



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM



The Jubilee Centre  
for Character  
& Virtues

# Educating Character Through Sport:

## Principles and Purposes of a Virtues- Based Framework

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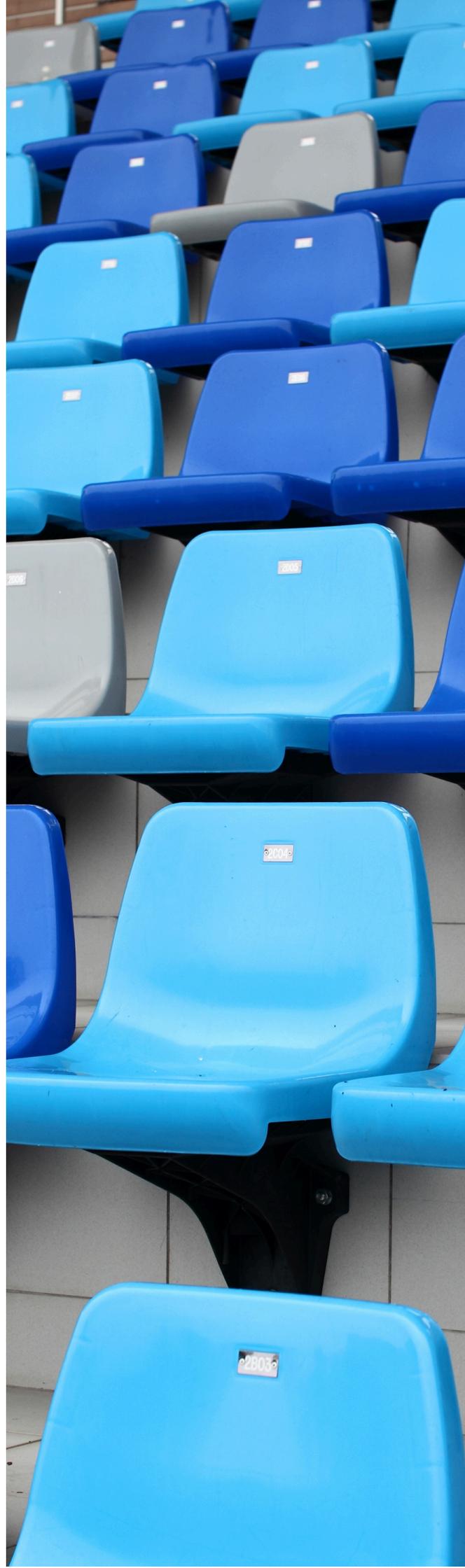


# Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues is a unique and leading centre for the examination of how character and virtues impact upon individuals and society. The Centre was founded in 2012 by Professor James Arthur. Based at the University of Birmingham, it has a dedicated team of academics from a range of disciplines, researching the importance of character for individual and societal flourishing.

With its focus on excellence, the Centre has a robust, rigorous research and evidence-based approach that is objective and non-political. It offers world class research on the importance of developing good character and virtues and the benefits they bring to individuals and society. In undertaking its own innovative research, the Centre also seeks to partner with academics, policy makers and practitioners from around the world to develop strong strategic partnerships.

A key conviction underlying the existence of the Centre is that the virtues that make up good character can be 'caught', 'taught' and 'sought', but that these have been largely neglected in schools and in the professions. It is also a key conviction that the more people exhibit good character and virtues, the healthier our society. As such, the Centre undertakes development projects seeking to promote the practical applications of its research evidence.





# Educating Character Through Sport:

## Principles and Purposes of a Virtues- Based Framework

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# Introduction



*Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.*

*John Wooden, Basketball Coach and Player*



Organised sport (referred to hereafter simply as sport) and character are inextricably linked. While most who engage in sports activities at elite or grassroots levels will be concerned with technical aspects of the particular sport being coached, played or watched, they will also be concerned with the ways and extent to which those individuals and groups coaching, playing, or watching conduct themselves. When we describe a sports person we might identify and praise their technical ability, but we are just as likely to refer to their character – how determined they are, whether they persevere when challenged, whether they are humble, whether they demonstrate integrity, or whether they are a good leader. It is also the case that the character of those involved in sports often transcends beyond sporting contexts, impacting their character more generally. However, while character and sport go “hand-in-hand”, the language of character in sport often operates in unspecified generalities. Coaches and commentators frequently praise those who “show character” and refer to the “importance of character” when overcoming adversity without necessarily specifying what “character” means or consists of.

This document might be used to help those involved in organising and supporting children and young people’s participation in sport to inform their own approaches, to reflect on how they and those they work with understand character in sport, and how they understand and approach coaching with character at its heart. Being attentive to character, to the development of character, and to how character is expressed in and through sport is an obligation all involved in sport share – whether players, parents, coaches, or sports organisations. Participating in sport is not just a matter of technical ability, performance, and success, but is fundamentally concerned with how participation is experienced and conducted and how those engaging in sport view themselves technically *and ethically*. Participating in sport is fundamentally concerned, that is, with *character*. Those involved in organising and supporting children and young people’s sports participation have a responsibility to enable participants to explore character, to think about the sorts of player and person they wish to be, and to have intentional and explicit opportunities to form character through their participation – including having the opportunity for reflection and to learn when things do not go as they should.



*Remember that sports are meant to be fun. Don't let someone make the sport unfun for you.*

*A.J. Kitt, Skier*



# What is Character?

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**Character** is a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation, and guide conduct.

**Character education** includes all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people to develop positive personal strengths called virtues.

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*The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools* sets out a fuller account of character, of character education, and of virtues than we do in this short section, but in straightforward terms character is a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation, and guide conduct. Character education includes all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people to develop positive personal strengths called virtues.

Character education more commonly takes place in the home and in schools but also occurs in educational contexts that are informal and non-formal – including within sporting environments. Wherever and whenever it takes place, character education helps children and young people to explore and understand the ethically important aspects of situations in their lives and how they can act for the right reasons and at the right time in order that they become more autonomous and reflective in the practice of virtue. To talk about character is to talk about the kind of persons children and young people are and want to be, including how character becomes identify-conferring and features across the varied aspects and relationships of their lives. A central aim of paying explicit and conscious attention to character education is the development of good sense, or practical wisdom, which can be understood as the capacity to choose intelligently between alternatives – including when two “positive” courses of action conflict. In a sporting arena, such conflict might for instance occur when a player in a team sport has to choose whether to be honest about an unnoticed infringement or whether to prioritise the success of their team. To be able to make such choices and to think about the choices available requires practice, education, and support as it is through reflection, dialogue, and repetition – including with peers and those with more experience – that practical wisdom develops. One way of phrasing the development and importance of practical wisdom in sport is cultivating ‘slow thinking’ in preparation for the ‘fast’ and ‘immediate’ decisions sport often requires<sup>1</sup>. As such, it is vital that those involved in sporting activities are mindful and attentive to how character and virtues feature and are experienced.

# Why Sport and Character?

An immediate question that might be asked in relation to character and sport is *why* the focus is needed at all. In other words, whether the ethical aspects of sports coaching, playing, and watching are covered to a satisfactory extent already by the various rules, laws, codes of conduct, and conventions that exist and which shape how sports are played, coached, and watched. Surely, it could be asked, are such codifications that are already in place not sufficient? To some extent this question is well-directed. In all sports, rules, laws, codes of conduct, and conventions exist that *do* influence the conduct and character of those who participate. However, ethical matters and ethical conduct require much more than the following of rules and codes, and while these remain important they are limited as ethical guides, meaning that ethical questions and challenges remain.

We can point, for instance, to persistent concerns about the conduct of some players, coaches, and spectators at elite and grassroots levels in particular sports and about how officials are treated; times when the balance between competition, winning, and other important outcomes become unbalanced. Even more seriously, we can point to various high-profile scandals involving sports coaches, organisations, teams, and players that have come into the public spotlight and which have highlighted the morally questionable, and at times criminal, cultures and actions that have existed in some sports teams or organisations. In addition, these scandals and ethical concerns have occurred within grassroots participation and elite performance sports settings. As concerns are present in both settings, the view that grassroots settings are more concerned with fun and participant wellbeing and that elite performance settings are more concerned with success appears to be a largely false and unhelpful one where ethics are concerned.

Even beyond these more serious matters, in many sports ethical “grey areas” exist that involve matters of character and virtue. One example of this is the ongoing discussions in cricket about what constitutes the “spirit of the game”. More broadly, many sporting activities involve some form of gamesmanship, the tactical and not always ethical ploys used to gain a psychological or competitive advantage. The ethical questions and challenges alluded to briefly here are fundamentally concerned with matters of character and virtue, but also with immoral conduct and vice (whether as a result of ego, fear, pressure, or some other factor). That said, and while important, positioning the value of character in sport as a *reactive* and *preventative* measure can only take us so far and

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1. We are particularly grateful to Greg Clarence for his suggestion of differentiating between slow and fast thinking.

can only be part of the picture. There are many very positive reasons why character matters in sports. Indeed, ask a player, coach, or parent *why* they participate in sport and what their motivations to participate are and it is exactly these positive reasons that will often come to the fore.

First and foremost, sport offers a forum for forming and expressing good character. While much more research is needed on the precise relationship between participating in sport and character, it is undeniable that sport requires and involves strengths of character – or virtues. In making this point it is essential to recognise that while character is perhaps most readily identified through actions and practice, virtues comprise multiple components. To truly possess and exhibit a virtue involves reason, emotions, motivations, and identity all of which inform and shape action. In other words, character in sport is not simply about what we do, but about who we are, who we seek to be, and why.

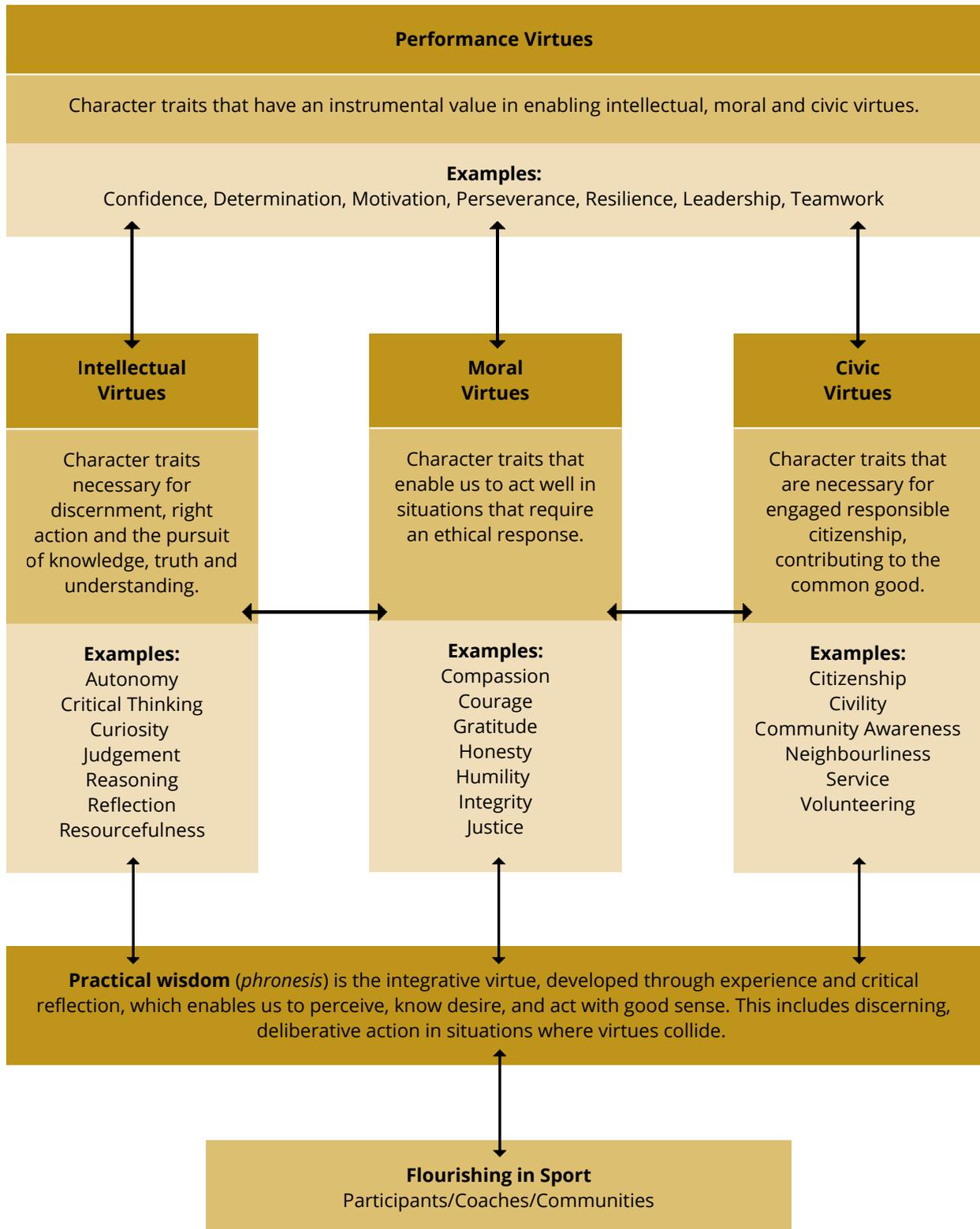
The most commonly cited strengths of character in relation to sports are performance virtues, such as determination, resilience, perseverance, teamwork, and leadership. These performance virtues often act as a gateway into deeper matters about character and virtues in sport, and it is for this reason that the modified Building Blocks of Character diagram presented in this document starts with performance virtues. Yet, and as with performance virtues in environments beyond sport, performance virtues are not good in and of themselves. Teamwork, for instance, can be directed towards negative goals and ends just as much as it might toward positive goals and ends. Performance virtues become *virtues* when they are aligned with virtues from the other categories in the *Building Blocks of Character* – namely, intellectual virtues, moral virtues, and civic virtues. This alignment works in two ways. Performance virtues become directed to the good through other virtues. For example, teamwork is more likely to be positive when it is aligned with compassion, empathy, gratitude, and justice. In addition, performance virtues are often vital for the realisation of intellectual, moral, and civic virtues. Being humble when winning, showing friendship in defeat, prioritising team over individual success, and making wise and ethical decisions are not always easy and require determination and leadership as well as an environment that prioritises and celebrates humility and friendship.

This latter point leads to a second positive reason why character matters in sport. As well as providing a forum for the development and expression of character and virtues in individuals, participation in

sport can also develop a sense of belonging and community. Indeed, it may well be that sense of belonging and community that sustains involvement in sport over time for most or many who participate. Just as with other formative environments, sport highlights how virtues are both individual and communal in their development and expression. In other words, virtues do not exist in individuals alone but require relationships with others for their formation and enactment. Even in sports that are ostensibly individual, participants will be connected to others within their organisation or, indeed, to those with whom they train, with whom they participate, and with their coaches. The forging of belonging and community is a vital ingredient of sport. The bonds and commitments involved are stronger where there is not just a shared endeavour, but where that shared endeavour is shaped, informed, and held to account by a shared language and commitment to a positive vision and ethos that has character at its heart. While performance virtues are an important aspect of vision and ethos in any sporting team or community, what really invigorates and unites a *positive* vision and ethos are intellectual, moral, and civic virtues such as courage, humility, service, friendship, curiosity, judgement, and compassion.

Being aware of, and paying attention to, intellectual, moral, and civic virtues in addition to more common performance virtues underlines a third reason why character matters in sport. The formation of character and virtues is likely to be beneficial for flourishing as a sportsperson as well as for flourishing as a person. Indeed, the two might well be connected. As already mentioned, there exists a lack of empirical evidence that can fully explain the positive (or indeed negative) association between sport participation and character. That said, if – as is commonly held in lay terms – sport does impact character then it would follow that where sport focuses on virtues as positive traits of character there could well be a positive association with virtue development more generally and, in turn, with flourishing. Human flourishing is the widely accepted goal of life and to flourish is not only to be happy or to win, but to fulfil one's potential *as a person*. Fulfilling one's potential involves paying due attention to virtues, to living with others, to being part of a community, and to respecting others and oneself. To view human flourishing in this way raises questions that are ripe for further exploration about what it means to flourish in any given sporting environment, what such flourishing "looks like", and how practically it might be achieved. It is certainly the case that far more research is needed about not only the impact of character and sport, but also about the transferability of any character formed in a sporting environment to other domains of life.

## Building Blocks of Character Through Sport



*Friendship in defeat is the essence of virtue.*  
Unattributed



# Character-Based Ethical Coaching



*The reason why I think I was so successful was because my coach ultimately always saw me as a human being first.*

*Rebecca Adlington, Swimmer*



Every sports coach is a role model, and every sports coach shapes the character of those they work with. Coaches do not have a choice whether they shape character – but coaches do have a choice about whether they take a planned, intentional, explicit, and reflective approach or whether they take an approach that is assumed, reactive, superficial, and disjointed. Coaches also have a choice about whether they share character positively (by teaching and role-modelling virtues) or whether they shape character negatively (by teaching and role-modelling vices). In addition, coaches do not operate and develop character in isolation; they are part of a wider community. Being an ethical coach is much more than following certain rules or repeating certain rhetoric and clichés. It is one thing to *know* what ethical coaching is and quite another to *be* an ethical coach. Ethical coaching takes time, requires support, and is an ongoing process – it is never the case that a coach could be said to be “fully” or “wholly” ethical. Similarly, at least part of the reason most coaches of children and young people are coaches is because they want to support holistic development beyond the acquisition of technical skills and the success of winning competitions.

This holistic and character-based approach to coaching requires the careful and considered development of a supporting environment by the sports bodies, organisations, and clubs that oversee coaches and coaching. When operating in an unsupportive environment, coaching can become an insular and isolated practice. To ensure that aspects of being a character-based ethical coaching are appreciated and reflected upon, it is crucial that organising bodies, sports clubs, and coaches themselves undertake directed professional development to learn from and with other coaches through the open exploration of ethical quandaries, opportunities, and challenges that sports coaches face.

Parents and families, of course, remain the primary moral educator – and this role remains fundamental where sports and character are concerned. Indeed, understanding the place and purpose of character in sports and sports coaching has to recognise the role of parents and families in children and young people’s early sports participation. The ways that parents and families interact with their children before and after sporting activities and the conversations they have about fairness, effort, humility, and competition shape the child’s early moral framings of sports and of themselves as participants in sport. Additionally, how parents and families speak to their children about sport and participation and what parents and families model and expect of their children often interact with the views, conduct, and expectations of coaches. This noted, just as it is important that character formation in the home starts with parents and in schools with teachers, so too character formation in sports is highly dependent on the conduct of coaches. Without starting with coaches and with ethical coaching, the impact of sport on the character of children and young people will be restricted or, worse still, negative. It is vital, therefore that all involved in coaching sport and in preparing sports coaches have a view of what it means to be “an ethical coach”.

The question, then, is not whether coaching has an ethical dimension but rather what form that ethical dimension should take and how best ethical coaching might be operationalised. Building on the suggestions in the previous sections, this document advocates for an understanding of ethical coaching that incorporates positive character development as an integral aspect, and which is ultimately interested in and guided by what it means to flourish as sporting participants and sporting communities. For that to happen coaches require educational and developmental processes and structures that enable them to explicitly and consciously explore and reflect on their own character and the place of character in their coaching.



*My responsibility is leadership, and the minute I get negative, that is going to have an influence on my team.*

*Don Shula, American Football Coach*





A character-based ethical coach:

- Views and treats those they coach as ends in themselves, rather than just a means to an end.
- Appreciates the dignity of all those involved in sport – at whatever level they participate.
- Understands that while coaching involves technical expertise, coaching also involves paying attention to the character and virtues of children and young people, including their emotions, motivation, and conduct.
- Is aware of how their own conduct and character can be “caught” by those they coach – both positively and negatively.
- Focuses on the “journey” of the coaching process as much as on the “destination”, emphasising the transformational rather than transactional nature of coaching.
- Seeks to develop a range of virtues in those they coach, not only focusing on performance virtues but also on intellectual, moral, and civic virtues.
- Appreciates that being ethical and helping to develop character is important to their identity as a coach.
- Is aware of and is guided by the positive vision of coaching set out by the organisations within which they work (for example, the sporting body, the club, and the team).



*Make sure you're very courageous: be strong, be extremely kind, and above all be humble.*  
Serena Williams, Tennis Player



- Thinks carefully about what “winning” and “success” means in their sport and for those they coach, but does not pursue external rewards at the expense of character and the flourishing of children and young people.
- Engages in ongoing reflection about their own character and motivations as a coach and how these relate to the motivations of those they coach and of other key stakeholders (for example, parents, other coaches, and spectators).
- Understands that what they *say* as a coach and what they *do* as a coach are equally important, and recognises that what they say they stand for can be either positively reinforced or negatively undermined by their actions.
- Recognises that being an ethical coach is a process as much as it is a goal, one which requires honesty, reflection, and feedback from others.
- Acts as a role-model for those they coach, for other coaches, and for other stakeholders.
- Is guided and informed by relevant codes of ethics, uses these to guide their conduct, but recognises that there is more to being an ethical coach than a code of ethics can cover alone.
- Listens and is attentive to the needs of those they coach, including their moral, social, and intellectual needs.
- Seeks to develop practical wisdom, or good judgment, in themselves and those they coach – finding support from others to do so.



*As a coach, you always have to be there to support the person – improving them as a player becomes secondary to a degree.*  
Gareth Southgate, Footballer and Coach



# Educating Character Through Sport



*The moment of victory is much too short to live  
for that and nothing else.*

*Martina Navratilova, Tennis Player*



Virtually all children will compete in sports of some kind and at some level, whether at school, at a grassroots level, or at elite level. If a child or young person is asked why they participate in sports, they are likely to provide a range of answers. They might participate solely for enjoyment, for individual improvement in the sport, or to be successful (by whatever measure they wish to judge success). Children and young people might also speak about the opportunities participation provides to make connections and friendships with others, to “test” themselves, to encounter different experiences and challenges, or for the physical and mental health and wellbeing benefits participation provides. Character and virtues are involved in most, if not all, of these motivations to participate. In addition, sport provides a space and arena where some children and young people are able to demonstrate positive aspects of their character that they find hard to demonstrate in other parts of their lives, including their more formal education.

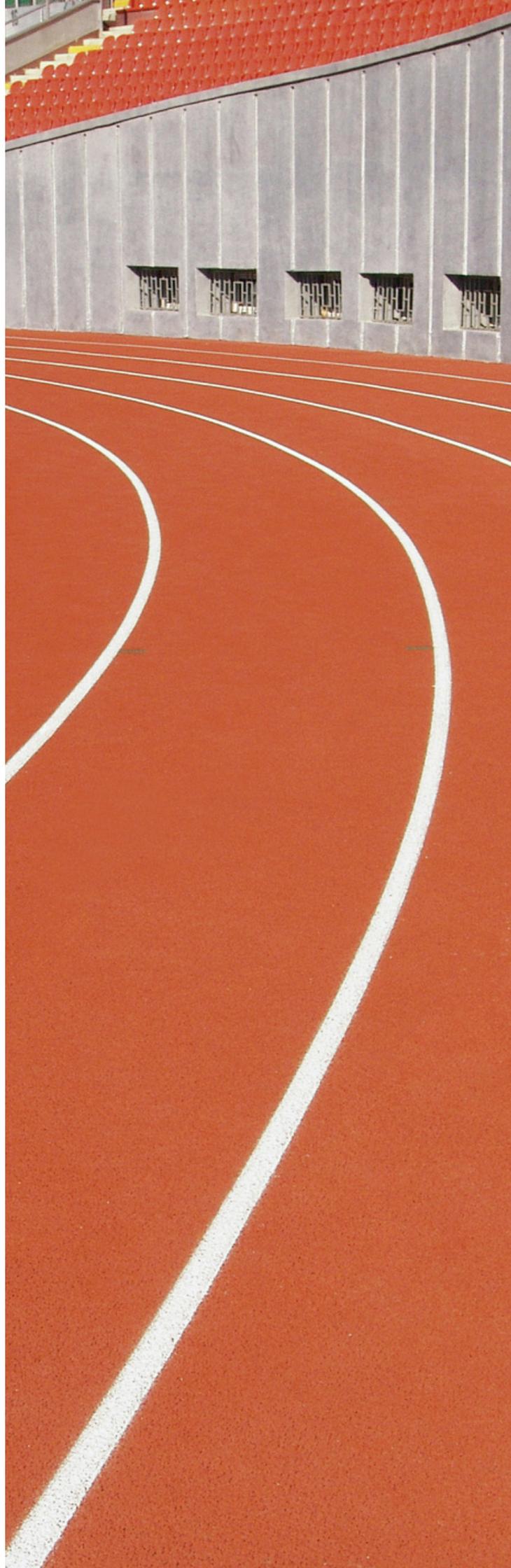
In the earlier sections of this document the “what” and the “why” of character and sport were outlined. In this section, ideas about “how” character can be developed through sport are offered. In offering these ideas, this document invokes the “character caught”, “character taught”, “character sought” typology of *The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools*:

## **Character virtues can be...**

**Caught...**through a positive community environment, formational relationships, and a clear ethos.

**Taught...**through the explicit use of teaching and learning strategies, activities, and resources that focus on character and virtues.

**Sought...**through experiences chosen by participants themselves that actively seek character development.



## Character Caught Through Sport

Character can be caught through sport when participation occurs within a collaborative, supportive, and aspirational physical learning environment that is shaped by a strong ethos and culture that strikes a balance between technical performance, enjoyment, and the development of the whole person. The ethos and culture that guides relationships and conduct may prioritise performance virtues, but also recognises and celebrates other virtues and views all categories of virtue as important for development and flourishing.

The positive ethos and culture – including the prioritising of a person-centred and other-regarding approach – builds a sense of belonging and community and encourages relationships and conversations built on respect, empathy, and kindness. Through respect, empathy, and kindness a platform is established to hold more difficult conversations. This positive ethos and culture that enables character to be caught through sport is shared and sustained by sport organisations, clubs, coaches, parents, spectators, and by players themselves under the shared consensus that the primary goal of children and young people’s engagement in sport is their enjoyment and positive development as well-rounded humans. Conversely, however, where the environment and ethos within a sporting organisation or relationship are negative and pursue external goods in such a way that acts to the detriment of character and virtues, vices, and unethical conduct are likely to result.

## Character Taught Through Sport

Though the primary way that character will be learned through sport is through “caught” processes, there are also important educational opportunities for character to be taught through sport. A crucial aspect of character taught through sport is enabling children and young people to engage in discussions with their coaches, peers, and other key stakeholders to discuss those matters and questions most relevant to their own sporting participation and lives, including through the use of explicit teaching and learning opportunities and through discussion and reflection on ethically salient situations (real or hypothetical). In turn, discussion and reflection benefits from the existence of a language of character, that enables those involved to possess the virtue literacy necessary to discuss matters involving honesty, compassion, justice, kindness, service, perseverance, resilience, friendship, and other relevant virtues.

The general trajectory of sports participation will give rise to a range of ethical questions and quandaries. It is crucial that coaches and, as their independence and autonomy grows, participants are able to recognise these questions and quandaries and make appropriate space for their consideration. At times, these will be general and applicable across sports, while at others they will be more specific and contextually grounded in the practices and conventions of the given sport involved. In addition, teaching character through sport requires coaches to listen, encourage, and role model reflection, as well as to be open to alternative ways of thinking, to feedback, and to criticism. A *willingness to learn*, to teach, and be taught, is of fundamental importance.





“

*Look for players with character and ability. But remember, character comes first.*  
*Joe Gibbs, American Football Coach*

”

## Character Sought Through Sport

Character can be sought through sport when participants identify and choose experiences and opportunities that require the enactment of virtues and which, in turn, provide the challenges and experiences so fundamental for learning and development. These challenges and opportunities often involve moving beyond one's "comfort-zone", a process that benefits from secure foundations, appropriate scaffolding, and support from others.

Leadership, whether in a formal or informal sense, is one of the main ways that children and young people can be encouraged and provided with the chance to develop their character in sporting environments in ways that extend beyond those environments to their lives in general. That said, coaches and others involved in sport organisations need to identify the right moments and opportunities for participants to take leadership and also be open to the fact that participants might take the opportunity themselves to exhibit leadership – however big or small – embracing challenge and gaining insights and perspectives about themselves and others. Character sought through sport could be encapsulated by amending the often-cited statement “**doing your best** is more important than **being the best**” to “**being your best** is more important than **being the best**”.

“

*Sport gave me my voice and brought out my best self. The curiosity that drove my athletic career remains, pushing me to take chances even in retirement.*

*Christine Ohuruogu, 400m Runner*

”

# Overall Vision

This document offers the following overall vision for character in sport:

- Along with technical performance, character is fundamental to sports participation and coaching.
- Every child and young person who participates in sport – at whatever level – has a right to be treated as a human being, including having their character recognised and being given opportunities for their character to be formed and expressed.
- Character forms a crucial component of flourishing *in* and *at* sport – whether individually or communally.
- Paying explicit attention to character in sport will likely benefit performance in sport, and may also have benefits that transfer to other aspects of children and young people’s lives.
- Realising the true potential of character in sport requires a positive vision and commitment.
- Positive and well-directed attention to character in sport will more likely manifest when a range of stakeholders are involved and when these stakeholders work together intentionally and with a shared vision.
- Character can be caught, taught, and sought through sport – but character caught is not only logically prior in this sequence but acts as the foundation for character taught and character sought.
- Sport necessarily offers up a wide range of ethical questions and quandaries for participants. These questions and quandaries must be recognised and turned into learning opportunities for discussion and reflection by coaches and others involved in children and young people’s sport.
- Just like their character more generally, children and young people’s sporting character is not fixed but is educable.
- The education of children and young people’s character is more meaningful when children and young people are involved as active agents rather than as passive receivers.
- Character helps to preserve the integrity of competitive sport, meaning that those involved compete fairly, ethically, and with integrity.



*In the end, it's extra effort that separates a winner from second place. But winning takes a lot more than that, too. It starts with complete command of the fundamentals. Then it takes desire, determination, discipline, and self-sacrifice. And finally, it takes a great deal of love, fairness and respect for your fellow man. Put all these together, and even if you don't win, how can you lose?*

*Jesse Owens*



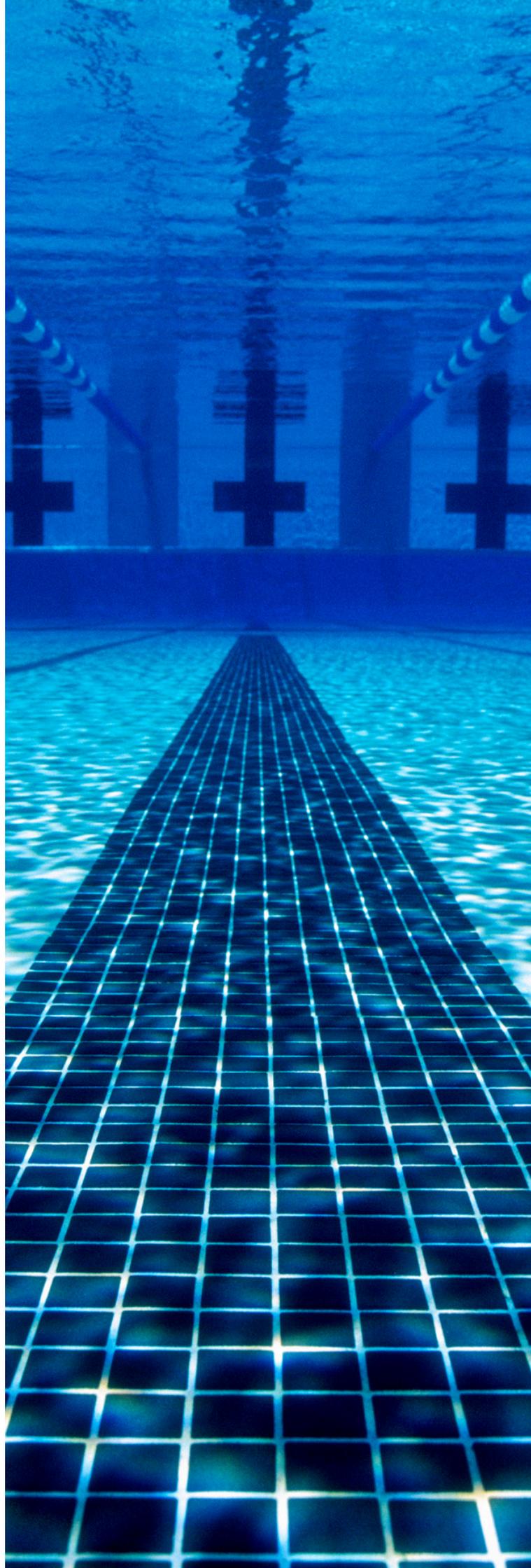
# Future Directions

This document stands as an initial elucidation of a virtues-based approach to character and sport. More thinking, discussion, and research – including the sharing of effective practices and teaching materials – is needed to further develop and extend current work on character in sport. The focus of this thinking, discussion, and research might usefully concentrate on the following areas:

- The place and value of character within and across sports so that particular needs, opportunities, and experiences specific to each given sport can be properly considered and explored.
- The creation of bespoke teaching materials for sports coaching in general but also for individual sports.
- The value of positive role models within different sports and how their influence can be harnessed for the benefit of others.
- The role of good judgment on the sports field and how it often mirrors good judgment about life issues in general.
- The connection between character development and success in sport at elite levels.
- The practical pedagogies, processes, and experiences that help to form character through sport, including those that help coaches to reflect on and develop a character-based approach to coaching.

## Acknowledgements and Authorship

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