

Effects of School Sports

As young people mature many drop out of competitive sports. Rather than emphasizing fun and participation, high-school sports, especially at the varsity level, demand intense effort and high levels of skill. Many players, including some good athletes, experience being cut for the first time. Others avoid this kind of rejection by not trying out in the first place. Consequently, high-school varsity sports teams provide a highly competitive experience for a selected group of young athletes. Observers have long believed that the special experiences associated with varsity sports might “build character.”

The precise meaning of “character” is not defined, but it clearly refers to good conduct and “good” attitudes which presumably will help the athletes to succeed in school and in later life. Sports sociologists have accumulated a considerable amount of research on the behavior, attitudes, academic performance and adult careers of high school athletes and nonparticipants. The following sections will look at the first two of these presumed outcomes of sports participation. The subjects of academic performance and adult careers will be reserved for the next chapter which centers on sport in the schools.

Some General Problems

When we speak of the “effects” of sports participation we are implying that participation is the *cause* of the effects. The standard method of discovering whether one condition (e.g., varsity sports) is a cause of something (e.g., different behavior or attitudes) is the *experiment* (see Table 5–2). The key to any experiment is the availability of two identical groups at Time 1. In animal research this may mean two groups of mice housed and fed the same and so inbred that all are virtual “identical twins.” One group is given a treatment, perhaps a hormone that is supposed to promote growth. Sometime later, Time 2, the two groups, *still exactly the same except for the treatment administered to the experimental group*, may be different (perhaps

TABLE 5–2 A Model of an Experiment

	Experimental Group	Control Group
Time 1	X ₁	X ₁ '
Treatment →		
Time 2	X ₂	X ₂ '

The key to any experiment is that two or more *identical groups* must be available. A *treatment* is administered to one of the groups making it the *experimental group*. The “no treatment” group becomes the *control group*. Since the only difference between the groups is whether the treatment was administered, any differences between the groups at Time 2 must have been produced by the treatment.