The ACT Skills Framework and Its Application in Youth Sport

If you have positive memories of youth soccer practice, old friends from little-league, or dusty, rusted trophies from high school track, you may not need any further evidence that sport is an excellent opportunity to shape youth in powerful and productive ways. However, our experiences and observations provide only anecdotal evidence that youth sports can promote healthy development. A growing body of research on youth sports augments personal experience, and provides a better understanding of the process by which sport can have a positive impact on young people. This summary showcases ways in which sports programs provide opportunities to address each of the three ACT domains, highlighting a selection of skills from the framework.

ACHIEVING

Programs provide opportunities for young people to be highly engaged in learning, develop authentic skills, produce real work for real audiences, and attain mastery.

Focus: Critical Thinking

Critical thinking in sports:

- The execution of strategy and the analysis of in-game decisions
- The act of decision making and receiving feedback, sometimes immediate, on those choices
- The process of developing connections with teammates and coaches
- When and how to react to officials and the enforcement of competition rules

Strategies to incorporate intentional development of critical thinking:

- Ask athletes to explain why they made certain decisions. Help them process the decision and understand what factors may have contributed to the decision. Make sure not to do this as a punishment but as a learning tool e.g. when an athlete makes a poor pass in competition don’t remove them from the game as a punishment, remove them and ask them to explain why they made that pass and what better options might have been available. Then, allow them to return to the game so they do not view their substitution as a punishment for making a mistake.
- Incorporate drills in your practice sessions that include opportunities for athletes to work on a problem and develop solutions e.g. when working on game strategy provide the athletes with the strengths of the other team and ask them how they might approach the game.
- In between innings/periods/event/quarters ask athletes what they feel they might be having difficult in and allow them an opportunity to organize a strategy to address that issue. Ask them to follow up with it at the end of the event to see if they were effective.
- Think of academic concepts that may be inherent in the activity (i.e. math or science) and ask athletes to reframe their experience through that lens e.g. when working on shooting in basketball ask them to try to think about the physics of how a shot goes in; what are the principles they need to be aware of to ensure the ball goes into the hoop?

CONNECTING

Programs provide opportunities for young people to participate in supportive relationships with peers and adults, experience giving and receiving and make a contribution to community.

Focus: Communication

Communication in sport:

- Athletes need to communicate in very different contexts – i.e. locating a defensive player, providing support to a teammate, communicating a shift in wind direction, drawing attention to a scoring opportunity, or discussing a concern with an official.
- Athletes must know when it is appropriate to voice a concern and when it is not. They learn this through interactions with coaches and most importantly officials.
- Athletes must learn the jargon of a sport.
- Athletes listen to feedback and work to integrate it into their performance; they often need to ask clarifying questions.
- Athletes listen to instructions and then translate them into actions.

Overview

In 2012 Boston After School & Beyond commissioned the Aspire Institute at Wheelock College to investigate the evidence base connecting participation in youth sports with the skills for success highlighted by the Achieve, Connect, Thrive Framework. A full version of the report by Lisa Lewis and Diana Cutaia will be released in early 2013. This preview highlights some of the practical suggestions the report offers programs seeking to help youth intentionally build skills through sports.
Strategies to incorporate intentional development of communication include:

- Coordinating with competition official’s opportunities for youth to articulate concerns.
- Ask athletes to repeat instructions back to you using their own words.
- Provide a culture that allows for them to speak up. Be sure to define what that means and also ensure space and time for them to engage in this activity.
- Be an active listener and allow youth to practice this skill within the program.
- Allow young athletes to journal their practice/competition performance to support the enhancement of their sport vocabulary definition and self-reflection.

THRVING

Programs provide opportunities for young people to create and maintain healthy lifestyles and to develop goals for and an investment in their own future.

Focus: Drive

Drive in sports:

- Every practice and competition is an opportunity to develop goals and plan toward those goals.
- The practice of recording, charting and evaluating statistics in sport provides athletes with a tangible view of what they have achieved and what needs improvement.
- Athletes are consistently assessing problems and developing steps to overcome those. This can be found in how to addresses strategic issues in competition as well as how to break down a complex skill into its smaller parts.
- Athletes receive encouragement, sometimes immediate, for their performance or execution or a skill or strategy.
- Most competitions have a time limit, or performance length providing athletes with a structure that encourages them to overcome adversity (fatigue, poor performance, hostile crowd) and persist.
- Sports encourage the development of new skill as each basic step is mastered.

Programs can support the development of this skill by:

- Providing students with ownership opportunities. I.e. allowing athletes to break down and teach a skill
- Chart goals and progress in a journal.
- Show team progress through charting statistics
- Allow the team to be part of the development of season goals