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# Richness of Building Character in College Athletics

Craig Heynen

Dordt College, [craig.heyne@dordt.edu](mailto:craig.heyne@dordt.edu)

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# Richness of Building Character in College Athletics

## **Abstract**

"Sports offer an avenue and environment that is rich with opportunity for character development."

Posting about personal growth through athletics from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/the-richness-of-building-character-in-college-athletics/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, athletics, discipline, spiritual formation, character

## **Disciplines**

Christianity | Sports Studies

## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

# The Richness of Building Character in College Athletics

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 [all in allthings.org/the-richness-of-building-character-in-college-athletics](https://allthings.org/the-richness-of-building-character-in-college-athletics)

Craig Heynen

In a technological and media saturated age, the latest news cycle often includes some type of shocking story that is related to an athlete. In fact, the frequency and degree of these incidents is so great that many of us have developed a sense of cynicism toward sports and the influence they have on primarily young people. In many cases, we hear of incidents and even witness actions on video that happen in college or high school athletics. This can cause many to question the value of sports as a whole, and for some to rightly wonder what role sports play in a college setting.

It would be foolish to argue that sports build character automatically, without any intention. However, I believe that sports offer an avenue and environment that is rich with opportunity for character development. If priorities are correct and colleges take an intentional approach toward their athletic programs, athletes can leave these programs with an experience that influences their character with a richness that is difficult to achieve in any other setting.

Although we don't often associate humility with athletics, it is an important part of team success. Athletes put a tremendous amount of trust in their coaches. They need to trust their coaches in the areas of training, strategy, and personal well-being. Athletes also learn to trust their teammates. Although the form this takes varies from sport to sport, athletes must build trust that their teammates will be reliable, disciplined, and cooperative. Leadership is a characteristic that athletes learn that incorporates humility as well. Good team leaders understand how to serve their teammates by encouraging and sacrificing. They learn from their own mistakes and admit when they are wrong. A team that operates effectively will consist of members that have learned a great deal about humility.

The relational aspect of being on a team is a great tool for athletes to develop character. Just as a close relationship such as a great friend or a spouse requires the development of the fruits of the spirit and other sanctifying qualities, so does being on a team. Athletes regularly face challenges in training and practicing for their sport that result in strong bonds between them. They also have to learn how to work with and for each other in order to make progress, both individually and as a team. The closeness with which team members operate has a tendency to magnify any relational difficulties. As a result, the members of a team can rarely operate smoothly if there is any dysfunction in the relationships of the athletes. The effect is that team members rarely have the opportunity to avoid conflict and must deal with personality traits that lead to conflict. The relational aspect also includes coaches, and athletes must cultivate and navigate their relationships with coaches in much the same way as with teammates. When successful, these relationships can be some of the most significant in an athlete's life, in many cases similar to a second family. As with a family, many of the joys and trials of life are shared with teammates as they support and encourage each other. This can be a great learning experience for athletes as they learn to support each other in good times and bad.

Participating in a college sport requires a tremendous amount of discipline and mental toughness. Athletes learn that to succeed at this level requires consistent training and attention to detail. Gaps in training or neglecting weaknesses typically yield noticeable performance deficiencies. This aspect of college sports provides a very concrete example for many athletes of both the reward of discipline and the disappointment that results when they lose focus. There are also many opportunities for athletes to hone

their mental toughness. In a team environment, an athlete has an entire group that is dependent on them. They cannot quit when they might want to or be distracted. Athletes must learn that to succeed there is a necessary level of discomfort. Mental toughness and focus can also include the balancing of athletics along with other responsibilities in life. These characteristics are great assets for athletes as they become parents, employees, caregivers, church members, and in any other life role they acquire requiring perseverance.

For many athletes, the connection between discipline and their spiritual walk is evident. They realize that the discipline and perseverance that they learn in athletics can also carry over into the discipline and perseverance that is essential to spiritual development. Going through a season as a team is in many ways a microcosm of life. The members of a team will experience relationship difficulties, family struggles, challenges with school, social difficulties, moral decisions, illness, injury, and more. Because of the bonds that they have with coaches and teammates, these difficulties provide many opportunities for mentoring and learning about how to relate to and rely on God. As a coach, I have learned to better cultivate these opportunities, but I have also witnessed many instances where athletes have taken the lead in being the hands and feet of Christ to their teammates.

As an athlete, and in my early years of coaching, I didn't really think about or take the time to notice the connection between being an athlete and spiritual development. I have come to realize that the weaknesses and strengths that an athlete displays are often also characteristics of their spiritual life. In many cases, the athletes that make the best teammates also are more effective in living out their faith on a daily basis. The discipline, determination, and reflection needed to develop spiritually are very similar to what is needed to develop as an athlete. Coaches who help athletes make these connections can help them grow spiritually.

Webster's dictionary defines character this way: *the way someone thinks, feels, and behaves: someone's personality*. By this definition, I believe participation in college sports is a significant influencer of character. There are so many aspects of an athlete's personality that are involved in team dynamics and athletic development. One of the great rewards of coaching is witnessing the personal growth and character that takes place over the four years an athlete is in college.