

Why Discipline?

“Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things...”

1 Timothy 4:7-8a

We live in an age of sports idolatry, when star athletes are revered as gods and heroes, and their words and actions embody the fullness of what young people aspire to be and achieve. For decades Christians have reflected the world’s view of athletics. Our young athletes have learned to train and compete according to a code of value, belief, and conduct that has been dictated by an authority — our culture — to which we do not profess ultimate allegiance.

It is time that we who are a “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Peter 2:9a) begin to direct our athletic endeavors in such a way as to instead reflect the excellence and “declare the praises of Him who called [us] out of darkness and into His wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9b). As Christian coaches, parents, and leaders, we face an imperative (and often intimidating) challenge in redefining the way that our young people think about athletics — its purposes, benefits, demands, and messages. Moreover, we must communicate the truth that the purpose of athletics is not any of the misguided things that have previously been demonstrated to our young people, but rather is the deepening of a relationship with Christ. (“I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” - Philippians 3:12b)

There is no value in admirable behavior (that which we might call “good character”) apart from knowing Christ. (“I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. *I consider them rubbish*, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, *not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law*, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.” - Philippians 3:8-9) As our athletes strive to develop the disciplines to which they are called by Christ, we must remind them that their goal is not simply to attain these habits, but to know and please and become more like Christ. Though learning to apply these principles will naturally cause an individual to develop more effective athletic habits (and, therefore, become a better player and teammate), these disciplines do not exist for the purpose of heightening and strengthening a person’s athletic ability. Rather, sports is an arena where these disciplines can (with the right leadership and direction) be challenged, sharpened (Proverbs 27:17), and ripened (Galatians 6:22-25, Matthew 8:20), for the ultimate purpose of knowing God and reflecting His glory.

Any effort to accomplish this, however, must begin with an understanding of the concept of discipline. Many people today mistakenly praise sports as a good “character-building activity,” believing that being a part of a team and being challenged athletically will inherently improve a young person. Though there is truth in the claim that many lives have been positively impacted by experiences in sports, we must also recognize that sports are not a magic potion for personal growth. Sports has an equal potential to impact a person’s character in a negative way — to teach bad habits, encourage poor attitudes, allow hurtful treatment of others. Good athletic experiences that promote healthy growth rise out of the intentionality of the leaders in a young person’s life. This is discipline.

I should also remark that this program uses the term *disciplines* (rather than “character traits”) because these are not habits and skills that are intrinsically present in an individual’s genetic make-up. We do not naturally want to do these things; a person must work hard, diligently exerting attention and effort, and remain willing to accept correction as he seeks to grow in these areas.

An equally important truth is the reality that no person can achieve this growth by his own merits and efforts; these disciplines can be produced only by God. Thus, we don’t view the *Wellspring of Life Initiative* as a “character development program”. All of these concepts and challenges — coupled with many coaches’ well-intentioned instruction and care, and strengthened by committed and sustained effort by athletes across the country — will not *in themselves* amount to anything more than a mountain of machismo. We must fall upon the grace and saving strength of our God, and in our deep need we must ask

Him to mercifully produce in us (coaches, parents, athletes — all of us alike) a harvest of righteousness that is unattainable by our own dogged efforts and wishful thinking.

For these reasons we refer to these areas of challenge as “disciplines”, because they are difficult (“Endure hardship as discipline” - Hebrews 12:7a) and because we cannot accomplish them through our own efforts (“God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness” - Hebrews 12:10b).

So then, we present to you The Wellspring of Life Initiative — not a program for developing student-athletes whose external behavior is “nice” and admirable, but rather a commitment to training athletes to think and train and live (within the scope of athletics, and away from their sport) according to the truth of Scripture, and with a desire to *know Christ*. These disciplines should mark an athlete’s life in his sport, in the culture of his school, at home, in his relationships, and throughout his years (eventually as a parent, an employee, a mentor, and maybe one day even a coach).

To the leaders who join in this commitment, remember that your example of discipline (the ways in which you are sensitive and obedient to God’s sculpting of your own heart and life) speak volumes to your athletes. And know that we are praying for you as you embark on this journey with your athletes!