

Score One For Schools – A South Korean Reporter Sees What’s Valuable In School Sports.

By Don Collins
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If you ever question the value of high school sports, just compare it to how youth sports are run in other countries. In February, 2009, I had the pleasure of meeting Peter Dongseok Kim, a reporter with South Korea’s Chosunilbo Daily. The ostensible purpose of our meeting was for Peter to interview me so he could examine how Americans manage to blend sports with school. I ended up learning just as much from Peter.

Peter noted some of the problems with the Korean sports model, where handpicked athletes play for clubs. Peter noted that, “Soccer players - they don’t even go to classes. This is a very big social issue back in South Korea. Last year, the government tried to change this very long and strange tradition back in Korea, but still now it’s a very very long tradition that sportsmen don’t have to study because they’re specialists in sports. Here [in the United States], it’s a little different. These [American] students are not so-called elite athletes. They’re just ordinary students. In Korea, the elite athletes are in a separate program. They face very high pressure.”

Peter nailed it. The American interscholastic sports system really does give people who do not project to be elite athletes a chance to engage in athletics. If you compare the interscholastic athletic system with the American AAU and club system you probably can tell the difference right away. The AAU and clubs are nominally open to all, but they spend an excessive amount of time and focus on elite players and travel teams. The AAU and club coaches have fostered a modern environment in which children are encouraged to specialize at an early age. The advent of the AAU and club system of play also corresponds with a modern trend in overuse injuries amongst youth. Believe me, there’s a direct correlation between this new system of play and those injuries. Generations that grew up under previous systems of youth sports did not incur these injuries.

Our interscholastic system has one thing the AAUs and the clubs can’t offer. Our interscholastic system has formal credibility; it came first, and it still has all the trappings of formal credibility. Interscholastic champions get their pictures in the local newspaper. They get the formal recognitions of success. They get the big crowds for games both big and small. Athletes who advance are forever announced as products of their high school – and then products of their college if and when they turn pro. Yes, interscholastic sports has the trappings of formal glory, and club programs - in spite of their elite competition and their well-heeled travel teams – simply can’t match this.

Most countries mirror the AAU and club system. They pick a handful of elite kids and train them outside of the school system. School, after all, is school and sports are sports, and never the twain shall meet. School people constantly hear the club people telling them that they can do it better.

As Peter Kim notes, maybe the club model isn't all that it's cracked up to be. Sure, it separates out elite athletes and lets them play each other at an early age. However, the interscholastic sports model may be the best model for exposing a large number of students to the physical and character building benefits of sports. The interscholastic sports model also gives the late bloomers – the kids who wouldn't be handpicked at an early age as elite athletes – a chance to play.

Score one for schools! Sometimes it takes a person from another country to see what's really special about our system.