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The Relationship between Sports Participation and Academic Performance: A Case Study

QUEK CHIN HWEE STEVEN

Introduction

In Singapore society, there is great pressure on students to excel academically (Yip, 1982; Thomas, 1985, 1987, 1988). Very often, our society judges a person's worth by their academic achievement (MOE, 1987). As such, students and parents see examinations as the be-all and end-all of education. Any activity that takes time away from studies is seen as a waste of time (Joseph, 1982). In such a context it is not surprising that students are not forthcoming to participate in Extra Curricular Activities (ECA).

The aim of ECA in Singapore schools is to provide for a healthy recreational activity by teaching pupils necessary skills and at the same time cultivating "correct" values and desirable social attitudes (MOE, 1989). Sport is an important part of the school ECA programme. However, there are cases of sportsboys/sportsgirls who have participated actively and excelled in sport but failed in their school examinations. Even though there are also instances of outstanding sports participants who excelled in both sports and studies, these achievements are often considered to be the exception rather than the norm.

A review of literature has not revealed any conclusive findings regarding the relationship between sports participation and academic performance. Larson (1973), Adler & Adler (1985) and Whitner & Myer (1986) reported that participation in sports has a negative effect on schoolwork and examination performance. On the other hand, Schumaker, Small & Wood (1986) and Byrd & Ross (1991) found that sports did not adversely affect the students in their

academic areas. Finally Rehberg & Schafar (1968) and Soltz (1986) showed that sports participation actually enhanced students' examination results.

The differences in the findings may be explained by the fact that the above studies have been undertaken in different contexts involving different types of sports and age groups. The specific situation and parameters of each study need to be examined carefully in order to make judgements as to the validity of any findings. Moreover, the majority of the above studies were completed in the US context which is clearly very different from that in Singapore. Nevertheless, the above references provide us with some indication of the complexity of the debate.

The Case of "Mark"

This article presents a single case study involving one boy from one Singapore school. It discusses the passage of the boy from primary school to pre-University level and shows how sports participation has accompanied academic success.

Sources of the Data

The author coached the boy in athletics from Sec 4 to pre-U 3 (1989-1992). This association provided the author with first hand information on the coach-athlete relation, the response of the athlete to training and other matters pertaining to the athlete's participation in the sport. Such information was noted as it occurred and formed the bases of the case record.

Additional sources of information were documents like the PSLE, GCE "O" and "A" Level certificates, as well as the schools' academic record books. These were accessed and enabled the academic performance of the student to be monitored and/or verified. Reports by his form teachers about his conduct and general progress throughout the thirteen years were also consulted. The training diary was a particularly helpful data source.

Finally several informal interviews were conducted with the parents (Jul' 90, May' 91 and Dec' 93) and the teacher-in-charge of athletics in his institution (May' 90, Jan' 91, Mar' 92 and Mar' 93). Their opinions on the progress and conduct of the athlete both in and out of school were obtained and noted. During the regular training sessions, informal interviews were also conducted with other members of the team, which provided information concerning the athlete. This provided yet another perspective, that of his peers.

The Early Days

Mark was quite a cheerful and intelligent boy. He was brought up in a 3-room Housing Development Board flat and underwent his six years of primary education in a school in his neighbourhood. Mark's parents did not have many paper qualifications and had to work many hours a day to earn a living to support the family. The parents consequently did not spend much time at home. Without their supervision, Mark spent little time with his studies but instead loitered around his neighbourhood. He would play any of the games his neighbours played and he became quite good at them. In fact he was so active that when he returned to class, his teachers described him as "restless", "hyper-active", even "inconsiderate". One of his form teachers complained that he was a distraction in class and blamed him for affecting his classmates in their studies (Case Record ix).

Although he spent little time with his studies, he was able to sail through his examinations with ease. At the end of primary six, he passed his Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and was promoted to Secondary one. As Mark had opted for an average secondary school (one near his home), his PSLE grades were good enough to place him in the top class of his new school.

Just as when he was in primary school, Mark still hung out on the street and continued to get by in each examination with minimal preparation. However, the workload in secondary school was much heavier and required everyone to put in a fair share of work to be able to do well. Mark's results began to suffer. From the top class in lower secondary, he ended up in the last-but-one class after the streaming exercise at the end of secondary two. What was worse was the

company he mixed with. His friends started to introduce him to billiards. He also started to ask for more money from home (Case Record i).

Although Mark passed his examinations every year, his results deteriorated. At the end of secondary four when Mark sat for his GCE "O" Level examinations, his mediocrity showed. He obtained only five credits with an aggregate score of twenty points, the minimum requirement for admission to a Pre-university centre.

Due to his poor "O" Level results, Mark could not attend a two-years junior college (JC) but had to attend a three-year pre-university centre (pre-U). He was posted to a centralised institution far away from his new home. Mark needed an average of one hour and fifteen minutes to get to school. That meant he had to catch the first bus daily or he would be late for school. However, he was not too disturbed, thanks to his easy-going nature. It turned out to be a place where Mark's life took a sharp turn for the better.

When Things Began To Change

When Mark was posted to the new institution, he asked the coach of his former school team to train him in athletics. The coach had been coaching the school team when Mark was in the secondary school but Mark had not been seriously participating in the sport at that time, and had not worked closely with the coach. However, he had experienced some success with the team in secondary four (where the team finished runners-up in the National Schools Cross Country Competition) and as such was encouraged to take up running seriously. It was at this stage that Mark began working closely with the coach in the athletic squad.

Mark found things quite difficult initially. He had never before been closely monitored by someone, unlike his team-mates who had worked very closely with the coach in the past. Mark had been used to just drifting along. Suddenly, someone expected him to be present regularly for training. The team trained as often as 5 times a week. He also had to be punctual and during the training sessions perform the necessary workouts diligently. He was also expected to train independently on certain days.

The training was physically demanding. Mark had to rest adequately the night before so as to be able to handle the training workload after finishing a day's lessons at school. Travelling to school and to the training ground at the School of Physical Education also demanded a lot of his time and energy. Before long, Mark felt troubled. He was not used to the discipline that was now expected of him. However, with the help of Mr. Y, an experienced teacher who was in charge of athletics in Mark's institution, Mark was encouraged and at the same time counselled and taught about discipline, determination and dedication, the basic ingredients of success in sports (Case Record ii).

That year, Mark participated in the National School Track and Field Championships for the first time. As Mark was in a centralised institute, he was to participate in the "A" Division (Under 20) despite being only 17 years of age. Nevertheless, he overcame many older and bigger opponents to take third position in both the 3000m steeplechase and the 5000m events for the "A" Division.

The next two years saw more successes on the track as well as on the MacRitchie Reservoir course. Mark won four more silver medals at the National Schools Track and Field Championships and was selected to represent the Combined School Team in the ASEAN Schools Track and Field Meet in Thailand. In his final year in the institute, he also won the National School Cross Country "A" Division Individual title and captained the school team to the team championship. He eventually received Zone and National Colours Awards, as well as the Top Sportsboy award in his school.

Success Beyond Sports

Mark's success in his three years in pre-university went beyond sports. Associated with the sports involvement was a change in character. He became a mature student who was respectful of his elders. Once the complaint of every class teacher, he became, in the teachers' words; "competent, committed and co-operative" (Case Record x). In fact his form teacher and classmates so trusted his responsibility and leadership that in his final year in school they made him the class representative. His coach, his team-mates and Mr. Y

also felt that his leadership role was instrumental in the success of the school cross-country team (Case Record iii). It was the first National Schools title the school had won since its inception in 1989.

Mark's father, was one who saw a drastic change in the conduct of his son ever since he took up running. Mark used to ask for fifty dollars every week on top of his daily pocket money. He would spend the money at the billiards salon each day after school. Now he would return home from training, have a quick dinner, wash-up and immediately settle down with his homework. Because he was tired from his training and that he knew he needed adequate rest, he did not spend time in front of the television watching television programmes or film shows from videos (Case Record i).

During the school holidays, even though Mark slept much more than the average person of his age, and spent much time with computer games, he started to do some studying each day. He would meet up with his team-mates or class-mates to do some revision in the afternoons. The most relevant and quantifiable measure of his success (at least in terms of our society) was to be his GCE "A" Level results. He not only passed all his subjects, but was also one of the top students in his institution. He gained admission to university.

How did a change like that take place over the relatively short span of three years? What circumstances combined to achieve this transformation? Was the school such a special place to be able to turn the "devil" that he used to be into an "angel" within a short span of time? How did his involvement in the athletic programme relate to his new found success in the classroom?

Possible Reasons For The Change

Without taking credit away from the teachers who put in many hours to guide the boy in the academic areas, it could be argued that much of his success may have been due to his involvement in sport.

Rehberg (1969), identified five factors to explain a positive relationship between athletics participation and academic

achievement. It would appear that the change in Mark over the three years could be explained by any or all of these five factors.

(i) *Association with high achievement peers*

Mark was training with a few boys who were studying in a leading junior college. This association may have provided him with the necessary peer environment to excel in his studies. The coach was also studying in the university at that time and Mark visited the hostel very often. This also gave him the opportunity to mingle with the undergraduates.

According to his father, when he became serious about sports, he spent more time at the track and less time at the billiard saloons or on the streets. This, the father felt, served not only to keep him from wasting money but also reduced the likelihood of mixing with the wrong company and being influenced to pick up gambling or smoking by a very different group of peers (Case Record i).

(ii) *Transfer of achievement value from sport to classroom environment*

Values like self-discipline, determination and dedication which brought him success on the sports field were being transferred to the classroom. Particularly, after the pressure of the athletics season, he appreciated the amount of time he had and spent it wisely to prepare for his examinations. This is also explained by Parkinson's Law (when time is at a premium, it is used most efficiently) (Soltz, 1986).

(iii) *An increased self-esteem which creates a higher level of aspiration in other domains*

This explanation is also supported by Schumaker et al. (1986), who reported that participation in sports enhance the self-concept. The success Mark has achieved in his sports also gave him more confidence in his other endeavours. He began to think that he could also do as well academically. Merely passing examinations, which was once his target, was no

longer enough for him. He wanted to excel further and earn a place in the university.

- (iv) *Pressure applied internally and externally to present a consistent image in all areas as a successful individual*

In school he became more aware of his conduct. Being the top sportsman, he received more attention from the teachers and the student population. This put pressure on him to be on his best behaviour both in terms of doing his homework as well as in his general conduct. He also did not want to let his parents, teachers, coach and friends down. After all they had been very supportive of his sport and he did not want to disappoint them. He attempted to project a positive image at all time.

- (v) *More career guidance from a significant adult*

Mark looked up to the coach as a role-model. He started to ask the coach about the entry-requirements to the university and the respective courses to enrol in order to pursue certain career. The friends he made in the university hostel also provided him with much advice and guidance. He began to think more seriously about his career.

Based on the above discussion, any or all of the five factors identified by Rehberg (1969) may arguably have contributed to the change in Mark's behaviour.

Conclusion

On entry into pre-university Mark's future had been far from bright. Imagine what he would have been getting into if he had not picked up a sport but continued to hang out on the streets and the billiards salons? What trouble he would have had with his parents when he kept asking for more money from home to be spent on billiards? How much trouble he would have created for his class with his misbehaviour? Life would have been very miserable for him and the people around him.

This one particular case appears to provide us with some supportive evidence of how sports experiences can contribute to personal and academic development. There is a great need for further case studies and empirical studies to explore this relationship. Some such studies might identify others who have failed to combine sports with studies. However it is the belief of the author that this single case provides clear and plausible evidence that sports participation can serve a role in fostering all-round development for an individual. Such development can include the enhancement of academic performance as one of its outcomes as in the case illustrated here.

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