

What in the Name of High School Football? By Hank Hill

My high school is an *athletocracy*. Sports are well-celebrated. The arts and academics are simply tolerated. Football players are princes; artists are stepchildren. The hockey team walks on water. Musicians just walk. My yardstick is a glance at the amount of community recognition and resources dedicated to each. Don't get me wrong. Our high school has one of the strongest academic and arts programs. Our artists and musicians consistently win awards when matched against their greater statewide peers.

Our scholars are many and perform admirably on a wide array of Advanced Placement courses and national tests. But you would hardly know it.

With Martha's Vineyard Regional High (MVRHS) sports, win or lose, you cannot escape the news. The deaf can almost hear the cheers. The blind would tire at the week-after-week, above-the-fold, page-one photos of ball-catching/throwing/whacking. The local cable television channel repeats both the JV and Varsity football games a half dozen times a week. Ditto for field hockey and soccer. The advertising banners on that same channel flash accolades for sports teams from local businesses 24 hours a day.

Each Friday before football games, the school is decorated with banners and streamers and mug shots of football players. And on autumn Mondays, the heroes (as defined by catching a TD pass or two) are again up on the walls as icons. Winter and spring have a new cast of poster boys. Yet only a few weeks ago, 16 MVRHS vocalists and instrumentalists auditioned for the competitive All Cape & Islands music festival. And the judges selected a remarkable 16 of 16. Unheard of success. And yet not a mention in the local papers. Not a word on the radio. Not a sentence in the principal's address. Not a squeak on the morning announcements. Not a face on the wall.

The gift of music came wrapped in silence. The only recognition was a list of names taped to the music-room door and a story I jammed in as editor of the school newspaper. Imagine the hoopla if the entire starting offense plus defensive backfield of the football team (that's 16 give or take the particular defense) were selected as All-Cape League All-Stars. A parade down Main Street with fire engine sirens blaring would only begin the excess. Again do not misunderstand me. I am not against athletics. The single greatest factor in preventing the nation's number one killer – heart disease – is regular and vigorous exercise, and that gets my vote. In junior high school I played baseball and lacrosse and loved it.

Fenway Park, the Boston Red Sox's baseball stadium, is among my favorite places on earth. I am against the unfair and lopsided allocation of community resources to varsity sports that benefit one select group of students over another. I believe colleges are even-handed when slicing the pie. Not MVRHS.

Our school will shell out \$26,000 this winter alone to pay for ice time for the hockey teams. That's before even a dollar is spent on coaches, insurance, transportation, and equipment. At the end of the season, that \$26,000 will literally be water vapor. The drama department limps along without even a decent set of body microphones for productions which include 50 students at a time. Two Advanced Placement English seminars were compressed into one unwieldy class this year as a cost-cutting measure. And the hockey players skate on \$26,000 that by March will evaporate into thin air.

The athletic program at MVRHS has become almost a religion. The administration openly concedes that our mostly sleep-deprived student body – many of whom catch a 6:20 a.m. school bus – is the result of a forced homage to sports. The school day must start that early

so athletes who travel off the Vineyard for away games limit their missed classes. The result of this catering to sports is bleary-eyed students and an overall depression of academic performance for everyone. This is an accepted cost of athletics. Absurd.

Without even addressing the actual “value” of competitive athletics or the arts, consider just the numbers: Band, orchestra and jazz have a total of about 120 kids times *three full seasons* of participation in my school. Freshman chorus, mixed-chorus, and Minnesingers (vocal performing group) have at least an equal number times *three seasons*. Yet the music students have to fight for a group lesson while the sports training programs rival that of an NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) Division I team.

Meanwhile, an educational crisis is looming. As more and more master teachers retire, MVRHS cannot find veteran replacements – the cost of buying a home here is unaffordable for most teachers. Last year, an advertised math position drew only a single applicant. Yet instead of taking the lead from our sister island, Nantucket, which has followed the example of the best private schools by building teacher housing on school property, MVRHS is poised to bulldoze the last, prized acres of undeveloped school land and expand the athletic fields even further at huge expense.

Good teachers benefit all students. Varsity sports only benefit some. I am not suggesting eliminating or even cutting down any MVRHS sports programs. Not at all. I am simply stating that to *expand* an already large athletic department is, by definition, at the *expense* of the arts and academics. It’s time the Martha’s Vineyard *athletocracy* take the perennial advice of all wrestling coaches: Time to go on a little diet.

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Are High School Sports Good For Kids?

By Daniel Gould, Ph.D. Director, Institute for the Study of Youth Sports

High school sports are an integral part of the fabric of Americans society with over 5 million youth participating in any school year. Here in Michigan almost 300,000 young people take part in high school sports every year. Moreover, school sports are justified because of their potential educational benefits. For example, the mission statement of the National Federation of State High School Activity Associations indicates that it promotes “participation and sportsmanship” in an effort to “develop good citizens through interscholastic activities which provide equitable opportunities, positive recognition and learning experiences to students while maximizing the achievement of educational goals.”

Not only are school sports justified on educational grounds, but researchers have shown that participation in them and other extracurricular activities have positive effects on adolescents. For example, a multiyear study conducted in Michigan has shown that children who participate in sports have increased educational aspirations, closer ties to school and increased occupational aspirations in youth. It has been demonstrated, then, that school sports participation has a number of desirable benefits.

This does not mean, however, that school sports are not without problems. An overemphasis on winning, year-round single sport participation, and difficulties finding qualified

coaches are but a few of concerns facing leaders in the area. The over-emphasis on winning issue is especially significant as when this occurs the educational objectives for involvement are often forgotten.

And while principals, athletic directors, and coaches have the ultimate responsibility for keeping winning in the proper perspective and must be held accountable for their actions, let's not place all the blame on them. The general public, parents and society is placing more emphasis on winning than ever before which, at times, pressures athletic personnel to deviate from the athlete-centered educational and personal development mission. We cannot let this happen. The educational objectives of high school sports must be recognized and placed in the forefront.

This does not imply that winning is unimportant and should not be emphasized at all. Leading youth development experts contend that one of the potential benefits of sports participation is the development of initiative or the ability to set and go after goals, which is part of the competitive process. Moreover, in a recent Institute for the Study of Youth Sports investigation of outstanding high school coaches who were recognized for the character and citizenship building contributions to players we found that these individuals were highly successful (winning over 70% of their games). They stressed winning, but never put winning before the personal and educational development of their players. Instead, they maintained a strong educational philosophy and did not just talk about building character in their players, but took daily actions to do so while at the same time pursuing excellence.

The bottom line is that high school sports are still a highly desirable activity for students to participate in and should be supported for their educational benefits. However, we as taxpayers and proponents of positive youth development must insist that their educational objectives always come first. We cannot knowingly or unknowingly let winning become the only goal and must support school district, athletic director and coach efforts to always put the education and development of the student-athlete first.

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