread physical and mental abuse by British Gymnastics coaches on athletes as young as six years old in a system which prioritised ‘podiums over people’, according to 2012 Olympian Jennifer Pinches, who spearheaded the complaint. A letter sent before legal action to the governing body alleged, ‘British Gymnastics implemented a model of suspended pre-pubescence leading to generations of girls with eating disorders, body image issues, and deliberately stunted physical development’. Simultaneously in 2021 an independent report criticised the Swiss Gymnastics Federation as having a ‘totally dysfunctional high-level sports concept’ following accusations of systemic humiliation and abuse of their rhythmic gymnasts.

Even the less systematic versions of these toxic high-performance cultures still uphold dehumanising systems which value results over the mental and physical health of the people within the system. In 2020, Choi Suk-hyeon, a 22-year-old South Korean triathlete, took her own life after her complaints of enduring years of physical and mental abuse by coaching staff were ignored by the sporting authorities. In her journal, Suk-hyeon wrote of how she ‘shed tears every day’ and that she would ‘rather die’ after repeatedly being ‘beaten like a dog’.

Public trust in the integrity of sport at all levels is waning, with trust in the value of elite sport being severely tested by dismaying stories and unethical behaviours. In 2017 a survey of 2,000 British people found that over a third of them declared that their trust in the sporting industry had declined over the previous 12 months, while two-thirds believed that there is a ‘widespread problem of ethics in sporting bodies’.

Tales of corruption and unethical behaviour within the highest levels of sports administration are so prevalent as to be

almost expected. There are enough examples to fill a book on their own, so let it suffice to mention the most brazen of all followed by the most recent at the time of writing.

The systematic and state-sponsored doping regime of Russian athletes culminated at the Sochi 2018 Winter Olympics. The Russian government had orchestrated a method to switch out the urine samples of known doped athletes for clean substitute urine – via a hole in the doping test lab, no less. The whole, incredible story is captivatingly told in the award-winning documentary *Icarus* by Brian Fogel. Despite overwhelming evidence, including the detailed testimony of the scientist who masterminded the whole debacle, the Russian government is yet to comply with the demand of the World Anti-Doping Association and admit their guilt.

In 2021 an External Review Commission (ERC) into allegations about the International Biathlon Union (IBU) uncovered ‘Evidence of systematic corruption and unethical conduct for a decade’. After a two-year investigation, the ERC released a report detailing that the governing body’s former president Anders Besseberg had ‘no regard for ethical values and no real interest in protecting the sport from cheating’. The report followed criminal investigations into doping, fraud and corruption against Besseberg and IBU’s Secretary General, Nicole Resch, and labelled Besseberg’s commitment to clean sport as a ‘charade’, accusing him and his allies of having done ‘the absolute minimum that was necessary to preserve a veneer of respectability for the sport’.

There have recently been high-profile cases involving poor athlete physical or mental health stemming from their commodification. In 2017 the *Journals of the American Medical Association Network (JAMA)* studied the autopsied brains of 202 American football players who played at different levels of the game. Disturbingly they diagnosed nearly 90 per cent

of the brains with chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a progressive and fatal brain disease which is associated with repeated concussions and blows to the head and is linked to dementia. They also found that the longer the person had played football, the more severe the damage, with 99 per cent of NFL players having CTE. For years the NFL denied any risk posed to the players by these types of injuries, calling concussions 'minor injuries' and stating that there were no long-term health risks associated with them. At the highest level of Britain's equivalent sport, rugby, it has been exposed just how many of the professional players are suffering from mental health issues. The Rugby Players Association (RPA) conducted an anonymous survey in 2018 in which they discovered that 62 per cent of players suffered from some form of mental illness within two years of retiring and that 10 per cent of current players phone the RPA's hotline every year to discuss mental health concerns.

Sports mega-events provide a consistent source of unethical behaviour and objectionable practices. Immense costs and excessive demands are heaped on the host communities, who receive little to none of the promised benefits in return. To prepare for the 2022 Football World Cup in Qatar, 2 million migrant workers have been involved in building the necessary infrastructure. Amnesty International has shown that Qatar's system of sponsorship-based employment traps migrant workers in a cycle of abuse. Workers are prevented from changing jobs or leaving the country by their employers. Late and non-payment of wages, barriers to obtaining justice when rights are violated and the failure to enforce labour laws and penalise employers who abuse their workers are just some of the unethical features of this system.

The 2016 Rio Olympics was plagued with accusations of unethical actions. The illegal displacement of residents, an

uptick in police and army violence, the corrupt transfer of public resources into private hands and renegeing on environmental promises were among the violations compiled by Children Win in a dossier titled 'Rio 2016 Olympics: The Exclusion Games'. The cost of hosting the Rio Olympics was another scandal, ending up costing just over \$13 billion, over a third more than the original budget, at a time of national economic crisis in Brazil. Similar human rights violations and economic concerns have been raised in conjunction with previous Games in Athens, Beijing and London.

This gloomy landscape points to the fact that sport has lost track of its true meaning and lost touch with its core, humanitarian values. Sportsmanship, fair-play and honour have been demoted in importance, both on the field of play and at the organisational level, by a win-at-all-cost attitude. As an athlete, you may experience this through alarmingly packed schedules, the inappropriate behaviour of hyper-competitive parents, stressful or toxic performance environments, a lack of emotional support or perhaps through your own doubts about the integrity of the system you are dedicating your life to.

The driving force is often a cynical business-model approach where the bottom line is results (which can be translated into financial gain), and we have been quick to justify or excuse almost any means to that end. The old excuse 'but they won' should no longer justify an increasingly damaging system.

We must find a way through the fog to bring sport closer to that vision depicted in the Olympic charter. With the joy of participation and deep engagement in physical endeavour, the out-of-body experiences that are accessible to all, the magical, historic moments that inspire those that witness them and can connect us to our parents and their parents, sport can transcend time and culture to bring us closer together and further as a species. But it is clear that we must take active steps to move in

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this transformative direction and away from the current, bleak trajectory. In the words of Canadian Olympic rower-turned-coach and business consultant Jason Dorland:

*Sport can choose to maintain the status quo that says competition is a battlefield where combatants use any means possible to destroy one another in the pursuit of winning. Or, it can choose something more meaningful. Therein lies the truest opportunity for sport.*

What is needed is an approach that journeys deeper than the ego-driven realm of wins, losses, medals and the superiority of nations. We need a unified, guiding philosophy that puts athletes, coaches, teams and all those that support them back in touch with the core benefits and true purpose of sport.

This guiding philosophy would light the way for athletes to excel at their sport *and also* become exemplary family members, friends and citizens who have trained mind and body to better nourish their social circle and contribute to their community and ultimately to society as a whole.

Now imagine a world of these *True Athletes*:

- Showing that it is possible to live a life of purpose, separate from material gains
- Who role model positive human connection even while engaged in fierce competition
- Who take care of themselves and the world around them, and create an ongoing ripple effect on their families, friends and community at large

Imagine how society could benefit from generations of these more rounded, socially conscientious and compassionate citizens and role models.



*What Is the True Athlete Philosophy?*

That is a vision which shows how sport could live closer to its ideals. It is also a vision shared by many top athletes who are dismayed to see the potential of sport diminished in front of their eyes. Michael Bennett, the NFL defensive linesman who won the Superbowl with the Seattle Seahawks, puts it vividly:

*The essence of sport is beautiful. People coming together to achieve a goal regardless of their color, race or religion. Everything about that sounds beautiful. It sounds like a healthy marriage. It sounds like commitment. It sounds like dedication. It sounds like Passion. It sounds like everything worth rising out of bed for. But it gets destroyed by society, by valuing wealth over play; by professionalizing sports for our kids, which sets them against each other even when they are on the same team; by having locker rooms where people can't be themselves; by caring more about winning than the process of how you get there; the glorification of those kinds of values is what makes sport toxic. I believe that sport has a role in changing society, from youth leagues to the pros.*