

## FROM SCHOOL SPORT TO SPORTING EXCELLENCE: RESPECTING THE RIGHTS OF MINORS \*

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### INTRODUCTION

May I once again thank the Organising Committee of this International Seminar for the very welcome invitation to participate in this important event. I think sport, and especially top-level, elite, sport has reached a very crucial period in its development and it is certain that some of the points and issues I will raise in my paper today are of great concern in relation to what is happening and will happen in the next few years.

In the title of this paper I could have used the words The Contribution of School Sport to Sporting Excellence at national and international levels, or The Child and Sport. I have chosen the word «minors» because it should remind us particularly that I am talking about a section of society which has its particular place, role, expectations, **and legal rights and requirements** for those of us, adults, who work with children in sport.

Last October, in Sion, Switzerland I had the privilege to direct a seminar on the rights of the child in sport and many of the speakers made a considerable impact on participants. I hope to share many of the important points made then, with you today and this presentation is a partial report, stimulated by that event. (Institut International des Droits de L'Enfant, Sion Switzerland -15 October 1998) The publication of the full Seminar Report is programmed for this Spring and should be out any day now.

One of the principal speakers was **Paulo David**, Secretary of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva. I will let him set the scene as he sees today's children and adolescents in competitive sports:

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\***Discussion.** We publish this paper as contribution to discussion about rights of children and school-children to actively participate in creation of sport contents for programs of physical and health education in modern schools.

### Setting the scene...

«The political, financial, commercial and human implications of sports today are unparalleled. Championships, such as World Cups or Olympic Games, are not only attracting the world's largest television audiences, but are also drawing unprecedented political and commercial attention. Modern champions no longer just play to win; they also carry the hopes of millions of fans as well as negotiate multi-million dollar contracts. This overwhelming success has created an environment in which the most respectable aspects of sports, such as its educative scope, sportsmanship and physical and mental wellbeing, are seriously threatened.

Children are one of the most important contributors to the success of sports today, both as observers as well as practitioners. At an early age, children begin to play and compete in sports. In general, sports is considered highly beneficial to the physical and mental development of the child. It helps the child to improve co-ordination, to increase awareness of his or her body, to interact socially, to learn rules and respect them, to enhance concentration capacity, to learn to take responsibilities and to build self-confidence.

In the 1970's, sports at the elite level changed drastically - amateurism died and professionalism took over. The significance of winning also changed. A victory was no longer just a symbol, but had concrete financial, commercial and political consequences. With the accent on making money, sports professionals focused less on the game and more on satisfying the public's appetite for better performance and more spectacular sports events. To meet the rising expectations of spectators required improved and more sophisticated preparation of athletes. Children were some of the first victims of this new trend, with sports trainers no longer asking how sports could benefit children but rather how children could benefit sports. A child with some talent was viewed more and more as an ideal candidate to be moulded into a champion. Subsequently, there was a significant rise in the number of children enrolled in professional sports training programmes.

There is a wealth of research that exists today which studies the impact of competitive sports on young athletes. Sociologists, psychologists, pedagogues, and medical doctors have added to the understanding of the effects of competitive sports on children and adolescents. By was an extremely clear illustration that dimension that may federations and by this means that their Convention, have to denouncing the excesses and abuses, both practitioners and researchers have certainly made an important contribution to improving the treatment of children in professional sports. Nevertheless, only in very rare instances has anyone tried to understand the link between the practice of competitive sports and the fundamental human rights of children and adults.

History has shown that sports can bring out the best and the worst of human beings. As said earlier, the many unique and positive aspects of sports for children and adolescents, should not be challenged. But when the child is not properly guided by adults in his/her sporting activity, sports can enter the realm of abuse and exploitation. Is 4 hours of daily training for a 5-year-old child truly beneficial? How much stress can a child take? Should a young adolescent be traded between teams for thousands of dollars? Is it good for a 15-year-old swimmer to have turned his shoulder 1.5 million of times? Is it normal for a 16-year-old gymnast, who trains 7 hours a day, to be only 1m. 30 and weight less than 30 kilograms? Is it real support when a 12-year-old boxer's parents urge him to knock-out his opponent, which is medically equivalent to a brief coma? In other words, is

the reality of competitive sports always following the best interests of children? Or are some narrow-minded and over-ambitious adults putting children's human rights into jeopardy through competitive sports?

«Children, even the youngest ones, are human beings. Therefore they also are given the possibility to enjoy fundamental human rights. This might sound like an understatement, but until 1989 both at legal and political levels States only recognized children as passive subjects of law. The human rights of children were not recognized comprehensively by international law, and States were not inclined to fully accept the specificities of children and adolescents in their legislation, policies and programmes. Children were simply the invisible side of society only perceived as an object of protection. This old-fashioned perception of the role of the child in daily life has been drastically challenged by the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, a legally binding international human rights treaty adopted in 1989 by the United Nations and today ratified by 191 States.

**The Convention on the Rights of the Child** (hereafter, the Convention), recognizes the specific status of children, which it defines as all human beings under 18 years old (article 1). This treaty recognizes not only protection rights for children, but also participatory rights which each child can exercise according to his/her maturity. It combines through an holistic approach civil and political rights with economic, social and cultural ones. The Convention also strongly reaffirms the indivisibility and interdependence of each human right recognized to children and therefore the fulfilment of one right can only be achieved when all the others are fully respected.

The Convention also guarantees all children, with no exceptions, the rights to access basic services, such as education, health and social facilities.

The Convention covers an immense range of issues and defines four basic principles:

- the right of the child to non-discrimination (article 2),
- the principle that the bests interests of the child should always be a primary consideration (article 3),
- the right of the child to life, survival and development (article 6), and
- the right of the child to have his/her opinions duly taken into account in all decisions affecting him/her (article 12).

As any activity undertaken in society, sports functions within a recognized legal framework. Whether it is the payment of a membership, the construction of a stadium or the payment of a salary, all sport related actions need to respect the established rule of law. This might seem obvious, but in reality sports have until recently succeeded to function in a legal loophole. This is possible simply because local, national, regional and international sports federations have their own rules, administrative bodies and courts. There is nothing wrong with this, on the condition that those rules are defined and implemented in accordance with domestic and international law. But this is not always the case.

One illustrative example is the Bosman Case. The European Union and its member States recognize the principle of the right of freedom of movements for all its citizens. But, the European Union of Football Associations (UEFA) strongly limited this fundamental human right in its own regulations. In this regard, in 1996, the European Union decided that the UEFA regulation was a gross violation of European law and consequently obliged this regional sport federation to revise completely its ruling and authorize European players to play in any European club they so desired. The Bosman Case is not

an isolated one: since the early eighties several similar conflicts between State legislation and sporting rules have emerged in many countries.

The Bosman Case important one because it is a sports carries a human rights not be neglected by sports States. In the case of children rights, as recognized by the Convention, have to be fully taken into account by all partners involved in sports: parents, trainers, federations and especially public authorities. This is certainly not the case today. In fact, a wide range of children's rights are threatened by the demands of competitive sports.»

I make no apology for this extensive reporting of Paulo David's authoritative account of the situation as he sees it, and I believe everyone in this audience will recognise the situation which he so clearly describes.

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Turning to the main theme of this paper, which is to look at Physical Education's part and its links with School Sport as a basis for good citizenship, health and sporting excellence, it still seems necessary, especially in international meetings, to make a difference between curriculum physical education (as a compulsory subject) and school sport (as voluntary activity. As most of you are aware, this differentiation is not always made. In certain languages and ways of thinking, the word «sport» is used to refer to most forms of physical activity and, in some countries, «Sport» has replaced «Physical Education» as the name for the school curriculum 'subject' taught by our profession.

In my view, where this has happened, it has blurred some important distinctions and caused more problems than it has solved. This lack of global consensus about what is or should be 'physical education' is not a new situation but it is one which is still causing problems today.

Writing in the first issue of the *European Journal of Physical Education* of 1998, Dawn Penney and Sarah Glover reminded us:

«In the public arena and particularly the media, we rarely see any clear distinction made between "physical education" and "sport" in schools. Consequently, few people appreciate that each have their own well established interests, communities and representatives, and that while **these interests and communities certainly overlap**, each also maintains its own *specific* identity and agendas». (my emphasis in bold)

«There is little awareness that *how* physical education and sport are defined and positioned in relation to one another are far from neutral matters, or that embedded in *any* definitions are *particular* views of what physical education and sport are and should be; (and) what values, attitudes and behaviours they do or should promote.»

Although their article looks at recent developments in England, Wales and Australia, I believe the concerns they raise are very widely felt, even in countries which have followed the largely German lead in simply using «sport» to cover a huge variety of human physical activities.

It would be possible to spend all my time today going through different definitions in order to see what different positions and links are embedded in the terminology used in official texts from different countries, but in 1993 I gave a paper at a European Conference on Youth Sport' entitled «*School Sport and Club Sport- an educationist's point of view*» and I have not substantially changed the views expressed at that time.

In it I quoted a document published in September, 1993 jointly by the Sports Council and the British Council of Physical Education, which summarised the intended outcomes of curricular physical education, and replies to the question «*Why Physical Education?*» as follows

**So that pupils can -**

- «enjoy physical activity
- develop physical skills;
- understand,
- take part
- make decisions,
- value safety
- adopt appropriate roles;
- appreciate performance;
- learn to cope
- adopt an active lifestyle;
- value others;
- appreciate fair play;
- become involved;
- develop knowledge, understanding and vocational skills».

This document positions Physical Education within the whole school curriculum, including what it calls «the extended curriculum», **sees PE as the basis of School Sport** and Dance performance, and recognises a link to Community Sport and Dance outside school.

**Physical Education is portrayed as occurring in five contexts, involving different contributions, personnel, responsibilities and qualifications:**

**Physical Education in school and related contexts**

1. PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM  
Governors the custodians of Curriculum Teachers the skilled experts Responsible for delivery of national Programmes of Study
2. PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN THE WHOLE SCHOOL CURRICULUM  
Whole school responsibility Shared by all teachers, For all pupils Some activities as options
3. PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN THE EXTENDED CURRICULUM  
Open to all pupils: their choice Provided by teachers, parents, coaches with suitable qualifications
4. PHYSICAL EDUCATION AS THE BASIS OF SCHOOL SPORT AND DANCE PERFORMANCE  
For pupils who choose and who are selected Provided by teachers, parents, coaches with suitable qualifications
5. PHYSICAL EDUCATION'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO COMMUNITY SPORT AND DANCE  
Links with wider community provision Provided by a range of agencies

**Sport**

Just as Physical Education exists in different contexts and forms, so does sport and not all of Paulo David's criticisms and concerns are applicable to all sport.

Risto Telema, in his excellent introductory paper at the same IDE *Rights of the Child in Sport* Seminar in October, 1998, drew heavily on the work of Adier and Adier (1994) in presenting «a continuum of children's sport».

He showed that in general terms the word «sport» has very wide interpretations, I quote...

«The concept of sport has nowadays a broad meaning as defined, for example, by European Sport Council : Sport means all forms of physical activity which through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels- (Vuori & Fentem 1995).»

Seeing this as too wide a definition, he limited his definition of children's sport to «organised sport which is mainly competitive.» This is in line with my own definition of sport, built up by a series of defining characteristics, of which the presence of competition is certainly one.

Telema then went through Adier and Adier's (1994) analysis in more detail, pointing out that: «When analysing children's after-school activities they differentiated three kinds of activities:

- **spontaneous play,**
  - **recreational organised activities, and**
  - **competitive sport »**
- noting that, the third kind, « **competitive sport, can be divided into three levels,**
- **democratic,**
  - **meritocratic and**
  - **elite sport»**

He went on: «By presenting this sport continuum- I want to emphasise that **children's sport can be organised in different ways which have different implications.»**

I believe it is also worthwhile for this Seminar to follow this analysis in a little more detail to understand what differences Adier and Adier, and later Telema, are seeking to clarify, in order to decide what to recommend as **acceptable school sport** and why. (In recording the definitions for you, the following paragraphs are largely quotes from Adier's/Telema's text, with some very slight changes made to help my spoken English to flow more smoothly).

«**Spontaneous play** concerns physical activities which are planned and directed by children themselves. The activities may be created by children or they are sports from the adults sports, often applied. According to Adier & Adier (1994) there are myriad organisational skills children have to master to accomplish spontaneous play. For instance, they have to plan what to do, decide upon a place and time where they will meet and play, set up parameters of how to play, establish rules and roles for participants, and set handicaps to ensure equitable and enjoyable play. There is usually no system for selecting or dropping- out participants, but child-directed play can be sometimes exclusive. Spontaneous, child -directed play teaches participants a wide range of important interpersonal skills, from communication to cooperation, negotiation, compromise, improvisation, goal-setting, malleability, teamwork, independence and self-reliance»

**Recreational organised sport**, is adult-organised and supervised. The programs which are offered by organisations like YMCA or community centres or private groups, emphasise the social functions of companionship and play. They introduce a teacher-student type relationship and establish a clear situation of authority and hierarchy. There can

be a competitive element, but scoring and winning are not emphasised. They are guided by a philosophy of non-competitive structuring. Young participants are thus expected to be socialised to value acceptance and fairness, team spirit and camaraderie, knowledge acquisition and skill development, and submission to adult rules and authority.

**Competitive sport.** When moving from spontaneous play and recreational organised activities to competitive sport, children's activities take on a different philosophy and character, emphasising goal orientation, winning, and meritocracy. The continuum within competitive sport consists of *democratic*, *meritocratic* and *elite* sport. Factors such as seriousness, commitment, bureaucratisation, and professionalism shift as one moves from lower end of this continuum towards the top.»

Looking more closely along **the competitive sport continuum**, the following points are made: (the emphasis given by italic use is mine). (Adier & Adier 1994 in Telema 1998)

#### **Competitive, democratic sport.**

«At this level sport activities are structured hierarchically. Scores and tallies are kept and league or divisional standing recorded. On one hand, there is more emphasis on competition and seriousness than in the recreational sport, but on the other hand, the rhetoric of recreation is still espoused. *Often it is the parents who take the activity seriously. Coaches, thus, often find themselves caught in a pull between competition and recreation.* Thus, at this level, *differences become more apparent between the stated ideals of the program and the actual practices of the participants.*

#### **Competitive; meritocratic sport.**

«At this stage skill and performance become increasingly rewarded, while *effort and fairness diminish in centrality.* Augmenting the previous competitive features are such elements as rank and stratification, posted, running standings, all-star games, and a national play-off structure. Individual and teams competing in meritocratic systems can progress beyond the local area to compete in regional, state-wide, and national tournaments. Participants who excel in their activity may, for the first time, see their name in the sports section of the local newspaper. *Selection and exclusion are much more usual than in democratic sport*

#### **Competitive, elite sport.**

The decision to pursue an elite activity means allocating it a greater amount of time, making it a priority ahead of other activities, and *eliminating other projects.* For those who do choose to make the commitment, not only their, but their families' time may have to be shifted and activities rescheduled around what was once an after-school activity. *Decisions are no longer made on the basis of fairness or ethical values, but on merit, pragmatics, and outcomes. Coaches and leaders foster a mentality of winning. Encouraging and hiding encroachments, glossing over umpire's favourable mistakes, and favouring shrewdness over integrity become more acceptable in the elite subculture. Elite sport is clearly exclusive. It is closer to work than play.»*

My reason for spending time today on this analysis because, in face of some of the negative aspects highlighted, some educationists have proposed that teachers and schools should abandon all competitive, meritocratic and elite sport!

That is NOT my own, nor FIEP's opinion although, as Telema shows, the closer one moves towards **elite sport** the more questionable become some of the values associated with it - at least from an educationist's point of view. There are more and more very serious questions being asked on the grounds of protecting children's human rights, even in what appears to be voluntary participation in meritocratic and elitist sport. (See Decker Personne and Thomson in a special issue of the 1996 *FIEP Bulletin*, devoted to *The Child and Sport*).

At this stage we need to look again at **competition in sport** and its place in education, and then see what considerations the increasing awareness of, and attention to, **children's rights in physical education and school sport**, carry for the future of these related fields of schools' activities.

### Competitive Sport, Winning and Education

In preparing these some comments on Competitive Sport, Winning and Education, I have drawn on a chapter in a book, by Peter Arnold with this title, (which merits attention if you have not read it). Although written ten years ago, I find Arnold still has much to say which is of current value for those working in Physical Education and School Sport. An article by Robert Decker in French has also contributed to this section of my overview.

For example, looking at competition, Arnold insists it is «important to provide some historical perspective on how a term has come to be used and understood. This is certainly the case in relation to sport. Originally *com-petito* meant to question, to strive together. It was more closely tied to friendship than to rivalry. Thus, competition in the context of sport was, and for many still is, seen as **a struggle for excellence, a form of excellence that would not be possible were it not for the type of situation which sport provides.**

In this approach, to compete in sport «it is first necessary to understand the activity and agree by the rules which govern it. If a competitor deliberately breaks or flouts the rules it can be seriously questioned whether what is done remains sport. The point here is that competitive sport is **not** an unbridled form of conflict, as it is sometimes depicted, but a rule-governed institutionalised practice which attempts to regulate what is permitted and not permitted along lines which are just to all.»

«Paradoxically **competitive sport is best exemplified as being a rule-governed form of friendly rivalry, which involves co-operation.**»

(If only the mass media could be persuaded to present sport more often in these terms, instead of the language of warfare!)

Olympism, in its untarnished form, is the movement in which this view of competitive sport has been consistently put forward. Arnold reminds us that Olympism «stresses the ethic of fairplay and sportsmanship and upholds the view that competition should be marked by honest endeavour and goodwill. Far from seeing competitive sport as immoral and anti-social, it sees it as a form of contest that generates fellowship in a mutual struggle for excellence.»

Unfortunately the practice of sport, even in the Olympic Games, does not always live up to these ideals. In 1995 Brenda Bredemeier wrote, awe may waver in our resolve to work towards the Olympic Ideal... We want to believe in this radical possibility, this



Olympic Ideal. We want to believe we can help our children develop the qualities necessary to embody mutual respect and just relations with others. Yet despite our deepest yearnings, we may suspect that there is little we can really do to influence our children. We may fear that we can not change the ways sport is done».

FIEP remains determined and optimistic in face of strong negative influences in sport. As Arnold concluded, «Whether or not this ideal is lived out as a part of a young person's upbringing is largely, if not entirely, **a matter of how competitive sport is promoted and taught in schools.**» That is our field of activity.

The link between education, school sport, and all sport, and especially elite sport, must be maintained and strengthened. Those adults in charge of Physical Education and School Sport programmes can not avoid their heavy responsibilities in this matter.

If one takes full account of the rights of minors, (as has been attempted in Flanders for example) they have important implications for PE and School Sport.

The right of young people to be consulted and have a say in decisions concerning their sporting activity, for example, calls into question the often all-powerful role of the adults who organise school sport along (sometimes modified) adult sport lines, and select, coach, train and often ruthlessly discard children in their search for success at school sport level. (See also Robertson for an Australian initiative « to solve the sports equation for teenagers»)

Another Sion speaker was Lucio Bizzini (3) one of the leaders behind the 1988 *Charter for Children's Sporting Rights* which has since been adopted and widely diffused by Panathlon This Charter shows clearly the influence of child developmental, medical and educational thinking, and sets out **principles which can and should direct the practice of school sport and the total involvement of children in sport including those competing at or aspiring to the highest levels of sporting excellence.**

#### **Charter for Children's Sporting rights**

- The right to enjoy myself and play.
- The right to practise sports.
- The right to benefit from a sound environment.
- The right to be treated with dignity. The right to be surrounded and trained by competent persons.
- The right to attend training sessions adequate to my rhythms
- The right to confront myself with young people having the same opportunity of success. The right to participate in competitions adequate for my age.
- The right to practise my sport in absolutely safe conditions.
- The right to have resting periods.
- The right not to be a champion.

To maintain a necessary balance in this account of school sport and elite sport we need to remind ourselves that the percentage numbers open to this threat are relatively small. But at the same time we can ignore the evidence that many of the dangers of elite sport are already present in school sport, especially where adult, possibly professional, clubs or agencies see school sport as their «nursery», and where, in certain sports, children of school age can win medals in adult championships at national and international levels.

There can also be very strong political pressure put on teachers and schools, and curriculum development committees, by governments or by sports federations lobbying to ensure that their sport is an established and regularly taught part of the national programme of school P.E. and sport. For example in developing the new National P.E. Curriculum in England and Wales «The British Government was firmly focused on the development of a national curriculum for the *subject* of physical education» and «made it very clear that establishing *games* as the dominant feature of a curriculum and emphasising "the practical nature of the subject' **were also non-negotiable matters**» (Penny and Glover 1998) This did not leave too much room for manoeuvre for the physical education curriculum planners, nor for the inclusion of a wider range of practical activities to meet children's interests, their developmental needs, and to offer greater choice.

Moreover, at the local level, parents and teachers, who one might fondly imagine to be amongst the prime **protectors** of children's rights, are sometimes the first, and perhaps the worst offenders.! For example, I am sure most people working in physical education and school sport have met and suffered from the over-enthusiastic and sometimes aggressive or abusive behaviour of some parents.

This behaviour has not gone unnoticed, even at the level of the United Nations Commission, and David tells us, «Sports is more about fun and less about scores for young children. But parents do not always share this innocent motivation. **In the adult World winning is often more important than how you played the game.** Parent's urge to win can be a stressful situation to manage for young athletes....» «In some instances, the obsession of parents to see their child win has proven to be so strong that they behave violently. Hysterical parents insulting umpires, officials or children and parents from opponent teams seems to be an increasing trend, though there are no official records of these types of incidents.»

By contrast, especially «For a young child, aged 9-11 years old, it is essential to play to participate in the game. Most researches show that approximately 90% of children under 9-11 years **prefer to play with a losing team than to win but sit on the bench as a substitute player.**»

«Another important factor of motivation of young athletes is their individual progress. The first question parents often ask is if their child won; but a child is much more interested in improving his/her game and participating as much as possible on a team or in a competition than in winning or losing.»

This latter point should never be forgotten when we decide **what kind of school sport competitions are to be organised:** whether, for example, there is a 'knock-out', eliminatory approach - which means that the best teams or individuals get the most participation, satisfaction, and all 'the glory' in the final stages.

To close I wish to publicly support the recommendations made in a **European Federation of Sport Psychology Position Statement No. 2 in May 1995** which I have slightly modified, but which express so clearly an educational view of children's sport.

1. "Children's sport should be organised with the prime objective of enhancing the well-being of the child.
2. Those involved in children's sport should understand that children are not mini adults.
3. A subculture of children's sport should be created with its own rules and systems for competition.

4. Children should be offered opportunities for varied practice in many sports, and early specialisation should be avoided.
5. A 'mastery' motivational climate should be created for children's sports by emphasising personal and self-improvement goals, and stressing enjoyment, the learning and development of new skills, co-operation, and feelings of autonomy.
6. Adults should have a caring and accepting attitude towards the child and, when appropriate, emphasise independence and collaboration in decision-making by the children.
7. Teachers and Coaches should have regular contact with the parents of children in their charge. For those children in high-level sport, parents should be an integral part of the child's support team. Adults should learn to recognise signs of potential problems, such as anxiety or eating problems, and seek expert assistance where necessary.
8. Adults involved in children's sport should have opportunities for receiving education on children's needs and development in sport. "

Starting from a different historical background and through different studies and experiences, FIEP has arrived at largely the same series of recommendations.

If you wish to promote total community health, recreation and integration, and to enjoy levels of sporting excellence of which everyone can be justifiably proud, then we are not part of a morally (and perhaps financially) corrupt system trying to produce champions at any price. Proper attention to the rights of the children and young people will give strong guidance as to what is and what is not acceptable day to day practice.