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## Where is sport steering youth?

**Nationwide survey of high school students challenges the assumption that athletics build character.**

By Lance Pugmire  
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For generations it has been one of the great American axioms, accepted truth on diamonds, courts and gridirons everywhere: Sports builds character, instilling the values of teamwork and good sportsmanship.

But amid fresh headlines of alleged cheating in auto racing, continuing controversies over steroid use in baseball, track and cycling and ugly brawls among basketball players comes a nationwide survey suggesting a decidedly darker vision of sports.

"There is reason to worry that the sports fields of America are becoming the training grounds for the next generation of corporate and political villains and thieves," says Los Angeles ethicist Michael Josephson.

The latest two-year study of high school athletes by the Josephson Institute found a higher rate of cheating in school among student-athletes than among their classmates. It also found a growing acceptance of cheating to gain advantages in competition.

Josephson's report, based on interviews across the country with 5,275 high school athletes, concluded that too many coaches are "teaching our kids to cheat and cut corners."

The provocative findings were met with strong reactions from all sides — some acknowledging problems while others scoffed.

James Staunton, commissioner of the 565-school California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) Southern Section, which governs high school sports for most of the Southland, said he "hopes" ethical deviance hasn't "gone that far."

"What this points out to me is that we still have a tremendous amount of work to do with our athletes, parents and coaches," Staunton said. "For all the good things we talk about in sports, and the wonderful things we promote, we're fighting some societal pressures."

The commissioner acknowledged finding "that kids are powerfully motivated for the wrong reasons."

Some established Southland prep coaches dismissed Josephson's conclusions, including Chino Hills Ayala High's Tom Gregory, a 27-year veteran basketball coach. "I've used basketball as a tool for my players to become better people," he said.

The survey's conclusions may be open to some dispute. Josephson found, for example, that about 25% of teen athletes considered rule-bending and aggressive behavior in competition acceptable. A substantial majority did not find it acceptable, though the percentage who considered that behavior acceptable had risen since a previous survey.

Among other notable survey results were:

- At least 65% of athletes acknowledged cheating on an exam at least once within a year, compared with a 60% rate among a general student population.
- 72% of football players acknowledged cheating.
- 48% of baseball players believe it proper for a coach to order his pitcher to throw at an opposing batter in retaliation.
- 37% of boys think it is acceptable for a coach to motivate a player using personal insults and vulgarity.
- 43% of boys endorse trash-talk and showboating during games.
- 6.4% of male athletes acknowledged using performance-enhancing drugs in the last year.

"I'm not trying to fool people, or be an alarmist," Josephson said. "But I believe in looking at these numbers; there are so many kids learning to cheat that there is cause for great concern."

He said the survey did not pinpoint "whether this enhanced propensity to cheat is due to values that put winning over honesty or a reflection of pressures to stay [academically] eligible or simply manage their time given the high demands of sports."

But Josephson said: "The fact remains that for most kids, sports promotes rather than discourages cheating."

Barbara Fiege, commissioner of the CIF City Section in Los Angeles, called the survey results "amazing to me."

She speculated that positive values of high school sports may have been diminished in recent years by a diluted pool of experienced teacher-coaches. In the City Section, for example, 40% of coaches do not teach any classes at the school, not even physical education courses.

"When your coach has not gone through four or five years of college, does not have a degree in education and is not involved in the kids' grades or classes, there's going to be an inherent amount of drop-off in the effect they have on the kids," Fiege said.

Gregory, the coach at Ayala who disputes Josephson's findings about sports, nonetheless agrees that coaches make a big difference.

"When I see problems with undisciplined teams, many times there's a young coach on the bench," he said.

Higher incidents of poor sportsmanship can also be attributed to less-than-perfect "role models like Barry Bonds, violence in professional sports, the showcasing of kids as individuals in a team game, and parents becoming much more aggressive," Gregory said.

"It's cool now to be overly aggressive, taunting, boisterous," Gregory said. "Many kids don't want to be a yes man."

But warped values are not the fault of sports, he insisted. The failure rests on parents, teachers, coaches and role models.

Said Fiege: "Participating in sports still teaches kids the lessons of work, of working with a team, of conflict resolution, of learning to win and lose, and how to deal with a competitive world. But now there's a bigger influence on the need to win by coaches, with parents who are motivated to get their kids in the best club programs and to that elusive college scholarship.

"Now it's about more than just being a high school kid proud to be playing at your local high school."

With 660 victories and four Southern Section boys' basketball titles in 28 years of coaching, Glendora High's Mike LeDuc said his most troubling ethical concerns are the number of coaches engaged in recruiting players, the prevalence of amateur teams that displace high school team loyalties, and "illogical" parents.

Josephson "went too far if he's not saying the vast majority of players and coaches are OK," LeDuc said. "I still believe sports promotes winning, but not at all costs. We promote values ahead of success. We define winning as doing the best you can. I think you can have two winning teams on the same night."

Southern Section commissioner Staunton did not hesitate to embrace Josephson's survey.

"As kids grow and change and learn, if they're learning all along that cheating a little is OK, what will they do when they're at a greater level in life?" Staunton asked. "We have the facts of what these kids have reported to us. I can't deny this is happening. We need to do something about it.

"Sports should be the training ground to do things properly. These numbers tell us we have a ways to go, and it's on all of us — administrators, coaches, parents and athletes."

The Southern Section holds a series of one-day training sessions for coaches to examine ethical decisions and dilemmas, and requests ethical mission statements from athletic departments.

On March 8, its council members will vote on a measure to stiffen penalties for bad behavior by athletes — banning players for the remainder of any season in which they are ejected from two games. Two ejections now result in a two-game suspension.

"Our belief is to install more punitive measures," Staunton said. "Education is the answer. We want our athletes to accept that wrong is wrong, not to dismiss what they do as part of the game."

Sure penalties tend to deter cheating, according to the student survey, Josephson said. He credited NASCAR and the NBA officials with setting a good example. NASCAR removed driver Michael Waltrip's crew chief from Sunday's Daytona 500 after a banned fuel additive was found in his race car. The NBA imposed a 15-game suspension on Denver star Carmelo Anthony for fighting during a game.

"We have bad sports in athletics, in the political world and in the business environment," Josephson said. "These people are polluting it, and in some cases, they're corrupting it."

The City Section's Fiege commended Josephson's strong words.

"I'd venture to say he's saying these things to make the very strong point that this is a crisis," she said. "He might be going a little overboard to get people's attention, but this surely deserves attention, because whatever we've done to this point isn't working."

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(INFOBOX BELOW)

### Unsportsmanlike conduct

The ethics and values of young athletes are often adversely affected by their sports experiences, according to a report by the Josephson Institute of Ethics. A look at some of the results:

Q. A coach orders a player to "attack" a preexisting injury of a top scorer on the other team.

### Percentage of boys who think it's proper

Wrestling: 44%

Football: 39%

Tennis: 30%

Volleyball: 29%

Baseball: 27%

Overall\*: 29%

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Q. Cheated on a test in high school in the past year

### Boys who cheated at least once

Football: 72%

Hockey: 70%

Baseball: 69%

Basketball: 68%

Wrestling: 62%

Volleyball: 60%

Overall\*: 65%

Girls who cheated at least once

Softball: 72%

Cheerleading: 71%

Basketball: 71%

Soccer: 68%

Track: 64%

Overall\*: 65%

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\*Overall percentage for boys also includes cross-country, gymnastics, soccer, swimming, tennis, track and volleyball. Overall percentage for girls also includes cross-country, gymnastics, swimming, tennis and volleyball.

Q. Used racial slurs or insults in the past 12 months

Boys

No: 48%

Yes: 52%

Girls

Yes: 29%

No: 71%

Percentage who think it's proper for a coach to instruct a player in football to fake an injury to get a needed time out

Boys: 37%

Girls: 20%

Source: Josephson Institute. Graphics reporting by Lance Pugmire



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