



## Little League, Huge Effect

By Scott Ganz and Kevin A. Hassett

*In this article, AEI's Scott Ganz, who coaches the Institute's softball team, and Kevin A. Hassett examine the academic evidence about the rewards of participating in youth sports. Among the benefits: young people who are active in youth sports make more money, become more active citizens, and stay in school longer.*

When pundits discuss the influence of sports on American culture, they often emphasize the negatives: Michael Vick and dogfighting, the steroids scandals in baseball, lewd fan behavior in football, or doping incidents in cycling and track. But below the radar of popular athletic culture is something that has profoundly shaped the lives of millions of Americans for the better: youth sports. A growing body of research is showing the social and economic benefits of participation in youth sports to be surprisingly large and overwhelmingly positive. Other things being equal, if a kid plays sports, he will earn more money, stay in school longer, and be more engaged in civic life.

To understand how and why this might be so, consider the case of Sandy Brown, who works with the Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA), a national nonprofit organization that aims to improve the quality of youth coaching in America. As a youngster, Brown was frequently in trouble and had been kicked out of school for fighting and other unruly behavior. But Brown's life was turned around by a grade school principal and football coach named Bill Spencer. According to the PCA website, Spencer confronted his difficult new student one day and

said, "Brown, I know what your problem is." Sandy thought he knew what was coming next because he had heard this speech so many times before: "You're no good; you'll never amount to anything." But Spencer saw something else in the young man: potential. "Brown, you get into fights all the time because you want to compete. You have the heart of a winner."

Brown went on to play football for Spencer and had an impressive career. He is now a legendary coach at the Giddings State School, a youth detention facility in Giddings, Texas. Brown molds groups of violent young offenders into disciplined and winning football teams. Having won three state championships in the second-largest classification of the Texas Association of Private and Parochial Schools, he is regularly recruited by other "normal" schools but feels his job at Giddings is too rewarding to relinquish.

Brown takes kids who have committed heinous crimes and gives them hope. And he does that by making the game a metaphor for life. In a speech he delivered to his players in 1997 that was recounted in a *Sports Illustrated* profile, Brown said, "You boys had some tough breaks in life. You had judges who locked you up. You had parents who kicked your behinds and didn't give you the love you wanted. But let me tell you something: What happens to you tonight is up to you. You're the only ones out here who can change yourselves for the better. . . . You've got to stand

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up. Do you hear me? You've got to stand up and be a man, or bow your head and be a loser."

Feel-good stories such as this help illustrate a larger point. An increasing quantity of research suggests that people like Spencer, Brown, and other youth coaches have a major impact on the lives of their charges. One study, by economists John M. Barron and Glen R. Waddell of Purdue University and Bradley T. Ewing of Texas Tech University, examines a series of surveys of American males who attended high school in the 1970s. It found that high school athletes achieved a level of education 25–35 percent higher than their nonathlete classmates.

It is not just educational achievement that correlates with youth sports participation. Barron, Waddell, and Ewing also found that high school athletes had 12–31 percent higher wages than their nonathlete counterparts. And when the wages of college graduates who were high school athletes are compared with those who were not, the athletes generally made higher wages—on average, \$73 more per week. It is pretty clear that athletes win in the workplace, too.

Athletics also seems to give a bigger edge to students than other activities, such as band, student government, or theater. In another paper, Ewing estimates that, all else equal, athletes earn roughly 6 percent more than nonathletes, translating into around \$1,000 per year in extra wages.

Of course, it is possible that participation in athletics is just a proxy for other talents and abilities. Maybe sports do not really have a beneficent effect at the margin; perhaps it is just that more able people tend to participate in sports.

To investigate this possibility, Barron, Waddell, and Ewing also control for a number of variables in order to see if athletes are higher achievers because they share some other common characteristic. The authors examine IQ test results and standardized test scores and find that an "athlete premium" remains even after controlling for intelligence. In other words, if you take two kids who have the same IQ and put one in a sports program, he will have a better future.

Athletes are also more active citizens, a 2006 study found. Economists Mark Hugo Lopez and Kimberlee Moore of the University of Maryland examined the effect of participation in sports on civic engagement. After controlling for factors such as age, educational attainment, and income, they found that athletes are 15 percent more likely to be registered to vote, 14 per-

cent more likely to watch the news, and 8 percent more likely to feel comfortable speaking in public (and for public speaking, the effect on females is twice as large).

Why would participation in sports be associated with many benefits? Distinguished sports historian Allen Guttmann provides a clue. He notes that ancient sports were highly religious affairs, and competition was organized in order to please the gods. Modern sports, however, have an entirely different character. Guttmann comments, "Once the gods have vanished from Mount Olympus or from Dante's paradise, we can no longer run to appease them or to save our souls, but we can set a new record. It is a uniquely modern form of immortality."

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Small tastes of that immortality are available to today's athletes at many levels. Indeed, we speak from personal experience. What we have learned coaching youth baseball suggests why sports, especially modern team sports, can be so transformative.

For starters, one thing we have noticed is that no matter how low the stakes, the participants' emotional attachment to competition is intense. There seems to be little distinguishable difference between the transcendent joy of a World Series victor and a local Little League champion. A kid who has never had a hit in his life will feel like a Major League all-star when he rounds first base after his first line drive up the middle. It is doubtful there is a former Little Leaguer around who does not rate his first home run as one of the happiest moments of his childhood.

A coach does not have to teach a kid to care about winning. Indeed, the problem is the reverse. The youth coach's role is to focus on sportsmanship, effort, and excellence precisely because the obsession over the outcome is so innate and so strong.

But since individuals care so much about the outcome, they experience—perhaps in a way that is unprecedented in a young life—a desire for excellence. Once this fire is lit, the change in the behavior of kids on a team can be extraordinary. Parents do not have to hound kids to practice. They do so voluntarily. And when they do, they almost always improve.

The positive feedback between effort and results can then lead to snowballing commitments to excellence. One particularly successful cohort in our league, for example, consisted of kids who would organize informal practices at the local ball field. If you drove past the park on the way home from work, the odds were pretty good that half a dozen twelve-year-olds would be on the diamond, working out.

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This lesson—that hard work can lead to excellence—is one that can transform lives. Almost all of life in a capitalist society involves some form of competition. Young athletes learn the formula for success in a market-based system. And the evidence says they outperform their peers throughout their lifetimes.

A recent scholarly paper by economists Alberto Alesina and Edward Glaeser of Harvard University and Bruce Sacerdote of Dartmouth College found that countries tend to build large welfare states when citizens believe that success in life is largely determined by luck. When citizens believe that hard work determines success, they tend to build leaner and more economically efficient governments.

Americans are remarkably different from Europeans in this regard. If you ask Americans whether the economically disadvantaged are poor because they are lazy or unlucky, 60 percent say lazy. If you ask Europeans, only 26 percent finger laziness. Alesina and his colleagues argue that these attitudes shape society by shaping governmental and social institutions.

But why do these attitudes exist? A big part of the answer may be found in sports. A 1999 study by developmental psychologists Françoise D. Alsaker and August Flammer found that American children spend more time participating in athletics than Europeans. In certain cases—America compared with France, for instance—the gap is quite substantial. A 1996 study by Michigan State University sports psychologist Martha E. Ewing and Vern D. Seefeldt, former director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, found that 45 percent of all eligible American youths play in an agency-sponsored league, like Little League baseball or Pop Warner football. That is 22 million children each year who get an infusion of the American work ethos.

Americans learn on the ball field or in the gym that effort and success are connected. Convinced that effort matters, we extend more effort and celebrate and protect the fruits of effort. Why have Americans been unwilling to build a European welfare state? Because they believe that income differences are largely attributable to effort differences. Why do they believe that effort matters? Maybe it is because they played Little League.