

them. I don't try to prove my sensitivity by claiming to prefer activities based on mutual cooperation rather than competition. Since there is something a bit unmanly about disliking sports, I try to make sure women understand I haven't been entirely emasculated. I say, "I don't like baseball. Got that, sweetheart?" Usually that ends the discussion.

How did I get to my sports-free state? It goes back to childhood, but there's no wrenching tale. In elementary school, I was an avid New York Rangers and New York Mets fan. Then around eighth grade, for reasons that I still don't really understand, I lost all interest. There was no epiphany, no dramatic turning point. The attraction just dissipated.

At about the same time, I developed a passion for current affairs. Not that it was a trade-off. Pundits often talk about politics like it's a sport, but it's not. In any case, I never regained my interest.

When two friends finally dragged me to a Mets game the summer of my college freshman year, all the excitement was gone. (The fact that I was taking codeine on a dentist's orders—and spent several innings on my way back from the concession stand trying to find my friends—may have had something to do with that.) But other games have been equally uninspiring. Sports just plain lost their appeal for me. "Monday Night Football" just means that "Nightline" is on extra late. The one interest (besides women) that unites guys from all walks of life is irrelevant to me. But that doesn't bother me one bit. Don't try to feel my pain—because I don't have any.

Evan Gahr is a columnist for the New York Post.

Discipline

by Mark Gerson

When I taught U.S. history in a Jersey City, New Jersey high school last year, I discovered rather quickly that the most important factor in creating a positive classroom environment is discipline. Even something as mundane as talking in class is very destructive, because it creates a climate that gradually destroys concentration.

Discipline is possible only when students believe their teacher knows what is best for them. That requires trust. Among inner-city students like mine in Jersey City, such submission does not come easily. The combination of extreme egalitarianism, conspiracy theories, and racial tension gets in the way.

But it is possible to build trust and discipline. Because inner-city culture places such emphasis on physical prowess, a teacher can engender confidence by its display. Early on, I told the students that I would sponsor after-school games of pick-up basketball in which I would play. Everyone was welcome to participate, but they had best be aware that my team would invariably win, and that I could whip any of them in one-on-one if challenged.

I scheduled the first game two weeks in advance so that the students could get excited about it and brag about how they

would destroy me. And they did. "You ain't got no game, Mr. Gerson. You be playin' with those white boys in Short Hills who don't run to the hoop when a black man steps on the court—they run home to Mommy and Daddy," said Jamal.

"All right, tough guy," I replied. "We'll see next Tuesday."

Tuesday came, and we all changed in the locker room. The trash-talking was so merciless that I wondered if my own team would try to show me up as well. The game started, and they were playing a style of basketball I detest. I like a controlled, passing, team game—and they were launching three-point shots when teammates were wide open under the basket. They would grab a rebound and race the length of the court only to miss a wild, though sometimes acrobatic, shot. Not my game at all, but one that I saw I could use to show them I was a better player.

I hit a couple of threes early on, but they were unimpressed. In playground ball, shooting is *déclassé*; one is supposed to beat his man off the dribble and go strong to the hoop. Fine. Walt was guarding me and talking up a storm. "Mr. Gerson, you ain't got nothin'. You can't beat me. Go back and play with the white boys."

I was getting aggravated because Walt was being rude to his teacher, but I couldn't give him detention in this circumstance. Instead, I grabbed a defensive rebound and dribbled down the court, stopping only to tell Walt that I would fake right at the top of the key, cross over, and leave him in the dust as I streaked the other way to the hoop. He grunted, indicating that he did not take me seriously. So I approached the top of the key, dribbling with my left hand, made a quick move to the right, taking Walt with me, then sliced back to the left and to the hoop for an easy lay-up.

Walt was obviously embarrassed as his teammates began to shout that he had been beaten by a white boy. Walt said that he was going to get me the same way. That would be impossible, I knew. Walt, like many undisciplined players, dribbled way too high. His high dribble was practically an invitation for a steal, and I told him so. He ignored me, and came at me halfway between half-court and the three-point arc. He tried an acceleration move, and I stuck out my left hand and knocked the ball loose, then recovered it and passed it to Jamal streaking down the court, who slammed it home in an uncontested dunk.

When word circulated that "Mr. Gerson got game," I had passed the first test necessary to earning their trust. Having bested them at their game on their court, I could not be dismissed easily in the classroom. I continued to use basketball to accumulate trust. Throughout the fall, I used a classroom game that a well-behaved class could play at the end of the period: Stump Mr. Gerson on the NBA. The rules were simple: If any student could stump me on a question relating to the NBA and I could not stump him back, the student would earn an "A" on the next test. But if any detentions were given during the class, there would be no game. The students wanted to play—they relished the opportunity to earn an easy "A" and show up their teacher—and they often disciplined classmates whose behavior might have canceled the game.

They would come in with obscure questions that I could not answer—how many points did Patrick Ewing score in a par-

ticular game in 1989?—but their sense of basketball history was poor. No one knew, for instance, that Oscar Robertson went to the University of Cincinnati or that Wilt Chamberlain played his first professional ball with the Harlem Globetrotters. So no one ever won the game, though not for lack of trying. They asked fathers and uncles and any other knowledgeable adults about basketball history, hoping to be prepared for my questions.

Two of my students, Walt and Jamal, played on a school team and were fans of the NBA game as much as I am. So before their season started I bought them each a copy of John McPhee's *A Sense of Where You Are*, the classic book about Bill Bradley's senior season at Princeton. We had studied Senator Bradley in current events, so Walt and Jamal were able to place the book's subject in perspective. I instructed them to read the book carefully, and to study how Bradley—perhaps the greatest college player of all time—practiced his game. Bradley was the quintessentially disciplined player, a superstar by virtue of perfecting the fundamentals, and McPhee brings it out beautifully.

The test of Walt and Jamal's understanding was given on the court. After school, we went to the gym and I told them to shoot like Bradley did on page 24 of the book—in the way he learned from Jerry West and Terry Dischinger. They looked in the book to refresh themselves, and knew exactly what to do. Jamal went first. He took a few quick dribbles, bouncing the last one especially hard off the floor. Then he slammed his foot against the floor and went up for a jump shot. (The hard dribble helps players jump higher, and the foot slamming prevents drifting on the jump.) Swish. Walt went next, and met with the same result.

The trust I had earned on the court made Jamal and Walt believe my basketball advice worthy of taking. And this translated into the advice, and disciplinings, I gave in the classroom as well.

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Mark Gerson just finished his first year at Yale Law School. This article is adapted from his forthcoming book, In the Classroom.

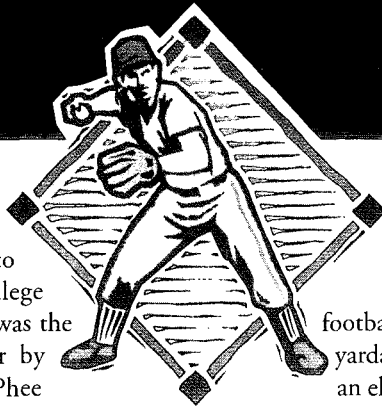
Character

by Dave Shiflett

*"Sports do not build character. They reveal it."
 —Heywood Hale Broun*

Sports have much to teach the young about character today. Unfortunately, among these things are just how petty, mean, and vicious people can be. Most of my family's sandlot sports ex-

**My arm was what
 gave me worth in
 the eyes of the
 world. Then
 suddenly my arm
 was gone.**



periences took place in Colorado, where the attitudes can be pretty rabid. Once, for instance, after a star running back transferred to my son's football team, the coach of the team he had left had the fellow followed by a private investigator to confirm that there really was a change of address that made him eligible for our team. The athlete in question was nine years old.

In Colorado and most other places today, the tradition of referee flogging has gone to extremes. Doesn't watching lawyers, tradesmen, and homemakers berate a referee for the sin of spotting a ball three inches south of "true" forward motion encourage a destructive attitude toward authority in our children? Occasionally today, parents will also fight amongst themselves, and even in rare circumstances attack children on opposing teams. I know because I've seen it.

At the close of a playoff battle with our chief football rival, one of our parents who was working the yardage chains on the field was punched in the face by an elderly gentleman who turned out to be the grandfather of the opposing team's star running back and the father of their coach. During another game, our boys were showered with spit by some of the opposing team's mothers. Only once in our sports history did we see an adult actually attack a child. It happened during a lacrosse game for 12-year-old boys. Before the game the opposing coach told his squad that beating our team was the most important thing in his life (I monitored his address from a nearby listening post). His team's response, however, was a slow start followed by steady decline. When one of his players had his legs chopped out from beneath him on a play, the enraged coach charged onto the field and put our player in a headlock. The boy had to wear a neck brace for a couple of weeks. After that season both our boys gave up organized sports, which was totally their decision. We are glad they played, and cherish most of the memories. We were equally glad when they hung up their cleats and the older one took up rock and roll.

There are so many examples of serious character problems among professional and college athletes today that the idea of the team "lineup" is taking on a whole new meaning. The list of athletes who have been dragged into the criminal-justice system recently is long, including such luminaries as Michael Irvin, Darryl Strawberry, Steve DeBerg, Jose Canseco, Marvin Hagler, Sugar Ray Leonard, Moses Malone, Barry Bonds, Scottie Pippen, Bobby Cox, Warren Moon, and Mike Tyson. The *Washington Post* points out that between January 1, 1989 (when O.J. Simpson pled "no contest" to spousal battery) and November 1994, 140 pro and college football players were reported for violence toward females. A study by researchers at Northeastern University and the University of Massachusetts, which reviewed 107 recent college sex-assault cases, found that while male athletes made up just three percent of the student body, they were involved in 19 percent of these incidents.