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“The First Tee and Schools: Working to Build Character Education”

Chairman McKeon and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak about a topic for which I have much passion—the unique social context of sport in developing character and other forms of social development. In addition, I will discuss The First Tee as an example of a youth development program that is having a positive impact on instilling character and teaching important life skills and values to participants. Today my presentation will include information stemming from my own as well as others’ research on character development through sport as well as specific findings from our first year of research evaluating the effectiveness of The First Tee educational programs on positive youth development. First I would like to start with some words on the context of youth sport participation in our country.

Context of Youth Sport Participation

Sport participation is a ubiquitous phenomenon among children and adolescents in American society. An estimated 30 million youths between the ages of 5 and 18 years engage in community-based or agency-sponsored sports (e.g., The First Tee, Little League baseball, U.S. Olympic Development programs, YMCA/YWCA, Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs), ranging from individual sports such as golf and swimming to team sports such as baseball and basketball (Weiss & Hayashi, 1996). Another 7 million adolescents compete in organized school sports (National Federation of State High School Associations, 2003).

Girls and boys participate in sport for a multitude of reasons, most notably to learn and improve skills, to be with and make friends, to feel part of a group, and to have fun (Weiss & Williams, 2004). When caring and competent adults supervise youth activities, children experience positive feelings that translate to a desire to continue participation and opportunities to reap the benefits afforded by involvement in such activities.

A substantial body of knowledge documents the potential benefits of athletic participation. Some of these benefits include self-esteem, social relationships, intrinsic motivation, self-regulation skills, and character development (Reeve & Weiss, 2006; Weiss, 1993; Weiss & Smith, 2002). Studies based in school settings have demonstrated positive effects of sport participation on academic achievement, development of peer networks, character development, and identity formation (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Gibbons, Ebbeck, & Weiss, 1995; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003). Moreover, participation in structured extracurricular activities has been associated with lower dropout rates, lower antisocial behaviors, and higher educational status (Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003). Thus, youth involvement in sport and physical activity affords many potential social, psychological, and behavioral outcomes.

It is important to note, however, that improvements in self-confidence, character, and interpersonal skills, among other characteristics, are not automatic consequences of sport involvement. The literature on risk prevention and resiliency demonstrates that effective youth development programs are those that emphasize personal skill development (e.g., self-regulation, social responsibility), positive adult leadership styles and behaviors, and a climate focused upon learning and mastery (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002; Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005). Educators and parents are responsible for ensuring that

youth glean positive experiences from their activity participation. To do so means that sport and life skills need to be taught deliberately and systematically.

Character Development through Sport Participation

Character development is without doubt one of the most hotly debated topics regarding the benefits and costs of sport involvement. On the one hand, educators and parents have long attested that participation in sport can teach children values such as honesty, respect, empathy, responsibility, cooperation, and fair play. On the other hand, sport critics implore that sport develops characters, not character, by lowering the bar for what behaviors are deemed acceptable during the course of play (Weiss & Smith, 2002). The bottom line is that sport has the potential to build character *or* characters, depending on the quality of adult leadership and the types of experiences afforded children in the competitive environment.

Children define character consistent with behavioral norms and conventions within one's society (e.g., follow the rules, take turns, be honest) as well as concerns about the physical and psychological well-being of others (e.g., don't make fun of others, don't hurt others physically, show respect for others). Children understand the gist of "the golden rule" (i.e., treat others the way you would want to be treated) and what it means to "do the right thing" when it comes to defining sportsmanship and fair play (Weiss & Smith, 2002). Children's definitions are very much in line with the two most prevalent theories of moral development—social learning and structural developmental approaches—that have guided inquiry on sport and character development. This is not surprising given moral psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's observation of "the child as a moral philosopher," referring to children's use of their social experiences to form judgments about what is just, fair, and right.

According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), character is defined as prosocial behaviors that are consistent with societal norms, such as honesty, respect, and helping. Children learn these behaviors through observing high status models (e.g., coaches, professional athletes), interpreting whether parents, coaches, and teammates approve or disapprove of unsportsmanlike play, and experiencing reinforcement vicariously (e.g., seeing another player being praised for supporting teammates). Structural developmental theories focus on individuals' moral reasoning underlying behavior, or *why* individuals act the way they do (see Weiss & Smith, 2002).

Children are active participants in constructing meaning about moral issues by interacting with adults and peers in a variety of social contexts. According to this approach, a moral reasoning *structure* underlies one's judgments about what is right and wrong; this structure undergoes *developmental* change as a result of cognitive maturation and social interactions. Change proceeds from a focus on self-interest to an other-oriented orientation to a principled level emphasizing mutual interest and welfare. Collectively, character development is concerned with both behavioral expression as well as the reasons underlying behaviors.

One of the many benefits of theory is that its principles can be tested through empirical research in specific social contexts and ultimately applied to practical teaching and coaching situations. Rest's (1984, 1986) four-component model of moral action focuses on two major sources of influence—social-contextual and individual difference factors—on moral sensitivity, judgment, intention, and behavior. Several studies have explored ways in which social settings influence personal beliefs and behaviors about what is “right and wrong.” Other work has examined how individual differences influence moral beliefs and actions. Taken together, this body of knowledge shows that both factors are important contributors to character development in sport. In the following paragraphs, I briefly summarize the research on social-contextual and

individual difference factors in relation to character development through sport (Weiss, Smith, & Stuntz, 2006).

The social context in which children reside is a strong contributor to character development (Weiss, Smith, & Stuntz, 2006). Relationships with teammates, coaches, officials, and parents shape youths' views of which behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable in sport. Internalizing normative beliefs and behaviors occurs through many pathways such as (a) socialization of prosocial behaviors, (b) modeling of sportsmanlike and unsportsmanlike behaviors, (c) social approval of aggressive and unfair play, (d) moral atmosphere, and (e) motivational climate (what goals are valued and emphasized). Studies show that aggressive actions are learned by watching elite athletes and are put into play by youth. In addition, believing that significant others approve of unsportsmanlike play is related to athletes' own approval of similar behaviors. The moral atmosphere, or collective group norms about legitimacy of behaviors, and perceptions of the motivational climate also influence character development in sport.

Many individual difference factors also influence character development through sport, including social perspective-taking ability, moral reasoning level, achievement goal orientations, moral identity, and self-regulation skills (Weiss, Smith, & Stuntz, 2006). Individuals who use higher levels of moral reasoning, embrace higher task and lower ego goal orientations, have a central moral identity, and possess high levels of self-regulatory efficacy to resist peer pressure tend to both disapprove of aggressive and unsportsmanlike actions and do not engage in such actions themselves. Combined with previously discussed research on social contextual factors, it is clear that both personal and contextual factors influence moral beliefs and behaviors. Only by

considering both sets of constructs can we comprehensively understand how to positively influence character development in sport.

One of the main reasons it is so important for youth programs to target character development comes from the finding that moral reasoning level in sport and daily life contexts diverges at about ages 12-13 and continues to broaden as age and sport experience increase (Bredemeier, 1995; Weiss, Smith, & Stuntz, 2006). Moral reasoning for sport situations is lower than for everyday life issues; Shields and Bredemeier (1995) coined the term *game reasoning* to reflect these differences. Game reasoning reflects one's viewpoint of sport as a form of *bracketed morality* or one that is set apart from the broader morality of everyday life. Game reasoning involves a moral transformation during athletic contests in which a self-interest perspective is considered a legitimate means of pursuing the goal of winning. Features of the sport context help form the "brackets" of sport morality that are embedded within daily life reasoning, such as rules of the game, officials deciding on rule infractions, and spatial and temporal separation of sport and everyday life experiences. Game reasoning is seen when professional athletes' unethical or violent actions are minimally punished, compared with similar actions in real life (e.g., high sticking in ice hockey, intentionally throwing "payback" pitches at a baseball player). Given the potential for game reasoning to exist, it is important to recognize that sport is a valued and powerful social context for promoting high-level moral reasoning and associated prosocial behaviors in youth participants.

The most encouraging research on character development in sport comes from intervention studies designed to promote prosocial and discourage antisocial behaviors among youth. The Fair Play for Kids program developed in Canada (Gibbons, Ebbeck, & Weiss, 1995) and the Responsibility Model (Hellison & Walsh, 2002) have been shown to be effective mostly

in physical education settings. These and other interventions unequivocally show that when environments are structured to purposefully teach youth positive values and beliefs about sportsmanlike play, and positive role models are available to reinforce such behaviors, effects on character development are significantly different from control participants and the magnitude of effects are meaningful. The foundation of these programs—competent and caring adults and activities that are specifically designed to teach life skills—serves as an exemplar for developing after-school and extracurricular sports programs that target positive youth development (Larson, 2000; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005; Petitpas et al., 2005).

The First Tee: A Model Program for Promoting Positive Youth Development

Despite the knowledge that youth sport programs have the potential to make a positive impact on character and other forms of psychological and social development, systematic and longitudinal studies of developmental effects of sport programs are scarce (Petitpas et al., 2005). We are not aware of any research that has followed youth from their initial participation onwards in a sports program specifically designed to develop life skills (social, psychological, self-regulation, character development). Systematic evaluation data are necessary to definitively show whether youth who participate in a life skills program show positive developmental outcomes in both the short and long term of their involvement.

Because positive youth development refers to acquiring psychological and social skills and characteristics that transfer to other domains (i.e., life skills), it is imperative that carefully designed research be conducted to investigate the efficacy of this assumption. According to Petitpas et al. (2005), positive youth development is most likely to occur when young people are (a) engaged in a desired activity within an appropriate environment (*context*), (b) surrounded by caring adult mentors and a positive group or community (*external resources*), and (c) learning

skills that are important for managing life situations (*internal assets*). The First Tee is one of the few youth development programs that have these components in place. Specifically, The First Tee uses *golf as a context* and *coaches as external resources* to teach life skills (*internal assets*) to youth so that positive psychosocial and behavioral outcomes are maximized (*positive youth development*).

The mission of The First Tee explicitly targets youth development: “To impact the lives of young people by providing learning facilities and educational programs that promote character development and life-enhancing values through the game of golf.” Recall that psychosocial development among youth does not happen automatically; curricula must be carefully designed based on the body of knowledge on youth development to ensure positive outcomes. To accomplish its goals, The First Tee Life Skills Experience provides the core lessons for teaching interpersonal, self-management, goal setting, and resistance skills. The First Tee Coach Program provides the training and youth-centered philosophy to ensure that life skills and positive social and psychological qualities are likely outcomes. Together, The First Tee Life Skills Experience and The First Tee Coach Program characterize the internal assets and external resources, respectively, which target positive youth development. The First Tee *Nine Core Values* represent positive youth development outcomes: honesty, integrity, sportsmanship, respect, courtesy, judgment, confidence, responsibility, and perseverance.

Educators, program directors, and policymakers need to know whether youth programs are effective in achieving their goal of positive development. If so, this would provide evidence-based information of effectiveness, pinpoint what works and what doesn't work, identify program components that are particularly effective, and help identify where resources should be directed. To borrow from a well-known advertisement, such information would be “priceless.”

We are conducting on-going, longitudinal research to document the effectiveness of The First Tee educational programs on positive youth development. I would like to share some findings from our first year of data collection in 2005. We specified three purposes: (a) What *impact* do The First Tee life skills programs have on positive youth development? (b) What is *unique* about The First Tee life skills programs that make an impact on positive youth development? (c) What *improvements* are suggested for the life skills curriculum and delivery? Specifically, we were interested in learning *how and why* The First Tee contributes to youth development in the *Nine Core Values*.

We interviewed 95 youth (ages 11-17), 26 coaches, and 24 parents representing Chapters varying in geographical area and diversity of participants. We used interviews because they yield substantial information, empower respondents by allowing information to emerge from them, and enable a viable method for learning about program effectiveness. Consistent with the core lesson content of The First Tee Life Skills Experience, we assessed how knowledgeable and skilled youth participants were in using interpersonal, self-management, goal setting, and resistance skills both in the golf context and most importantly in other domains of their life such as home, school, social situations, and workplace.

Due to the volume of information we obtained, I will focus on two sets of results: (a) youth participants' responses relative to the first purpose on impact of The First Tee life skills education programs on positive development, and (b) unique features of The First Tee education programs that make an impact on youth development. For more detailed information, please see the document I submitted under separate cover, *Summary Report of University of Virginia Research; "More than a Game:" Longitudinal Effects of a Life Skills Education Program on Positive Youth Development*.

Results for Purpose #1: What *Impact* do The First Tee Life Skills Programs Have on Positive Youth Development?

- Learning Interpersonal Skills
 - 100% of participants shared how they transfer meeting and greeting skills to other life domains such as school, home, neighborhood, sports, and workplace.
 - 94% of participants shared ways in which they show respect to others in other life domains, such as school, home, sports, and workplace.
- Learning Self-Management Skills
 - 95% of participants used specific strategies taught in the curriculum to control negative emotions such as *Be Patient, Be Positive, and Ask for Help*, the *4Rs* (replay, relax, ready, redo), and *STAR* (stop, think, anticipate, respond).
 - 100% of participants said they use these methods to manage negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in school, at home, in other sports, and when dealing with siblings, parents, classmates, and friends.
- Learning to Make Healthy Choices
 - 91.3% of youth defined wellness in physical, mental, emotional, and social terms, stated why well-being was important in golf and life, and disclosed ways of promoting healthy behaviors.
- Learning to Appreciate Diversity
 - 91.3% of youth indicated how experiences in The First Tee led to a greater appreciation for differences in skill, age, race, ethnicity, and culture. Appreciation for diversity was defined in terms of respecting others, enhancing social well-being, understanding others' perspectives, and learning from others.

Results for Purpose #2: What is *Unique* about The First Tee Life Skills Programs that Make an Impact on Positive Youth Development?

- Purposeful Connections to Promote Positive Youth Development: Synergy among Climate, Program Delivery, and Curriculum
 - Voices of adolescents, stories by coaches and parents, and percentage of youth transferring lessons learned in golf to life domains substantiate the unique synergy among the program components—climate, program delivery, curriculum, and core values.
- Seamless Approach: A Durable Bridge of Golf and Life Skills
 - An important aspect of the curriculum is integration of golf and life skills into one activity. The seamless approach to teaching is likely to have a long-lasting effect on young people because learning golf is not achieved independently from learning about life skills in a classroom. They are intertwined in one fun activity and bridged at the end of the activity.
- Optimal Challenges: Matching the Activity to the Child, Not the Child to the Activity
 - The *mastery-driven approach* is known in the motivation literature as *optimal challenges*—defining success for the child relative to her or his abilities. Modifying facilities, equipment, and rules, and sequencing skills, align with the child’s capabilities such as the concept of Personal Par.
- Empowering Youth: Creating an Autonomy-Supportive Environment
 - Allowing youth to make choices about activities and goals creates what the motivation literature calls an *autonomy-supportive environment*. Including youth in decision making communicates that the coach is a valued source of support.

As The First Tee Coach Philosophy espouses, “Kids don’t care what you know until they know you care.”

- Catching Kids Doing Things Right: Motivating through Good-Better-How
 - The *Good-Better-How* approach takes more time than “fixing the problem” as many coaches stated as the signature of most junior golf programs. Instead it is consistent with a philosophy of being youth-centered, which will motivate young people to enjoy their experiences and improve their skills and confidence.

Summary of Year 1 Findings and Future Directions

Collectively, findings provide scientific data-based evidence of the effectiveness of The First Tee as an exemplary youth development program. The First Tee is having a strong positive *impact* on young people’s development of life skills and core values. Additionally, the program is *unique* especially in the synergy among context (golf), external resources (program delivery by coaches), internal assets (life skills curriculum), and The First Tee *Nine Core Values*. We are now embarking on Year 2 data collection with our 2005 group and adding a new group in 2006. Both groups will be followed for at least 3 years to document (a) retention of life skills knowledge and use as well as levels of psychological and social development, and (b) differences in life skills and psychosocial outcomes compared to youth who are not participants in The First Tee.

Answers to our study questions should ultimately benefit the children and adolescents who partake of The First Tee in communities across the United States and abroad.

Additionally, the in-depth information on *context, external resources, internal assets, and psychosocial outcomes* identifies The First Tee program as an exemplar for other youth agencies and provides scientific evidence that may influence youth public policy. Such

evidence should justify funding for youth programs that can demonstrate efficacy in developing character and other important social, psychological, and behavioral outcomes.

Concluding Thoughts: Sport Participation and Positive Youth Development

Youth sports comprise an important part of children's experiences in our society. When experiences are positive, enhanced self-esteem, character, social relationships, and motivation to maintain an active lifestyle follow. Caring and competent adults are crucial in shaping positive attitudes and behaviors through modeling, reinforcement, expression of beliefs, and creating a cooperative climate. Based on theory and research, several conditions are necessary to maximize positive youth development: (a) a psychologically safe environment in which activities are optimally challenging, (b) close, trusting relationships with important adults and peers, and (c) acquisition of skills that are transferable to other life domains (character, social, emotional). The First Tee has these components in place and is making a significant impact on positive youth development, thereby achieving the goals identified in its mission statement. It is important that other youth development programs also demonstrate their effectiveness in reaching similar goals. The bottom line is an investment in our future—youth who grow up to become honest, responsible, and caring citizens in our society.

References available upon request