

# PLATO MAKES THE TEAM: THE ARRIVAL OF SECONDARY SCHOOL SPORT ACADEMIES

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**ABSTRACT** *Since sport captivates many young people in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is not surprising that it is being situated in a new form of educational setting. This is evidenced through the emergence of secondary school sport academies over the last four years. The first academy was established in 1997 at Aranui High School in Christchurch and now there are over 70. This paper examines the changing role of sport in secondary education, discusses the emergence of sport academies and comments on the development of three of these. The academies provide the context – where sport takes place – which is crucial to the education and sport nexus (Gerdy, 2000). Clearly, if sport can achieve educational purposes through sport academies, then we must explore their operation as an educational tool.*

## INTRODUCTION

The place of sport in secondary schools has occupied a dialectical relationship. Advocates for sport claim it deserves elevated status within the curriculum while opponents argue that it already receives too much attention. The advocates have extolled the contributions sport makes towards health, personal fulfilment, enjoyment, and community integration (Jeziorski, 1994; Wankel & Berger, 1990). Those less in favour have condemned sport for its excessive examples of violence, competitiveness, and exploitation (Brohm, 1978; Campbell, 1997; McKay, 1991; Ogilvie & Tutko, 1971). The degree of disparity regarding how sport is perceived was described quite colourfully by the ex-President of Yale University and past Commissioner of Major League Baseball, Bart Giamatti, who contended:

At its worst, sport is the pointless, if widely enjoyed, detritus of an industrial society – a kind of non-toxic pollutant, junk food for the spirit, without nourishment, without history, without serious purpose. At its best, sport is a remnant of an Edenic world ... fun, redolent of nostalgia, and probably because of the physical exertion required, good for your heart or maybe your character. (Giamatti, 1989, p. 26)

Over time the nature of sport has changed from many of its intended purposes. As Grupe and Kruger (1994) observed, several of the changes have not been for the best:

Today however, the realisation of the authentic meanings and possibilities of sport is often threatened by negative developments: examples are excessive competition, discrimination of the less successful, overemphasis on winning, success, and record, tacit approval of aggression, the clandestine tolerance of rule infringements

and performance manipulation, utilisation of sport as a media spectacle, dependence on political and one-sided economical interests. In all these cases, sport is losing a part of its authentic potential. (p. 23)

While these changes may principally be tagged to adult versions of sport, it is evident that secondary school sport is not immune from these changing trends. After all, schools are vulnerable to outside influences and the changing nature of sport has heightened the debate regarding the appropriateness of sport as an educational vehicle. Because of the apparent ambiguous status of sport in education, its examination from a social, cultural, and educative perspective is needed if we are to better understand the gulf between the manifest and latent functions of sport within educational institutions, particularly secondary schools.

The purpose of this article is to provide a preliminary examination of the emergence of secondary school sport academies within this country. In addition to addressing the arguments both for and against the place of sport within education, I share some preliminary findings from a qualitative study in progress that examines the emergence of sport academies.

In this article the term *education* will align with the notion of experience. Lodge (1947) offers two interpretations of Plato's definition of education but it is his "wider definition" that I adopt here. He states that education is equivalent to "experience", the experience of a living organism interacting with its natural environment (p. 32). More specifically, education includes the provision of experiences, mastery of some pre-determined body of knowledge, and learning opportunities that may contribute to the enjoyment of experiencing what the school environment has to offer.

## POSITIONING SPORT WITHIN EDUCATION

Despite widespread popular debate, secondary school sport has seldom been the subject of systematic research from educators and academics and, for some unknown reason, there has been a reluctance to evaluate how sport is projected to students. Historically, school curricula have been marked by a domination of academic subjects while sport has been peripheral (Kirk, 1988). Consequently sport (often termed the 'extracurriculum or co-curriculum') has generally become subordinate, inevitably allocated time outside school hours or during part of the school day when the academic curriculum creates a 'quieter' time. Given its status on the margins, it is not surprising that within educational circles the status of sport and its value as a form of learning has seldom been examined (Evans, 1990). Yet this failure is somewhat surprising given the continual changing nature of sport in contemporary society and the emphasis in this country alone on sport in the media and community.

While actual examination has been meagre, there have been numerous calls for greater analysis of and attention to the sport debate. Twenty years have elapsed since Siedentop (1982) observed that "the health of the sport culture and the role of the sport culture within the larger fabric of society is an enormously serious matter, given the importance that institutionalized sport has assumed in current times" (p.139). One of those institutions is, of course, education. Siedentop's remarks are endorsed Luschen and Sage (1981) who posited that:

... given the rapid expansion of sport in modern life, education needs to be increasingly concerned about it. This responsibility of education

is seldom recognized...education has to address itself to enlarging the understanding of sport in society as a whole. (p. 7)

Murdoch (1990) continued an examination of the education and sport relationship by asking two pertinent questions. The first was, "what is the place of sport in education?" And second, "what is the role of education in sport?" (p. 67). Two forms of argument have been speculated for the educational value of sport. The first heralds back to the ancient Greeks and presents sport as intrinsically educational. The second can be connected to the British public schools of the nineteenth century, where espoused benefits were historically grounded in sport's contribution toward personal development. As a derivative of English public schools, sport was seen as a vehicle to promote school spirit, foster identity, and create student cohesion (Rees & Howell, 1990). With the emergence of state schools in Aotearoa New Zealand it was commonplace for sport to be included as part of the learning experience for students, especially boys (Grant & Stothart, 1994). Because it was assumed that students' characters could be developed through sport this fact of school life became complementary. The outcome for students would be learning to accept defeat, striving for victory, and developing a desire to improve their physical and social skills. Further, sport success was highly visible in the wider community and was seen as a means of enhancing the reputation of the school (Hendry, 1978).

There is also an argument that the secondary school is the most appropriate venue for sport education. Gilroy (1993) and others have contended that professional educators can offer sport to young people in a caring and safe environment that is guarded from the perils of many adult agendas. However, in many Western countries the pressure of reduced budgets, payment of coaches, athlete scholarships, and transportation difficulties have prevented some schools from offering the range of sports and the number of teams to meet student demand.

While numerous arguments have been made for the educative potential of sport, many of the espoused values have also been questioned. At an international level, secondary school sport is entering a crisis of legitimation and justification (Hummel, 1997; Smith, 1990) challenged by critics who argue that sport venues are not sites for healthy practices and that any claims to the contrary are based purely on myth (Kohn, 1992; Lasch, 1978; Miracle & Rees, 1994; Ogilvie & Tutko, 1971). Although there is evidence to support certain benefits of sport in certain contexts, the educational benefits of sport are, for many, largely fallacious. In *Lessons of the Locker Room*, Miracle and Rees (1994) examine the myth of high school sports, and contend that "the traditional mythology concerning the role of sport in character-building and educational functions has been shown to lack scientific support" (p. 195). Their affirmation echoes that of Arnold (1992) who earlier stated there was "little or no empirical evidence to support" (p. 244) the belief that sport builds character which has been the longstanding claim for including sport in education. Arnold also conceded "this however, does not necessarily mean they [claims of sports' educational potential] are not to some extent true" (p. 244).

From the perspective of many young people sport is a highly valued leisure activity and plays an important role in their lives (Clough, 1993; Coleman, 1961). It is not surprising, therefore, that a greater number of people experience sport during their youth than at any other stage of the life cycle (Eitzen & Sage, 1993). It is possible that sport participation may permit young people to learn about themselves through the accumulation of a series of experiences to enhance their

personal growth. Such an argument could be used to support the need to situate sport academies within secondary schools and, thereby, allow young people to develop their knowledge and skills and explore their potentialities.

It has been argued that young people have quite strong perspectives on how their involvement in sport could be enhanced (Clough, McCormack & Trail, 1993). The years spanning high school are a time when young people formulate thoughts and behaviours that can have an enduring impact on the ensuing years of their lives. These years are often marked by drama, complexity, and growth (Wyn & White, 1997). Hence, any retention or development of traditional and contemporary sport programmes should be evaluated against the developmental needs of today's students.

The challenge is for teachers and coaches to find appropriate experiences that address the requirements of adolescent development and provide effective antidotes for their vulnerability to anti-social or at-risk behaviours. At a time when many adolescents are searching for something to identify with, sport should be utilized better, as suggested by McInman and Grove (1991):

... because sport has the elements that produce, for many individuals, the stimulus necessary to extend themselves further than they do in many other aspects of their lives, surely if we understand more about these great moments we would be able to help athletes experience more of them and get more out of them. (p. 348)

Recent estimates indicate that 133,000 of 236,000 or 56% of students participate in secondary school sport at a competitive level (New Zealand Secondary Schools Sports Council, 2001). Sport remains captivating for many young people in this country. The diversity of choice, organizational structure and the adult support, particularly from teachers, have together ensured that many young people in this country have positive sport experiences.

However, extra curricular demands placed on teachers continue to escalate along with increasing curriculum and assessment issues in the senior secondary school. As more pressure is placed on teacher time, aspects of school life such as sport may come under increased scrutiny. Greater attention must, therefore, be given to how sport is presented within educational settings. Similar warnings are in evidence in secondary school sport in the United States that has seen a drop in participation. In response to such a trend, Calloway (1991) contended "the decline in interest in athletics [read sport] by high school students across the nation is the result of non-creative approaches to education and extracurricular activities" (p. 61). Moreover, Brown and Theobald (1998) contested that "contemporary efforts at school improvement and school reform focus little attention on facets of the secondary school that lie beyond the academic mission" (p. 109). In this country, it could be argued that educators have been more creative and sport academies could be seen as an exemplar of this approach.

## **OPPORTUNITY ARRIVES**

Although Coleman and Henry (1990) placed sport at the centre of school culture they argue that the potentially captive characteristics of sport have not been utilized within the formal, secondary school curriculum and, above all, by those in positions of authority. However, following recent curriculum and administrative reforms in Aotearoa New Zealand, the freedom available to schools seems to have

finally had an effect on the structure and nature of sport in education. Educational reforms in this country have seen an increase in senior secondary school options (Dobric, 1997), a trend that has been endorsed by parents, teachers and principals (Wylie, 1997). The opportunity now exists for teachers, and parents to influence the nature and role of sport in their school and, if necessary, bring about changes through their Board of Trustees for it is the Board who are accountable for what occurs in their institution.

In Aotearoa New Zealand in the last four years we have seen sport situated in a new form of educational setting. The emergence of secondary school sport academies has followed a path of significant growth. In the next section I briefly discuss the relevance of the term 'academy', consider the development of secondary school sport academies, and then share several examples from a study in progress about the initiatives in three schools to establish sport academies.

### **The Academy Under Scrutiny**

The academy was originally a public garden or grove situated in the suburbs of Athens. Its name was derived from *Academos*, an area planted with olive and plane trees. It was within the walls of *Academos* that Plato, who advocated scepticism, opened a school for those inclined to attend his instruction. This approach is perhaps topical in that much of the interest in today's sport academies has been associated with a certain degree of ambivalence toward the role of sport as an educational tool. The popular usage of the term academy is restricted to an educational institution claiming to hold a rank between a university or college and a secondary school. The most common interpretation for a sports academy in an educational setting would appear to be that it is a place of special instruction – an academic community.

During the late 1990s responsibility for the changes to senior secondary school structures began to fall on individual schools. From that time, programmes have evolved and grown, giving particular credence to flexibility and the needs of student populations that were increasing in numbers. There has been a significant shift from a liberal education, where many students were marginalized, toward a more responsive programme that addressed the perceived needs of students, often with a vocational flavour but, most importantly, designed to offer choice (Education Review Office, 1995). In 1999 Tristram and Batty surveyed 353 secondary schools to gauge the frequency and arrival of sport academies. From a 90 percent response rate they were able to report that 52 schools had a sport academy in some form and a further 19 indicated they would have an academy established by 2001. While there is some scepticism as to the nature of some of these academies from sections of the education community, there is no doubt that this recent initiative has experienced significant growth (Tristram & Batty, 2000).

### **Aranui High School**

In 1997 Aranui High School in Christchurch opened a sport academy to retain senior students who were not achieving in traditional academic programmes. The principal, Graeme Plummer, and employment co-ordinator, Harry Westrupp, explored alternatives to mainstream academic programmes that were failing to cater to the needs of their final year students, most of whom were Maori or Polynesian. The school decided to build a curriculum based on a sport academy because their research indicated that sport held significant interest in their

students' lives. "I thought if we could capitalise on kids' interest in sport, we might be able to make a difference" (Plummer, cited in Velde, 1999, p. 7). The successful retention of senior students saw Aranui's sports teams bolstered significantly, a development that created widespread publicity but also public indifference from other city schools as reported in the Christchurch Press on more than one occasion. In a short space of time the school achieved a significant profile through reaching the secondary schools rugby final (a position traditionally dominated by single sex boys' schools) and national success in the sports of touch and women's rugby. Westrupp also reported that the evolution of the academy concept corresponded with a significant drop in destruction of school property, considerable reduction in student non-compliance, and an 80 percent reduction in absenteeism (Velde, 1999).

At Aranui, sport was employed as the hook to raise students' motivation and adjust their personal aspirations, particularly towards their vocational goals. The school seems to have found a balance between academy attendance, vocational training, and academic offerings and there are now 16 senior academies offered to students. Westrupp remembers:

I said to Graham, you know if no one's going to look after this group of people why don't we? ... so, I said to Graham, you know, this is the way that I see how it should be is let's retain this group, let's just solely work on the attitude... if we can change their attitude then the work becomes achievable ... the most important part is getting better outcomes ... We had to have an infrastructure to try and up-skill our kids that weren't achieving academically.<sup>1</sup>

From an initial cohort of 30 students, the senior academy system swelled to over 300 in three years. Furthermore, there are now 10 junior academies to supplement the senior versions. While sport was the focus of the first academy, Westrupp explains that sport was only the vehicle:

It wasn't so much about sport, but the real values and principles behind sport that was important. We wanted to get our young people jobs. We don't attract anybody here, we don't offer them any money, we don't offer scholarships, we don't have money, but our retention rate of our own kids is now higher.

While there are still traditional, full academic programmes available, Aranui has sustained attention from young people who would previously have passed through the system with little to show for their secondary education experiences. The school has fashioned an academy based on their resources and, as Westrupp stated, "it can't be all bad if you're spending half your time doing something you have a passion for".

### **Raglan Surf Academy**

Raglan Area School is situated on the West Coast of the North Island, west of

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<sup>1</sup> Except where stated otherwise, all quotes are from interviews conducted as part of the on-going research project.

Hamilton. The town is small but rapidly expanding, signalled through the number of houses nestled along the coastline, overlooking the bays that collectively boast one of the best left hand breaks in the country (the locals would expand this comparison to the world and, in fact, mention of it is made in the famous international Lonely Planet travel guide). The surfing academy at the Raglan Area School has been running since 1999 and was instigated to allow students to focus on their elite surfing skills, while at the same time complete a two-year certificated course that examines the academic and vocational aspects associated with surfing. In addition, most students spend weekends travelling to competitions in the academy bus, complete with surfboard racks and sponsorship endorsements. The academy programme includes surf training, fitness and nutrition preparation, and a core life skills programme as well as academic qualifications. The principal, Clive Hamill, explains:

We wish our students to come to school carrying two things; one is their schoolbag and the other is their surfboard. [The Academy] initially came about because often the surfers, the best surfers, weren't going to school... also we had some good students who we knew if we didn't put some sort of leverage on them, [they] wouldn't perform academically or wouldn't achieve to their capacity.

Raglan students have achieved in a variety of settings. While some students have been selected to compete at the World Scholastic Championships every year since 1993, others are focusing on careers in the surfing industry or are seeking the opportunity to compete professionally. Not all will reach their goals but for the students who fill the 16 positions available within the academy, the opportunities for achievement are plentiful.

Several students have come to Raglan from other parts of the country so part of the experience includes a home stay. This system is coordinated, among other things, by a community Surfing Academy Advisory Board (SAAB). All students must commit themselves to the academic programme, the surfing academy, and their home stay. For Craig [pseudonym], coming to Raglan has been a positive move because

Otherwise I would still be up north, trying to do comps, whereas Raglan really offers like a wide variety of surf breaks and better surfers to compete against... and that really improves your surfing ...there's really good surfers in the academy and that really pushes you.

Raglan Area School hopes to retain a maximum of 16 academy students each year. The SAAB would probably resist bigger numbers in order to retain an existing compromise with the community riders. Part of that compromise has meant two groups of eight students riding the waves at separate times so that there are enough rides for everybody. It is also identified as the upper threshold for developing skills at an individual level. As Deane Hishon (the Surf Academy teacher) explains:

That is one of my biggest challenges, to actually make every individual of the academy feel coached and at the end of the day, what they are going home and telling their parents.

As part of the research project I sat on the cliff tops for several hours above Manu Bay and witnessed some of the students assessing their peers using unit standards that Deane had written. It was very much a case of business as usual for the class. It was also a chance for me to reflect on the principal's comment from earlier in the day stating:

In essence it's about enhancing a student's performance in the surf and utilizing that passion to make them a well-rounded individual but particularly focusing on their academic schooling.

### **Cromwell College Golf Academy**

Cromwell College was rebuilt on a new site in 1984 to make way for Lake Dunstan that formed behind the Clutha dam. This Central Otago College is situated two blocks from a 6230 metre long golf course. The college has had a successful history of achievement in golf. In 2000 a golf academy was opened, with the school team winning their regional championship and finishing fourth at the New Zealand Inter-collegiate championship. Students who enter the academy attend half-day coaching sessions twice per week and compete in tournaments on most weekends throughout the province.

In addition to their golf commitments, students at the academy must complete a full academic programme. Moreover, academy students from outside Cromwell are required to participate in the Independent Living Programme at the school's apartments where a supervised flatting programme operates. This programme includes several life skill components and features visits by local restauranters, the Police, and drug and alcohol agencies. Jan Hawkins, the principal, emphasized the importance of the Independent Living Programme:

The parents always endorse the life skill thing, and how good it has been for their child. Even if the student hasn't done well academically, 100 percent of the parents remark about how that has changed them and been really good for them.

Two staff members, Colin Cowie and Chris Addington run the academy programme. Addington, the deputy principal, explained:

... there are lots of things you could have done... golf was the one that rose to the forefront. Colin was on the staff and that we had a good local junior golf programme and had some success with that. So we rang up people such as the Otago Provincial Golf Association and New Zealand Golf Association basically to make sure that we weren't stepping on anybody's toes or that we weren't going to offend anyone or no one else was planning to do this and we basically got the answer from those people, 'go for it, nobody else is doing it, no other High School's going to have a residentially based golf academy'.

The physical resources were already in place so it was mostly a case of informing the golfing world, lobbying sponsors for 1000 golf balls and encouraging students to apply for a place in the academy.



Colin Cowie, the second staff member, has had a very successful golf history as both a player and coach but he believes that his position in the academy requires a multi-faceted role:

I really enjoy working with young people and I know that I've been able to get really alongside a student through coaching or teaching golf. It's one way [for a student] to establish an association with an adult that you can like and trust and I think that's important ... one of the kids I've coached a lot in the last few years who has got up to a scratch handicap, over the last three years ... once he got down to about three he didn't see me as his coach. He said, 'Colin's my mentor' and I think a fair bit of that goes on, so ... that's a concept I think is worthwhile keeping in mind ... going from a 70 to a 67, it's all head stuff. I think it's more a mentor's role than a straight coach. If you go to a golf pro for a lesson you get a lesson in a controlled environment, you don't get a golf pro giving you a lesson out on the golf course with a variation in line or how to hit through heavy wet grass.

Shaving strokes from a handicap requires a concerted effort. Most of the students devote sustained practice to place themselves in a position where they can be selected for tournament play. Because only the top four players gain selection for each tournament, there is incentive to put in the extra hours. Trent (pseudonym) explains that to make this possible he must allocate his time wisely:

It's been pretty good so far and I mean I have to like, arrange my time so I fit everything in like, we've got certain study time which is good so you can do your study and homework but um, I usually try and get to the driving range or golf course after school ...like walk home and then go straight to the driving range or something like that.

While there is an expectation on academy students to practice and complete their academic work, it is not always possible to fit in everything. It is during such times that teachers encourage students to make independent decisions about how they can overcome any hurdles that appear before them. Linda (pseudonym) confesses:

Practicing's really good. If you don't feel up to practicing or you've got too much homework or something you just say to them you know, "I can't do it tonight but I'll come out tomorrow night" and they're just fine. They're not like pressuring you into doing it, they're kind of letting you do it yourself...I've always had my Dad to say "go out to practice" or "come on, let's go play". Down here I've got to do all that by myself otherwise I'm going to get behind and not get anywhere and it will just be a waste of time.

## **CONCLUSION**

These three sporting academies while similar in principle are distinctly different in practice. Clearly, these initiatives have been developed according to local factors based on physical and human resources, community connection, staff expertise, and resilient leadership. The evolution of secondary school sport academies has occurred from the bottom-up, based on local initiatives. To date such initiatives

have escaped the tentacles of central education policy and it remains to be seen whether such a status will continue to prevail on the education landscape. But the relationship between education and sport has reached new ground. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge Cagigal's (1990) contention that "sport is more educational if, instead of being approached as a preparation for life, it becomes part of life itself" (p.14).

The license for each secondary school to create change to enhance their curriculum is presently available. The local needs of a school can now be considered as part of any reorganization offering decision makers the opportunity to avoid the feeble rather weak palliatives that have characterized much of past sport policy. The administrative reforms of the last decade are intended to encourage educators to become decision makers. It is evident that some secondary schools within this country have taken the initiative and claimed ownership of a responsive and engaging academy-based sport education.

The place of sport academies will surely rise or fall depending on how teachers, principals, and school administrators interpret and address the potential educative value they hold for their recipients – the students. It is my argument that much of the learning that young people could experience in sporting contexts is only now being discovered. Sport can provide opportunities for young people to engage in a range of different learning experiences. However, these forms of learning will not occur in the same way for all students as they develop and seek to understand the associated meanings in their world.

Gerdy (2000) has recently argued that it is the context – where sport takes place – that is crucial to the education and sport relationship. The indication from this research, as illustrated through these three academies, is that context is critical. Schools who choose to operate sports academies should address the unique aspects of their immediate environments. The indications from staff and students at this stage of the research appear positive. Sport academies have presented an alternative means through which life skills and student growth can be championed. The present education system falls short in allowing all students to be successful or to gain positive experiences from their secondary education. Nor does it offer sufficient relevance or meaning for many young people. As educators we must seek alternatives that may promote a motivating, meaningful, and engaging curriculum. The indirect but crucial trend would be that if sport academies provide a platform for certain aspects of student achievement, then there is a better chance that success may carry over to other aspects of student achievement.

The introduction of this paper highlighted two opposing positions that are often taken by those who enter the sport and education debate. What is required is attention to the middle ground. This includes the opportunity to explore and develop the role that sport could play in education. Rather than focusing on the ends, sport advocates and critics should direct their attention to the means. The potential of sport as a developmental tool will only be realised if educators focus on the wider aspects of education as espoused by Lodge (1947). If young people are to benefit from participation in sport academies then we must continue to address the conditions under which success prevails.

Clearly, if sport can achieve educational purposes through sport academies, then we should explore their operation as an educational tool. Part of that exploration should include relevant research (Pope, 2001, 2002). We need to know more about the timing, nature and appropriateness of sport academies. Students, parents and caregivers must be assured that an academy is built on sound

educational tenets that collectively demonstrate tangible outcomes and most importantly place the growth and needs of the student at the core of any initiative.

*NB: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the New Zealand Association For Research in Education conference held in Christchurch, December 5-8, 2001.*

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