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HEADLINE: Are we serious about giving children a sporting chance?

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I can still remember those silly ankle boots. They were an improbable colour of pale grey, with 6in heels and pointed suede toes already bearing the scuff marks of our red blaes hockey pitch. "Forgotten your gear again!" sighed the PE teacher, with just a hint of forced exasperation. Sending me back to the changing rooms suited

us both. I got out of the dreich, Greenock rain to where I really wanted to be: the art department. She got rid of the biggest liability in the team.

This hatred for competitive games was formed long before my teenage passion for high heels and sketching the skulls of long-dead sheep. Could there be a worse horror than primary school sports day, limping home with legs like lead as one's peers were already tucking into their prize

lollipops? Actually, there was: improvised playground games were worse. At one point there was a craze for relay racing in squads hand-picked by the most athletic, popular girls. Our self-appointed captains argued over who should be burdened with me "this time". . .

Was I permanently scarred by the experience? For a long time I believed so.

In the distant past, I have publicly argued against all competitive sport, believing it lowered the

self-esteem of less able participants. Why, I asked, are we as a society

so reluctant to reward academic achievement, but happy to watch

little children publicly humiliated on the football pitch?

I would certainly have opposed Tony Blair's plan to encourage more

competitive sport in schools. The initiative, outlined by his culture secretary,

Tessa Jowell, this week, applies only to England and Wales. But, as we know from

experience, the Scottish Executive seldom sprints ahead in the innovation

department - it's only a matter of time before it catches up with Westminster

and unveils a tartan version of the very same policy.

Now, however, I would welcome it. The high school hockey drop-out will be

cheering from the stand, even attempting the occasional helpful suggestion on

how to improve performance. Was I hit by a stray discus on the road to Damascus?

Not at all: as with so much of life, my views changed thanks to personal

observation. Since my last torrent of invective against team sport, I have had a

second child. I see how she is driven by an almost primal need to compete with

her much older sister: for attention, for space and, crucially, in order to

develop skills. A seven-year-old cannot hope to draw/paint/write

stories like a 14-year-old, but boy does she try. It's like watching a kid

from an Old Firm boys' club who thinks he's in with a good chance of making the

first team - not in five years, but next Saturday.

This innate competitive streak spills into relationships between children of

the same age. They egg each other on to run faster and jump higher. I still have

sympathy for the kids who are left behind: I was that flat-footed soldier, after

all. Life, however, teaches us that losing the race is not the worst thing that

can happen. Learning to fail and forget it is a skill we must all develop.

When Paula Radcliffe's engine packed in because she knew she had no hope of

a medal in the Olympic marathon, the American ex-runner Michael Johnson immediately said she should run the 10,000 metres anyway. This contrasted with British commentators in the same BBC studio who all believed her far too delicate - psychologically and physically - to even think about giving it another go. One viewer commented on this transatlantic gulf in attitude. Might it be significant? Are we not often reminded that the United States has more business start-ups and failures than Britain? Silicon Valley is full of men and women who have lost everything, only to come back smiling harder than Tony Blair on ecstasy.

It is no coincidence that the country with most entrepreneurs places such a high value on sport in schools and colleges. The locker room is as central to its culture as Mickey Mouse, the Statue of Liberty and the graduation prom.

This is not to extol the plucky loser. One of the most inspiring sights of this Olympic games was former champions who - unlike Radcliffe - stayed the course. Sonia O'Sullivan, the Irish runner who finished a whole lap behind her rivals in the women's 5000 metres but still managed to smile and wave at supporters clutching those green, white and orange tricolours. I suspect she will remain a national heroine long after she has hung up her trainers, which looks like being soon. She has the stamina and mental flexibility to find satisfaction doing something else.

Moving from the glorious heights of sporting achievement in Athens to the school playing fields of Scotland is a steep descent. But the Olympics can teach us how to implement useful competitive sport programmes. The elite athletes at the games are fairly evenly matched - if you blank out the drug-taking of some. On the day, it comes down to training, mental attitude and physical fitness. All

the athletes have a reasonable hope of taking something home - even if it's just their pride.

In our under-resourced school PE departments, the distance between first and last is much greater. Yet,

traditionally, we have thrown them together regardless of ability. Given finite resources, only the best make the first - and only - team. The rest can happily "forget" their gym shoes. I am no born-again convert to competition. Healthy as it is, it must be punctuated by achievement, however small. That cannot happen if you

are being smashed into the ground each week by a child with more natural talent.

Fee-paying schools with a commitment to games understand this. They often have four different hockey and rugby squads for each form year, so that all children get the chance of a decent game. A similar approach is taken in the City of Glasgow's excellent swim team, which has intermediate, bronze, silver and gold squads. Such streaming is sensible, as well as sporting. It combines a commitment to excellence with a desire to see all reach their full potential.

Private schools are also able to offer a wide variety of games, as well as more individual forms of exercise, such as aerobics or simply working out in the gym. If our politicians are serious about getting young people enthused about games, they must deliver choice. And let's be honest, the days of expecting the maths teacher to muck in with the football team are long past. Teachers who do this are admirable, but this is a project which needs more than goodwill. We must recruit more PE teachers - not just "co-ordinators" as we do now.

Research shows that fit children learn more and get sick less. They all

deserve to learn the joy of winning, as well as how to develop the stamina which comes from failure. And they deserve to experience the fun of it all - even those who hate hockey. After all, we would not give up teaching a child to read because he or she was struggling. Why should exercise be any different?