

*What Sport Means
in America:
A Study of Sport's Role in Society*



U.S. Anti-Doping Agency

Executive Summary

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Legendary basketball coach John Wooden wrote in his memoirs, *The Wisdom of Wooden*, that his father was formative in instilling the values of sport and life:

“Basketball or any other sport can be great fun to play and entertaining to watch. However, it offers something more important. The lessons it provides—taught properly—apply directly to life. Many of those lessons are usually taught first by a good mother and father, but sports can help make them stick and add a few more.”

INTRODUCTION

Background

As the non-profit, independent entity recognized by Congress to administer the anti-doping program in the United States for the Olympic, Paralympic, and Pan Am Games sports, the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency’s (USADA) mission is to preserve the integrity of competition, inspire a commitment to the core principles of true sport, and protect the rights of U.S. athletes to compete healthy and clean. USADA is equally dedicated to its four main areas of service: 1) the anti-doping testing and results management processes, 2) programs that deter and detect incidents of doping, 3) research that advances anti-doping science, and 4) education initiatives aimed at preventing doping altogether, rooted in building a culture of integrity and priceless life lessons learned through true sport.

Recognizing that doping, at its core, is not just a drug problem but also a values issue, USADA understands that cheating by doping is just one manifestation of a fundamental ethical problem—the willingness to win in sport at all costs. This attitude undermines the intrinsic value of sport, and all that it offers, and incurs serious health and social costs to all of those who participate. It is with this in mind that USADA envisions itself as a guardian of the values and life lessons learned through true sport.

The Value of Sport – A National Asset

We know that sport, at its best, can build character and promote the virtues of honesty, respect, selfless teamwork, dedication, and commitment to a greater cause. Sport lessons (good and bad) transcend the playing field, spilling over into the classroom, the business world, and the community, and contribute to shaping the character and culture of America’s citizens.

In acknowledging sport as a valuable national asset, we must be candid about the issues currently tearing at its fabric. There are those who place winning above all else and are willing to cheat for the sake of this goal. This willingness to prioritize winning, at the sacrifice of ethics and health, erodes our trust in sport and its inherent value. In the United States, there is no doubt that we face a doping problem. The question is, to what extent is this but one extreme symptom in our country of a greater epidemic—an ethics issue? As a nation, we should embrace the role that sport currently plays and can play in our society, and the issues it now faces, in order to determine how to ensure its enduring integrity and value.

Project & Objectives

In establishing a foundation for its educational footprint, USADA has implemented this research project in an effort to measure the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the nation's general population, as well as those of athletes competing in sport under the auspices of a national governing body [NGB], regarding the impact of sport in our society (see box). Due to the NGBs' unique positions as regulatory and membership bodies, data from NGB participants is included to capture the formalized sport audience, which includes not only the most elite athletic levels of sanctioned competition, but also the developmental and organized youth programs for those who make sport a part of their lives. The results of this study will inform future education initiatives, serving USADA's mission to inspire audiences about the values to be derived from a culture of true sport.

The survey was conducted by Discovery Education under its national research arm, on behalf of USADA, and as part of a partnership on the national USADA True Sport Awards program. Based on an online questionnaire, including closed-ended questions and open-ended input from youth as well as adult populations, the study looks at, among other things:

- participation levels nationwide,
- the values sport should reinforce versus those that it actually does,
- beliefs about issues/problems facing sport today,
- why people begin playing and conversely why they stop and when,
- what drives the pressure to cheat and the impact of the emphasis on winning,
- the responsibility sport figures have as role models, and
- whether sport is meeting society's expectations.

METHODOLOGY

To address its research questions, USADA commissioned Discovery Education to conduct an online survey (a complete questionnaire can be provided upon request). A total of 8,934 surveys were completed, representing five different audience segments:

- **General population adults ages 18-64** (n=4,443): Individuals selected from a general population panel and weighted using U.S. Census data to be demographically representative of the U.S. general population,
- **NGB Adults** (n=370): Members of national governing body (NGB) sport organizations who are 18 years or older, and who participate in sport, are parents of children who participate, or are officials or volunteers. (For the definition of an NGB, see box this section.),
- **NGB Coaches** (n=193): Individuals who are coaches for NGBs. (For definition of an NGB see box this section.),
- **Teachers** (n=201): Educators recruited from the Discovery Education call list who teach at the K-12 or at the college levels (majority teach middle school or high school), and distributed nationally as follows: Northeast: 23%, Midwest: 20%, South: 33%, West: 24%,
- **Children ages 8-17**, including:
 - **General population children participants ages 8-17** (n=2,263): Children in the general population who either participate in organized sport through a competitive league/club (not associated with school), through a school team, through community-based leagues, or participate in informal sport (not organized through official entities),
 - **NGB children** (n=646): Youth (ages 8-17 years old) participating as members in NGB-level sport. (For definition of an NGB, see box this section.),
 - **General population non-participant children** (n=681) Children obtained from the general population who have minimal or no participation in sport.

Respondents from NGB sport organizations were recruited from substantial and well-maintained lists provided by the following NGB organizations (for definition of an NGB, see box this section.): USA Fencing Association, USA Hockey, US Youth Soccer, USA Swimming, USA Taekwondo, and USA Track & Field. For the purposes of this study, the sampling of NGB sports included is based on a preference to have a representative cross-section of those played in the United States, including, but not limited to, the following criteria: summer sports, winter sports, large, small, with and without comprehensive youth components, with and without professional leagues, and a balance of youth participation, gender participation, geographic diversity, and ethnic diversity. Additional sports were contacted but unable to participate for various reasons.

The study was fielded from December 18, 2009 to January 20, 2010. The several survey forms took an average of 21 minutes to complete. USADA worked closely with an institutional review board (IRB) to ensure the project was in compliance with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) regulations. Surveys sent to those in the general population were "blind," with no indication of the identity of the surveying party.

The online panel utilized in this survey was managed by Opinion Outpost. The online sampling method and sample size used in this survey produced results that are representative of the populations described. The 4,443 adult respondents have been weighted to reflect the U.S. Census for age, ethnicity and geography.

In addition to the quantitative study, 128 brief qualitative online interviews were conducted, focused primarily on the emphasis of winning in sport. Respondents were split between adults and children, and included 26 general population adults, 20 coaches, 20 teachers, 21 children ages 8-10, 21 tweens ages 11-13, and 20 teens ages 14-17.

This report emphasizes quantitative research findings among general population adults, but it also includes findings among the other primary subgroups as well as some demographic subgroups in which key statistically significant differences exist.

A national governing body (NGB) is a sports organization that has a regulatory or sanctioning function. Sport governing bodies can impose disciplinary actions for rule infractions and serve as the arbiter of rule changes in the sport that they govern. They also set the conditions for and supervise competitions. Every Olympic sport is subject to the oversight of an NGB, which also should provide training and education on the values and ethical expectations of the given sport.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To better understand what Americans believe about the role and significance of sport in society and to assess their views on sport ethics and values, role models, and aspirations, in 2010 USADA commissioned a survey of nearly 9,000 Americans, representing the general population, coaches, athletes, and parents of athletes involved in Olympic-path sports and non-Olympic level sports (e.g. community-based, school-based, informal). The major study highlights are as follows:

- ***More than three-fifths of U.S. adults—approximately 162 million Americans—claim some relationship to sport-related activities***
- ***Parents overwhelmingly cite personal and social values when describing their hopes for their children in playing sport***
- ***Coaches rank as the #1 positive influence on today's youth involved in sport***
- ***Two-thirds of Americans agree that sport overemphasizes the importance of winning***
- ***Americans rank the use of performance-enhancing drugs as the most serious problem facing sport today, closely followed by issues such as the focus on money, and the criminal behavior of well-known athletes***
- ***Nearly 90% of U.S. adults agree that well-known athletes have a responsibility to be positive role models for young people, and by wide margins agree that the personal conduct of well-known athletes is as important as their athletic accomplishments***

Important findings from the study follow.

Role and Significance of Sport in American Society

Sport plays a major role in American life. More than three-fifths of U.S. adults, approximately 162 million people, claim some relationship to sport-related activities, including 25% who are actively engaged in sport as participants, parents of children in sport, coaches, or volunteers.

Sport offers many positive benefits to society, as the majority of adults agree that sport provides a source of fun and enjoyment (88%), can reduce youth crime and delinquency (84%), can teach valuable life lessons (80%), and can bring people together in ways that strengthen communities (76%). Three-fifths of adults agree that sport overall promotes positive values.

Why We Value Sport

Those who start a sport because they enjoy it and derive benefits from participation may be more likely to make it a life-long activity. However, many people drop out of sport—often at an early age—because they no longer perceive its value. Fun is the most common reason adults and children give for initially becoming involved in sport. Conversely, when sport is no longer fun, children and youth are more likely to stop participating.

Parents largely name positive personal and social values when describing their hopes for their children in playing sport. They hope that playing sport will teach their children to have fun, do their best, feel good about themselves, play fair, have respect for others, be part of a team, and be competitive in a good way. Parents agree that sport meets these expectations. In fact, **parents so highly value sport that more than 90% of parents of children who are somewhat or very active in sports agree that sport is “fun and a reward in itself.”**

However, U.S. adults are mixed as to whether sport overall is reaching its full potential in contributing to society’s values. They strongly believe that it is important for sport to reinforce wholesome values such as honesty, fair play, respect for others, doing your best, teamwork, fun, hard work, and self-discipline, and rank winning and competitiveness as the least important values sport should reinforce. However, interestingly, adults believe **the top qualities that sport actually does reinforce are competitiveness and winning.**

Ethics in Sport

Ethics violations and the desire to win at all costs threaten the inherent value of sport in America. A majority of adults (75%) agree that athletes’ use of performance-enhancing substances is a violation of ethics in sport. This is further underscored by the fact that **Americans rank the use of performance-enhancing drugs as the most serious problem facing sport today**, closely followed by the focus on money and the criminal behavior of well-known athletes.

Nearly two-thirds of U.S. adults agree that sport overemphasizes the importance of winning and two-fifths (41%) of those who report personally bending or breaking the rules say they were motivated by their desire to be a “winner.” Children ages 8-17 who play a sport believe that the desire to be a winner is the primary motivation for cheating. **As children get older (and stakes get higher) teens experience more cheating than do younger children (ages 8-10) and they become more tolerant of it.** In terms of gender, boys are more likely than girls to be aware of cheating in sport and consider winning to be a more important value in sport than do girls.

There is little tolerance overall for breaking or bending the rules in sport. More than 8 in 10 U.S. adults agree that breaking or bending the rules in sport is always cheating, whether or not someone notices (83%), and that breaking or bending the rules for any reason is cheating and should not be tolerated (84%). However, **more than half of adults believe that there are some sports that are accepting of unethical behavior, demonstrating the reinforcement of negative values and undercutting the ability of sport to reach its potential.** Football, hockey, wrestling, and baseball were sports most frequently mentioned as accepting of unethical behavior.

Despite adults’ disdain for cheating, about 1 in 5 admit to having bent or broken the rules in a sport and nearly half say they know someone who has bent or broken the rules in a sport. Cheating is most common among sports volunteers (36%), sports participants (34%), and male parents of children ages 8-17 (31%). Furthermore, nearly all (96%) of those who have personally cheated cite knowing others who have done so as well.

The Importance of Role Models in Sport

Although 67% of spectators spend most of their time watching professional sport, **adults believe that professional sport lags behind all other categories of sport in actually promoting positive values, while community-based sport is considered to have the most positive actual influence.** Roughly half of U.S. adults think professional athletes have a positive influence on today's youth, and nearly 90% of adults agree that well-known athletes have a responsibility to be positive role models for young people. **By wide margins, adults agree that the personal conduct of well-known athletes is as important as their athletic accomplishments.**

Children who play sport also have high expectations for well-known athletes. Despite the general intolerance for cheating of any kind, alarmingly, 41% of children in the general population who play sport and 29% of children involved in organized sport through a national governing body (NGB) [see box on page 3] *agree* that **if a well-known athlete breaks the rules in a game, it makes children think it is acceptable to break the rules to win.** In addition, children in all types of sport agree that **if a well-known athlete takes drugs, it makes children think it's acceptable to take drugs as well.**

Among all audiences surveyed, coaches rank as the #1 positive influence on today's youth, according to the majority of respondents. This makes coaches, perhaps even more so than parents and teachers, the guardians of youth sport. These adults are closest to youth sport participants (both proximally and emotionally) and are generally perceived as having a positive influence on young people.

Behind coaches, and other direct influencers, such as parents, teachers, and teammates, Americans rank Olympic, college, and professional athletes as less positive influences on young people, with college and professional sport athletes generally ranked lowest amongst these groups.

As children move into the teen years, their rankings of positive influencers shift away from direct influencers such as coaches, parents, and teachers, toward indirect influencers such as Olympic and college athletes, demonstrating a swing in focus to external public personalities as role models. Interestingly, among all respondents, **Olympic athletes rank higher than college and professional athletes as having a positive indirect influence on young people.** And Olympic athletes overall received the highest score in the "completely positive" category.

Conclusions

Based on the findings in this study, the significance of sport is reinforced as a cherished national pastime. Survey results reinforce that parents hope their children will derive value from playing sport, and that Americans recognize sport's potential for building character and promoting necessary virtues for a greater cause.

As a society, Americans value sport and what it can offer. In general, they have a sophisticated understanding of what it means to bend or break the rules, and overwhelmingly agree that use of performance-enhancing

drugs is a clear ethical violation that threatens sport today. Furthermore, Americans believe that an over-emphasis on winning threatens sport, possibly by motivating rule breaking and by taking the fun out of sport for too many people. Role models, in particular coaches, can play an important part in maintaining the integrity and value of sport.

The lessons learned by participating in sport transcend the playing field and contribute to shaping the character and culture of America's citizens. As a nation, we should advocate for the role that sport currently plays and could play in our society, and attend to these issues that place sport in jeopardy in order to cultivate its enduring integrity and value to so many aspects of American life.