“Why We, Play It’s in Our DNA”

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In 1995 Nike launched one of the most inspirational campaigns of all times, “If You Let Me Play”. If you let me play, tugged at the heart strings of Americans as young ladies petition the camera with reasons to “let them play”; “If you let me play”, “if you let me play sports I will like myself more”, “I’ll have more self-confidence”,“ If you let me play sports, If you let me play”,” I will be 60% less likely to get breast cancer”, “I will suffer less depression”, “If you let me play sports”, if you let me play I will be more likely to leave a man who beats me”, “If you let me play,”” I will be less likely to get pregnant”, “I will learn, I will learn to be strong”, “I will learn to be strong”, “If you let me play”, “play sports”, “If you let me play sports!”(Nike, Weiden & Kennedy 1995). This moment in time was a game changer for parents and coaches alike, more girls and boys went out and hit the fields charged to do something new.

So what happened? The impact of this campaign had a positive affect creating an influx of participation, as more kids began to play and more parents became involved, but it also had unforeseen adverse effects such as a coaches need to win, helicopter parents, and a decrease in the appreciation and value of interscholastic sports.

Parents like myself begin asking, why are educational based/ interscholastic sports still important when club sports have become more popular? This question is very easy to answer but not so easy to understand. We must first go back to the beginning of time and creation, with the question what makes the human creature so unique? The brain. The brain at play is an integral part of the human body and understanding its factors makes the level of encouragement to participate in interscholastic sports and activities even more important and beneficial to children in adolescent development.

Studies after studies have been made on the importance of play in a child’s life, but how is this proven when no parent would dare to allow a scientist to do an invasive study on their child’s brain. This is where the rat tickler comes in, a scientist by the name of Jaak Panksepp began studying and dissecting the brain of rats to go further into the study of mammals, and the brain at play. (Poole,2015) He first focused on the question where did the brains need to play come from? Is it a learned activity found in the outer cortex of the brain where intelligence evolves, or is it a basic ancient attribute of a mammal like eating, sleeping, or intimacy?

As his study began he decided to cut out the outer cortex of the brain of a rat and wait to see if the rat would react to play. Low and behold it responded and began playing immediately with other rats in the study. He even went a step further and was able to personally interact and play with the studied rat by using his finger. This reaction allowed Dr. Panksepp to conclude that the brain at play is a natural instinct that is built deep in the heart of the human brain, making it an act that is vital to survival. As humans evolve in the act of play more benefits begin to arise causing it to become a crucial part of brain development on the basis of learning.

An anthropological study by Roberte Hamayon takes Dr. Panksepp physical brain finding one step deeper. Hamayon discovers that play has become a ubiquitous human characteristic across all cultures. and the performance of ethical values becomes a key component to the brain at play. In her findings she discovered that, “the facets of play such as learning, interaction, emotion, strategy, luck, belief, and socialization emphasizes the crucial ambiguity between fiction and reality” (Hamayon, 2015). Ultimately showing the invaluable role the brain at play plays in the human experience. She concluded that no matter what the interaction level may be, the brain at play is one of the most educationally based key components to human and social development. Whether on a sports team, or in a dramatic performance activity, interscholastic play is a necessity for all human beings and enhances their social, coping, and responsive skills.

As more scientific data is collected and dispersed giving supportive evidence that the brain at play is a component to the educational building blocks of all humans, the need for a purposeful plan and promotion of interscholastic sports to the general population must be put in place. It is crucial that we train coaches to coach in a transformational style, where the social facets that are engrained deep in the inner cortex of the brain are fostered in a positive manner. This becomes the solution to correct the current imbalances in the sports participation world.

Studies suggest that when a mammal is well fed, rested, and ensured safety, they will play spontaneously without reservation. As coaches and parents we can take these innate factions of the brain and break them down into simpler terms. When an athlete or participant is well fed by parents and coaches, through praise, support and encouragement they will play. When they are confident and can rest in knowing that win or lose they are supported and can continue to grow from mistakes, they will play. And when they feel safe from the fear of rejection or the unnecessary pressures of transactional coaches, they will play.

Coaches can foster these instincts in many different ways. One suggestion that I have found to be extremely successful with our coaching staff is the “To Be” list. Our society is continually encouraged to be more organized, books after books have been written about organization and reducing the risk of chaos in the work place, the home, and on the practice and playing fields. Popular books like “7 Habits of a Highly Effective Person” by Stephen Covey, “Designing Effective Practices for Team Sports” by Coach Kevin Sivils, or “The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of Learning Organization” by Peter M. Senge. All how one similar element, the art of making a list. But how far do these lists of things “To Do” actually get us when it comes to coaching kids to play? If you are not actively engaged at the heart, then the list becomes drills and commands that are given, and can be received in a positive or negative way by the athlete.

Changing the list from a “To Do”, to a “To BE” list not only will change the heart of the athlete but will transform a coach into a positive force that no matter win or lose will still hold the attention and engagement of the athletes that can catapult into successful seasons.

A “To BE” list becomes a simple change in the dynamic of coaching and can include statements similar to: 1. To Be Calm during practice; 2. To Be attentive to jimmy when he struggles with the block; 3. To Be Caring; 4. To Be Slow to React to a negative situation; 5. To Be Quick to praise, the list can go on and on.

Encourage your coaches to fill in their own “To Be” list during practices and games and see how not only they begin to transform into a more positive role model for their athletes, but create an atmosphere where all the athlete wants to do is play.

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*Hamayon, Roberte;”Why We Play: An Anthropological Study”. University of Chicago Press, 2016*

*Nike Advertising: “If You Let Me Play”; Weiden and Kennedy Agency, Portland, Oregon 1995*