

School Sports Days: celebration or humiliation?

2012 and all that

Surely, if the UK government is serious about hosting the 2012 Olympics in London, it should be investing in schools, sports centres and youth clubs right now.

I believe that all schools and colleges should be encouraged to:

- free up time for sport
- provide free access to high-quality sports coaching
- actively encourage more youngsters to participate in a wider variety of sports
- provide access to new, high-quality PE equipment.

I also believe such tangible steps, besides demonstrating the nation's conspicuous commitment to sport, would also help to combat sloth and selfishness. After all, when sport is well taught and well resourced it can encourage children to give of their best, to work as a team and to play by the rules.

Sports days

However, competitive PE lessons and school sports days (whether in primary, middle, secondary or special schools) are often counterproductive. An over-zealous emphasis on competition turns children off sport rather than exciting them about taking part. The fact that a typical sports day involves most children sitting inactive for an hour

We should encourage schools and colleges to make room for both competitive and non-competitive sporting activities

and a half until it is their turn to lose a race does little to motivate children or give their hearts a much needed cardio-vascular workout!

As Christian teachers, we believe that all people are made in the image of God and that our worth as people lies in who we are (and the fact that God made each and every one of us), not in what we do. What matters most for any school community, or nation, is the way we value, accept and encourage everyone – ensuring that, whilst we praise achievement and strive for excellence, no one is left behind... or made fun of.

I think we need to unpick the two important questions which seem to underlie this controversy. Firstly, we need to ask: is sport always 'better for children' when it is competitive? Secondly, we need

It seems to me that in most areas of human endeavour — whether sport, music, art, science, maths or business — a few people excel whilst most of us either muddle through or go totally to pieces

Rupert Kaye shamelessly confesses that he has never won an egg-and-spoon race in his life... or a sack race... or a three-legged race. Rupert began work as ACT's full-time Chief Executive in September 2002. Prior to this he was a primary school teacher in Oldham for seven years, and a Deputy Headteacher in the London Borough of Richmond-upon-Thames for three years.

that make adults coo and camcorders whirr into action – children blushing uncontrollably, tripping over, going the wrong way, bursting into tears – whenever they are coerced into doing the kinds of things they hate most in public?

Human endeavour

It seems to me that in most areas of human endeavour – whether sport, music, art, science, maths or business – a few people excel whilst most of us either muddle through or go totally to pieces.

Headteachers have, first and foremost, a responsibility to the children in their care, ensuring that every child is happy, safe and motivated to learn

We wouldn't dream (would we?!) of having a compulsory competitive school music day where every single child's performance was judged in front of the whole school as brothers, sisters, friends, parents and strangers looked on – videoing the event for posterity! (What about a compulsory competitive school art day? or a compulsory competitive school maths day? or a compulsory competitive spellathon?)

Recruiting enough adults willing to enter the parents' egg-and-spoon race is one thing, but what about asking them to paint a picture? to recite their nine times table in public? or to spell long words? And to do it in front of the unforgiving, unforgetting gaze of hundreds of other people – now there's a thought!

Sport for everyone

Headteachers have, first and foremost, a responsibility to the children in their care, ensuring that every child is happy, safe and motivated to learn. They should be looking after the children in their care, not laying on cheap entertainment for parents or pandering to politically correct (or politically incorrect) bullies in the media.

As a nation, we should not just be asking how we can turn school sports days into a celebration of sport for all – we should be questioning whether we need sports days in the first place. After all, we ought to be putting the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of children above the wants and preferences of adults. It seems to me that we should encourage schools and colleges to make room for both competitive and non-competitive sporting activities – and, as a nation, we should be adequately funding and celebrating both.

■ Rupert Kaye

to ask: is sport always 'better for children' when it is carried out in public?

Valuing every child

When it comes to school sports days we should answer the following questions: Why do we encourage children to participate in sport in the first place? Is it because we honestly think they will all be Olympic athletes, or become professional sportsmen or sportswomen? (Surely not!) Is it to identify potential superstars early on? (Maybe.) Is it to help children develop physically and mentally? (Yes.) Or is it to encourage children to develop healthy habits which will stay with them for a lifetime? (Probably.) And, if this is the case, where do school sports days fit in to the picture?

Are most school sports days designed to help children to grow up with a love of sport, with a 'give it my best effort' kind of attitude? Or do they merely show-case the talents of those who are already pretty good at sport?

In fact, are most school sports days designed to raise the self-esteem of every child? Or are they planned in such a way as to enable adults to see children doing precisely the 'cute' sorts of things