

Catholic Youth Sports and CYO: Teaching Gospel Values through Sports

Why are young people, parents, and coaches involved in Catholic youth sports when there are many alternatives via community based programs, travel teams, and more? The answer is simple and rooted in mission: *CYO sports is about helping young people be more Christ-like in how they live their lives.* This simple phrase is at the heart of why Catholic youth sports programs exist. This is also the measure of success through which programs should be implemented and evaluated by players, parents, and coaches alike.

While Catholic sports programs are known throughout the country for producing fine teams and athletes, they are also sometimes known for behaviors that represent the dark side of youth sports that reflect values that place winning above all else.

Catholic youth sports (CYO) is not exclusively defined by any one program or group. CYO is rooted in an active and sacred partnership. Student-athletes, parents, coaches, athletic directors, advisory committees and boards work together and operate within the teachings, beliefs, and values of the Catholic Church as its foundation.

There are times when individuals or any of these groups upholds the best of CYO by leading participants to be better Christians in the world. Regretfully, there are also times when individuals or any of these groups violate the fundamental mission and values of CYO, thereby doing a great disservice to young people, families, and the mission of the Gospel.

It is the work of all parties involved in CYO leadership to continually work to help CYO live up to its legacy and bring the best of CYO to all young people. This is increasingly difficult in a youth sports culture that highlights and celebrates values and behaviors that are often in direct opposition to the teachings and values of the Catholic Church.

There are truths, half-truths, and myths about CYO that combine to sometimes better focus and clarify who and what CYO is while at other times distorting or disguising the mission and values of CYO. One must proceed with humility and a touch of humor, recognizing that the heart and soul of Catholic youth sports is best identified by how we help young people live as better Christians through their involvement in CYO. This is the number one measure of success or failure in all CYO programs and efforts.

The Big 4

In the American Sport Education Program (ASEP) book titled *Catholic Coaching Essentials* (December, 2006), a compelling vision and understanding of Catholic Youth Sports identifies these 4 building blocks as the foundation of Catholic youth sports.

1. Sports as Youth Ministry

Catholic parish and school athletic programs must be intentionally connected with the mission and values of the Gospel. When understood in this context sports become part of the overall parish ministry to, with, by and for young people. This connects your sports programs with the basic mission and values of your school or parish. An essential question is this: How does your Catholic youth sports program enhance, animate, or violate the mission and values of your school?

2. **Coach as Youth Minister**

When sports are rooted in the mission and values of your school/parish, the Coach becomes a youth ministry leader who is ministering to young people on behalf of the faith community. In this context the coach needs to have the gifts and abilities to fulfill this ministry as well as being open to the training and accountability required to serve the youth and families entrusted to her/his care.

3. **Team as Christian Community**

Among the many terrific benefits of being on a Catholic athletic team is the opportunity to learn first hand what it means to be part of a Christian community in a personal way. This relates to how the young people and coaches live Christian values of caring, forgiving, encouraging, settling conflicts peacefully, supporting, loving, and challenging each other. The team experience is where Christian faith is lived in practical ways that connects the individual and team with basic Gospel values and beliefs.

4. **Parents as Partners**

It is commonly lamented that parents are a big problem in youth sports. Stories abound that support such a claim. Yet in Catholic sports programs we recognize that parents need to be as fully engaged as possible in helping to work as active partners to foster the best of what Catholic youth sports is about. This requires active work with parents to identify what is and is not acceptable in Catholic youth sports while working together to always keep the value of the child growing in faith as central to all considerations.

This framework of Catholic youth sports provides an opportunity to critically examine some of the most challenging issues in youth sports in general and Catholic youth sports in particular. This includes but is not limited to the following:

- Winning the right way and healthy competition.
- Role of parents and strategies for building effective partnerships.
- Guaranteed playing time for young people as a reflection of Catholic values.
- Age appropriate rules and expectations for healthy childhood development.
- Travel teams, A and B teams, and navigating youth sports culture and values.
- Coaches training and certification.
- Athletic advisory boards and booster clubs—their link to CYO programs.
- Evangelizing youth and parents through Catholic youth sports.

I invite you to return to our NCCYS.org website often where we will have a monthly article and helpful resources to address these and other foundational issues in Catholic Youth sports. We welcome your thoughts, feedback, suggestions, and insights. May God continue to guide and bless you in your ministry with the young, remembering the wisdom of St. Don Bosco who reminded us, “That you are young is reason enough to love you.”

Your brother in Christ,
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