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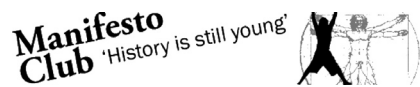
**In Support of  
Competitive Sport**  
Dan Travis

A Manifesto Club Thinkpiece

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## About Thinkpieces

Our ambition at the Manifesto Club is to start to develop the theory and substance of a new progressive politics. Thinkpieces are deep-thinking, spirited proposals for how to do things better in a particular area of life, written by Manifesto Club members from all over the world. Subjects can range from education policy to the running of a local school, from immigration to public culture. For more information, or if you are interested in writing a Thinkpiece, see [www.manifestoclub.com/thinkpieces](http://www.manifestoclub.com/thinkpieces); or email Josie. [Appleton@manifestoclub.com](mailto:Appleton@manifestoclub.com)



## About the Author

Dan is director of the discussion group the Brighton Salon, and is studying political sociology at Birkbeck College, London. He plays competitive tennis and was a middle-distance runner for his county. Dan is also director of sports coaching company OverTheNet, and studies sports coaching techniques for children. He is currently writing a book on the undermining of competitive sport in the UK.



### In short...

Competition is essential to sport. It is the desire to win that gives sport its meaning and drive.

Competition is being sidelined from school sport, and replaced with aims including health and self-esteem. This leaves children bored, and removes their incentive to improve.

We need to celebrate informal and community sport: local clubs and trainer-fathers have produced some of the best sportsmen and women. If anything, the churn of government sports policy merely reduces standards.

We need to reintroduce competitive sport in schools, and affirm the value of both formal and informal competition between peers. Government funding should provide sports facilities, and then let the games begin.

### **The meaning of competition**

I have been a passionate sportsman my whole life, first as a tennis player and now as a tennis coach. Over the years, I've witnessed a number of changes in the way people play sport, and what they expect of it. Most importantly, I think we're losing the rich and vital notion of competition, which is gradually becoming replaced with the less inspiring motivators of health, activity and self-esteem.

Although more people are now doing more physical activity than in the past, sporting standards are no better than 10 to 15 years ago; in fact, in a sport such as tennis the general standard in the UK seems to have gone down. I am also often struck by how slow runners are.

Those who now run seem to be concerned only about raising their heartbeat and the amount they have run. Race times seem less important, and the notion of a 'race' is becoming irrelevant (people may know how fast they ran in the half marathon, but have no idea where they came in the field). Alongside this proliferation of physical activity there is the growing absence of the school sports day, and the reduction of competitive sports in schools.

Doing sport to keep fit is fine, but when sport across the board starts to become a series of keep-fit exercises, it loses its meaning. Competition – at an amateur, professional or school level – is vital to sport, and it is competition alone that makes sport a dramatic and complex area of life.

I think that sport has historically offered an opportunity for the individual to exercise certain physical and mental attributes, and to operate at a higher level. It is competition - between two individuals or two teams, operating within universally recognised rules - that allowed play to become sport as we know it. There is a world of difference between messing around with a ball and playing a match; the one is mildly interesting, the other compelling for players and viewers alike.

Playing sport also allows for rampant self-interest to operate at a pitch that could not be possible in everyday life. Players could fight it out on the pitch or court, as total adversaries, then shake hands afterwards. This is the difference between the controlled contest of a boxing match, and the personal animosity of a pub brawl.

I also think that sport teaches important lessons of character, and self-possession. Children who play sport seriously are often more mature than their peers. A good sportsperson becomes wise about the strengths and weaknesses of the human personality, as he or she attempts to produce a performance at the very limits of their powers.

### **From competition to competence**

It is the competitive heart of sport that has been the source of controversy and unease in recent years, and it is the first area where the concerns of the outside world have attempted to change sports. Both in the past and present, some have felt uncomfortable with the rampant self-interest that operates in sporting competition, and have sought to offer alternatives.

The critics of competition have been motivated by different concerns. The left-wing critics of the past were concerned with the bellicose and imperialistic features of sport, which mirrored the worst aspects of capitalist society. Meanwhile, modern liberal unease with competition centred around the fact that it encouraged negative emotions, and had the potential to lower self esteem.

One image of the non-competitive sports is seen in the BBC 1970s comedy 'The Rise and Fall of Reginald Perrin' (in an attempt to counter a dull and alienating corporate existence, Reggie forms a 'commune' where absolutely no competition is allowed). In one scene Reggie recognises the problem of non-competitive football, where they are all in the same team and yet are losing four-nil.

Of course, this is something of a caricature of anti-competitive sentiments. For critics of competition, the problem was not so much being competitive at the expense of cooperation (there is a lot of cooperation within a competitive team); the problem was the beating of other people. At base, they wanted to replace beating other people via competition, with competing against oneself. While competition was seen as nasty and brutal, self-competition was viewed as safe.

The attack on competition instead emphasised 'competence'. When competence is emphasised over competition it is the individual competing against himself that comes to the fore. Another aspect was that competition was replaced with the idea of 'making everyone a player'. Again, it was not so much a move from competition to cooperation but a more individuating process, a focus on each individual's progress.

The concern was not with winning, pushing oneself further than your opponent, but measuring one's achievements on a chart. Yet it is only the social aspect of sport – the duel between athletes – that gives the activity its drama and meaning. In sport for competence, the athlete is focused not on his or her adversary, but on the measuring stick. So we see how, in fact, the attack on 'individualistic' competition actually makes sport more individualistic, and more concerned with the performance of the self.

This means that the individual becomes more complacent, and is not pushed to the limits of their powers. Running for a particular time is fine as a training exercise, but when you run races only against the clock, and not against other runners, there is no incentive to really push yourself. The whole exercise becomes somewhat dull - a test of individual willpower certainly, but without the interest of glory or defeat.

A number of writers, including Paul Hoch, Michael Novak and Christopher Lasch, have sought to explain and critique the shift from competition to competence. They analyse how the new sphere of 'leisure' affected sport. The sphere of leisure was simply a by-product or adjunct to the workplace: it was created from consumer society, and it overlapped and became part of the sphere of sports, games and play.

The rise of leisure meant that increasingly sports operated according to the principles of the market, and were relegated to being part of entertainment and relaxation (hence sporting facilities were known as 'leisure centres'). The 'leisurisation' of sports and their reduction to entertainment, in turn paved the way for sports to be influenced by a whole series of instrumentalist principles.

### **Playing for health**

Over the past two decades, and in particular the most recent one, sport has started to be reduced to health and wellbeing. To be more precise, sport has been given a purpose other than its intrinsic one – to play well, to win the game – and has a political purpose, which is to keep people healthy. 'Exercise' – previously only the prelude to the match or race - has become the whole point. This is seen most clearly in UK government policy, where sport is encouraged as exercise, and viewed as an antidote to illnesses ranging from obesity to heart disease.

The government recommends that everybody does 30 minutes of exercise a day, but it doesn't matter what that exercise is. This has led to a merging of traditional competitive sports with taking the stairs instead of the lift. It doesn't matter what you are doing, so long as you are 'active'. When sport is merged with health the competitive aspect of sport is argued against consciously, but is simply made irrelevant.

The UK government's latest policy has been to introduce pedometers to schoolchildren across the UK, in order to tackle obesity. The 'Schools on the Move' project gives these measurement devices to children so that

they can measure the number of steps they take in a given day. A more banal and dull exercise is difficult to imagine. Moreover, there is nothing to distinguish the types of step that are taken. A step is a step.

The fad-like quality of these policies mean that they do not last for long and are of absolutely no interest to children, who soon become bored. This should be contrasted to the rich and engaging sports that have always interested children. Trying to be better than your peers is a challenging and engaging experience; counting the steps that one takes during the day is not.

The irony of non-competitive exercise, where becoming healthier is the goal, is that it is less healthy than competitive sport. Competitive sport makes you fitter than simply going to the gym or running. The reason for this is that, in competitive sports, if you do not keep up you lose to your competitor or lose your place in the team. This potentially pushes you far further than the gym where, with the exception of the hardest individuals, one can stop when one feels tired. The greatest sporting performances have not been achieved in private training. Every record has been set in a race or match, with the shouts of the crowd in athletes' ears.

The emphasis on 'health' can push out competition in another way, too. Being competitive can lead to injuries, be they wear and tear or impact. The tendency in modern sport is to focus on the longevity of the athlete. Although injury prevention is not a bad thing, its promotion over performance and winning can mean that the competitiveness of the athlete suffers. This is particularly obvious in relation to running, where the emphasis on injury prevention in young athletes has been in part responsible for the decline in race times since the mid-1980s.

### **Raising self-esteem**

The bland nature of post-competitive sports is even more evident when we look at the next aspect of sport acquiring a social end: that of raising self-esteem. It is here that children's sport has become the focus of

attention for a society that is uncomfortable with competition.

The character-building aspect of competition was always seen as an advantage of competitive sports for children. Inherent in the concept of character-building sports was that although it was good to win, it was how you handled failure that was the lesson of competition. Your reaction to defeat was bound to be negative but it should be shortlived. Only by exposing the individual to possible defeat would they learn from the experience and grow.

Recently, raising self-esteem has taken the place of character building as a social end for sport, particularly in relation to children. Self-esteem is apparently under threat when a child loses in a particular competition. In schools, we are seeing the replacement of competitive sports with activities that are designed to affirm children's self-esteem.

In 2004, I offered to help organise a school sports day. Discussions went well until the issue of a race was brought up. The angst and hand wringing over the whether or not to have a race continued for two months. Objections were raised from everyone on the committee, ranging from whether the school was sufficiently insured in the event that a child were to fall over during the race, to who should be invited to watch the race and who excluded. The main stumbling block, however, was the fact that a race would produce a winner. Such an eventuality was far too problematic and considered unacceptable. Although the sports day went ahead, the race never did and I have been unable to introduce one into any of the schools I teach in.

I have noticed the effects of the removal of competitive challenges such as the race on school sports day. One of the mainstays of my school days was knowing who was the fastest runner in the school. We knew who they were as they had proved themselves on sportsday; even the children who were not interested in sport knew who was the fastest runner. Today, the children I teach have no idea who the fastest runner is and neither do I.

Here is an example of the kind of activity that has replaced the race, taken

from a recent newspaper report: 'On the last day of the year at Tong High School in Bradford a group of 13-year-old girls are intensely involved in their final PE lesson - captivated by a spider's web and a drainpipe. They wriggle through threads criss-crossing a frame, the "spider's web", while the short lengths of drainpipe are used in a team game to pass a ball to the other end of the sports hall without dropping it. The games, which are competitive, designed to develop balance, concentration and agility in pupils of all abilities, are part of the school's efforts to extend the appeal of physical exercise beyond traditional games'<sup>1</sup>.

This is the essence of the Child Centred Approach (CCA) to teaching, which aims to raise self-esteem and self-worth. Any attempt to introduce competition into schools comes up against the barrier of CCA requirements, and a compromise is reached as in the example above. Yet the reason competitive sports are so popular is because they have an obvious goal everyone can recognise and aspire to. The problem with compromise activities is that they have no obvious point to them, and no incentive for children to succeed.

Sports can help develop children's confidence, as they learn to push themselves and perform better. It can make them more assured and mature individuals. But it does this by subjecting them to pressure, and so developing *character*. The attempt to use sport to develop self-esteem does the opposite, and flatters them rather than develops them. Children protected from competition will tend to be more fragile than those who have been exposed to it.

### **Too much policy - why we need informal sport**

As the sports coach Paul Bickerton points out in his essay 'From Platform to Podium'<sup>2</sup>, there is a necessary balance between the 'formal' and the 'informal' in children's sports. Coaching is formal and is necessary but should only take up around 20 percent of the time children play sport. The informal 80 percent is where most of the learning and practice occurs, and it occurs away from the supervision of adults. As children's time,

especially that of 'play', is coming more and more under the scrutiny of adults, the informal aspect of learning sport is shrinking. As the US social critic Christopher Lasch pointed out in 'The Culture of Narcissism'<sup>3</sup>, it is the 'overseriousness' of the outside world that impinges on informal sport. The informal nature of play and its importance to sport in general is being swamped by 'sports policy'.

Contemporary UK government sports policy will comprise an 'initiative', and will involve all or any combination of the following bodies: the governing body of a particular sport, a charity or NGO, a funding body such as Sport England, and national or local government. Sports policy will attempt to do one of a number of things, many of which have little to do with sport. For example, improving health and safety – with the involvement of the NSPCC in helping shape the child safety policies of sports governing bodies, and the role of the British Heart Foundation in the government's 'Schools on the Move' pedometers project.

Then there are drives to increase the profile of sport. Governing bodies will also introduce policies to increase the popularity of a sport, without necessarily increasing participation in that sport (this can also be referred to as 'raising awareness' of the sport). The final role of policy is for a governing body to attempt to raise standards in a given sport - the best example of this is the continual drive of the British Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) to create better players.

The key features of sports policies are that they continually fail, while the number of them increase year on year. It is staggering to see the amount of time and money that is spent on creating sports policies only to see them fizzle out a couple of years later.

The most dramatic example of policy failure in the UK has been that of British tennis, with ceaseless attempts to develop better tennis players and increase the numbers of people playing the game, costing round £60 million each year. This is far more than any other country spends on its tennis programme - yet there is now only one British player in the men's top 100, and none in the women's.

There is a highly organised coaching programme for women in the UK. In Serbia, however, which now boasts the highest number of women players in the top 100, there is no 'policy'. Indeed, most of the best women tennis players of all time were coached by their fathers. Milek Navratil coached Martina Navratilova until she was 11. The 2004 Wimbledon champion Maria Sharapova's father Uri coaches her to this day. The most famous and successful 'Dad Coach' is Richard Williams, whose daughters dominated tennis a few years ago and continue to win grand slam titles.

It is sport coaching that is founded on love of the game, and sympathy between coach and player, that tends to produce the best results. Hyperactive sports policy is founded on a bland churn of initiatives, which are disconnected from the reasons why people play and love sport.

### **Towards a new competitive sport**

I would argue that competitive sports are rich and complex. A sporting culture is developed within and between communities and not imposed artificially from outside.

It is important to have a separate space for the individual to test themselves to the limit, free of the constraints and concerns of the world at large. This space must not be occupied by bloodless health regimes. Nor should we allow the nervousness surrounding competition to rob sport of its competitive heart.

Here, I would like to offer some practical suggestions about how we could move forward.

I would reintroduce competitive sports back into primary and secondary schools across the board, and assert the necessity of lowering children's self-esteem from time to time. Children ought not to be shielded from the downside of competition by eliminating the possibility of failure. They should be taught how to deal with losing as well as to enjoy winning, and to relish the challenge and excitement of a match.

I would also abolish all pedometers and activity sessions in schools. Competitive sports – of whatever kind – will be far more interesting and motivating for children than these artificial measures.

We need to give community sport funding and space to thrive, and stop tying up volunteers in red tape. The concern with health and safety makes it difficult for people to organise local matches, and the possibility of sporting injury becomes a reason that matches are cancelled. Let the organisation of events, coaching programmes and the participation of volunteers be free from red tape and the arbitrary opinions of officials and policy makers.

I would reduce 'sports policy', and keep government initiatives and direction to a minimum – simply providing the pitches and courts on which new players can be fostered.

Overall, I would argue that competitive sport can improve health and fitness far better than any policy. Competitive sports, like art, are a sphere of activity that allow us to experience our humanity in a more complete way. We need to start playing sports again for the love of it.

## **Endnotes**

[1] *Guardian*, David Conn, 25 July 2007

[2] 'From platform to podium', *spiked*, Paul Bickerton, 4 December 2006

[3] *Culture Of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch, 1979