

Does football build character or character disorders?

Building the Right Kind of Learning Environment

Does football build character or character disorders? Most people associated with the game would argue vehemently for the former, and by reading many media accounts you would think the latter. However, the correct answer to the question is "none of the above." Football creates numerous and powerful opportunities for athletes to learn about themselves and to acquire important skills, but individuals are not likely to benefit from these experiences unless they are in the right kind of learning environment and are surrounded by the right kinds of people.

At the NFF Center for Youth Development through Sport, we have been identifying the factors necessary to provide young athletes with the optimal environment and activities necessary to facilitate positive growth and acquire skills that can be transferred from the playing field to the classroom and to future careers. These factors have become the building blocks for our model of youth development through sport and form the guiding principles that drive the success of the NFF's Play It Smart program. In a nutshell, we believe that positive growth is most likely to occur when young people:

...are in an appropriate Context for growth, i.e, participating in activities that are voluntary, challenging, and require a lot of commitment and effort over time.

...are surrounded by positive External Assets, including caring adult mentors in the form of academic-coaches, football coaches, and community and school leaders.

...develop Internal Assets, such as interpersonal, decision-making, and problem-solving skills.

...benefit from Research and Evaluation that identifies best practices and guides program improvements.

Our model is illustrated in figure 1.

The staff at the NFF Center is engaged in a number of research projects in efforts to provide support for the efficacy of the model. We already know that Play It Smart has a remarkable track record of academic accomplishments, with graduation rates of 95% and 87% of graduates going onto college. But what kinds of things is Play It Smart doing to bring about these impressive results? We knew that Play It Smart participants loved to play football, but now many of them believe that they have an important place in a special group. As one of the student-athletes put it, "I became more determined and felt better about what I put toward athletics knowing that I finally had a supporting cast. I felt like I was part of a first class program that was teaching me how to be a better person for life."

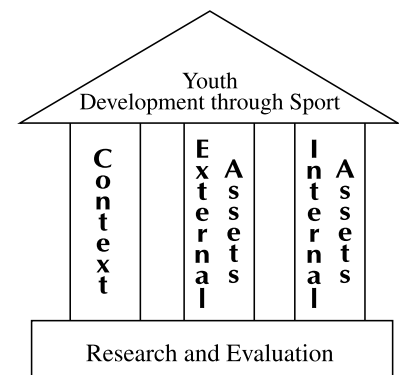


figure 1

With Play It Smart, participants have the added benefit of interacting with an academic-coach, who spends the entire academic year helping them gain confidence in their abilities and assisting them in setting goals and planning for the future. Having a mentor to encourage and provide support makes a world of difference for a lot of Play It Smart student-athletes and is summed up by one first year participant, "Help was always there if you needed it and the academic-coach never gave up on you no matter how hard the work was. The program helped me improve my schoolwork and helped me be the best." Another student, when asked what it was like to have an academic-coach, responded, "It brings the best out in everybody and it helps you achieve your goals and make big strides in your life. It helped me be a responsible student and person."

The NFF Center has also learned that engaging in community service or leadership and mentoring roles outside of sport is necessary for participants to identify transferable skills and gain confidence in their abilities to use their skills outside of sport. One participant summed up his feelings this way, "In the community, Play It Smart showed me you don't have to be rich to give back. By doing community service at a local elementary school, I was able to help so many kids. I know that helping and caring is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and there are so many things I can do to help out."

Using this model as a foundation, the NFF Center will continue to explore ways that sport, in particular football, can help develop youth. Specifically, in the months to come, the NFF Center will be attempting to identify how football may be different than other sports in teaching specific skills and fostering important values. We are developing and refining our assessment tools and plan to gather data from current and former players and coaches at all levels of participation. Contact us if you would like to help out (nffcenter@spfldcol.edu or (866)532-2289). Your ideas and participation in this important work would be greatly appreciated.