Introduction
When I entered the 9th grade at a Seventh-day Adventist academy, I applied myself diligently to my studies. At the end of the first term, I had earned straight A's and was at the top of my class. But when I compared my grades with those of my classmates, I discovered that the next highest grade point average was a "C." Since I was only interested in being "number one" in class, I decided that I really did not have to study that hard. Consequently, there was a steady and marked decline in my grades, even though I still managed to retain first place. Unfortunately, I ended up "proud of my mediocrity!"

How could this have occurred in a school whose goal was to teach Christian virtues and values? I had faithfully attended Bible classes, where we studied about the sacrificial life of Jesus Christ—how He had consistently lived to uplift others and not Himself. I even attended chapels and worship services, which stressed the importance of being a humble Christian. Why, then, had I become so self-concerned? What had "gone wrong" in my educational experience?

For more than a century, concerned Adventist educators have contemplated the contentious issue of competition. Although athletic activities have often been the focus of this furor, reflective educators have rightly recognized that rivalry can arise virtually anywhere. Since we believe that in addition to imparting information, the Christian teacher must also seek to develop godly character in students, the question naturally arises: What can an Adventist campus do to inculcate a Christ-centered spirit of self-sacrificial service through all of its activities?

In considering that question, this article will examine two issues. First, we will look at the apparently innocuous issue of record-keeping and reporting, together with some alternatives. Then we will examine selected aspects of athletic activities, along with specific proposals for transforming competitive events into cooperative ones. While not claiming that this discussion is either exhaustive or the final word on this matter, I do hope to stimulate serious reflection on ways Adventist educators can provide a more wholistic and balanced approach to the controversial question of competition.

Addressing the issue of rivalry, Paul says that those who engage in "measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise."

Reporting: Risks and Recommendations
Even a cursory reading of the Bible indicates that on various occasions, records were kept regarding the growth and development
of God’s people. Unquestionably, record-keeping is useful and frequently necessary in order to measure improvement and progress. This is clear from statements about figures such as the 3,000 baptized as a result of Peter’s preaching on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:40). Furthermore, there is nothing inherently evil in setting targets or goals. However, this all too frequently includes a dangerous downside—pride in personal achievement. This is quintessentially epitomized in Nebuchadnezzar’s braggadocio: “Is not this great Babylon that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?” (Daniel 4:30). The result? With the swiftness of an eagle, he was reduced from a boast to a beast!

One of the more subtle dangers in focusing on figures is that those of us who work for the Lord will take credit for providential blessings and divinely bestowed successes. I’ll never forget the “global evangelist” I met at an international airport one day. After a brief chat, we exchanged business cards. Other than personal data, which I have omitted or changed to conceal his identity, his card reads as follows:

John Doe, an apostle to the nations, has preached in more than 55 nations, to tens of thousands of people around the world. He often preaches at the largest churches in nations. He spends 7 hours a day with God . . . 4 hours a day in prayer and 3 hours a day in the Word of God. In 1999 he preached in 40 nations, all in one year, and might be the first man in the history of Christianity to preach in 40 nations in one year. In 1999 he preached in every nation in Central and South America, all in one year, and might be the first man in our time to have done that. (Italics supplied.)

All that, and more personal data, on his regular-size small-print business card! Admittedly, this is an extreme example, but the danger must be recognized for what it really is—the perils of pride in personal performance, the risk of self-glorification!

Thus, while acknowledging that there is a place for financial figures, quantitative analyses, and numerical records, do we really need to elevate statistical reports to the “number one” position, as is so often done? The number of new students enrolled; the number of courses being offered; the number of books in the library; the number of faculty members with doctorates; the number of computers in the lab; the number of graduates; even the number of baptisms! This fixation on figures conveys the impression that quantity is of great consequence, while at the same time ignoring qualitative development. It might be helpful to remember at this point that only eight persons were saved in the ark, and that Jesus Himself warned: “Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:13b, 14). Note that it is only the few who find salvation!

Since a wholistic education seeks to promote Christian values such as quality, commitment, mastery and excellence in all things, altruistic self-sacrificial service, and Christ-centered humility,
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wouldn’t it be more in keeping with these objectives to reassess the entire concept of “success,” then report progress in a way that promotes a faith-based perspective?

Instead of a Dean’s List (which emphasizes academic achievement), why not establish a “President’s List,” which seeks to recognize all students who model a consistent, harmonious development of the basic values and objectives of the institution? Quality growth can also be assessed by means of pre- and post-tests, improved community relations, the overall tone and general content of student publications, the growth and success of the work program, improved methods and results in student retention, the vibrancy and spontaneity of voluntary spiritual activities initiated and conducted by students; the growth of spiritual mentoring programs, the improved health awareness and wellness practices of students and employees, the number of students and employees involved in optional community and church-related activities, the quality and relevance of scholarly faculty publications, the institutional loyalty of administrators, faculty members, staff, and students, and even alumni, the exit reflections of students regarding the perceived quality and value of their educational experience (especially extra-curricular practices), and the selection of “Alumni of the Year” who live exemplary lives that are “Bible-based, Christ-centered, service-oriented, and kingdom-directed.”

In brief, the focus should not be on facts and figures, but rather on developing dedicated students who seek to be faithful to the Lord as they serve the church, the community, and the world as a whole.

Sports: Self-Centeredness and Solutions

Without a doubt, the issue of sports and games has been one of the most contentious in Adventist educational circles. This has primarily been due to concerns over rivalry and competition.

But first, a necessary clarification:

1. When discussing competitive activities, some have sought to differentiate between “rivalry” and “competition,” seeing the former as problematic, but the latter as acceptable. However, since various English dictionaries use the terms as synonyms, we will also use them interchangeably in this article.

2. Not everything in life is competitive. Some activities are intrinsically competitive—sports such as tennis, baseball, or soccer, in which the only way that one person can win is if the other loses. However, other aspects of life such as work, hobbies, or nature activities are not inherently rivalrous. They become so only when people make them competitive.

Thus, while a spirit of rivalry can arise in many situations, including physical education and other classes, the main emphasis of this article will be extra-curricular sports because these involve competitive activities sponsored by our schools, often with little thought about the values being transmitted, which “can be damaging to the spiritual growth of the youth of the church.”

This mixed message concerning competition is clearly a problem that we need to face head-on. Back in 1980, Reuben Hilde commented on this “double standard” by using the metaphor of the Adventist Church marching around a modern Jericho, an enemy to be conquered, before entering the promised land:

“We’ve trumped with uneven cadence; we’ve blown our trumpets—but with different sounds and different pitches; we’ve marched to the beat of a variety of drummers; and we’ve stubbed our toes on the rock pile of competitive grades. . . . We’ve given prizes to our temperament winners, but we’ve cried aloud and spared not (and we’ve given it that certain ring) when the kids have become too enthusiastic over a basketball game. . . . [And] we’ve used red books [of Ellen G. White] to spank the child afflicted with the inordinate craze for competition. . . . In plain English, we have been inconsistent.”

Addressing the issue of rivalry, Paul says that those who engage in “measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.” Furthermore, the Christian is challenged to “Carry each other’s burdens, . . . without complaining or being critical of each other”; and to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vainglory, but in humility considering others better than yourselves.” Put plainly, “Competition is selfish. . . . It tends to breed suspicion, alienation, and exploitation.” Or, as George Knight puts it: “At its base, competition rests on strife for the supremacy—to be the first, the best, the most, and so on. Here, we should note, is the very disease that stands at the heart of sin.”

Ellen White wrote that “a spirit of competition . . . is all wrong and displeasing to God,” and that rivalry “is an offense to God.” In her classic on the principles of true education, she spoke pointedly about competitive sports:

“Some of the most popular amusements, such as [American] football and boxing, have become schools of brutality. They are developing the same characteristics as did the games of ancient Rome. The love of domination, the pride in mere brute force, the reckless disregard of life, are exerting upon the youth a power to demoralize that is appalling.

“Other athletic games, though not so brutalizing, are scarcely less objectionable . . . they stimulate the love of pleasure and excitement, thus fostering a distaste for useful labor, a disposition to shun practical duties and responsibilities . . . . Thus the door is opened to dissipation and lawlessness, with their terrible results.”

Basic Problems

Essentially, competitive sports “is a gladiatorial model, inherently antibiblical and anti-Christian,” for it idealizes an adversarial view of, and relationship to, other human beings—God’s children.” Indeed, “Self-promotion is the lifeblood of competitive games.” There are seven basic problems with these activities—They

1. Promote vengeance: They foster a selfish, “pay-back” attitude;
2. **Glorify violence:** They encourage aggression and a “killer instinct”.

3. **Normalize overreaction:** They portray uncontrolled reactions as normal.

4. **Displace perception of spiritual need:** An empty soul finds a pseudo-fulfillment in sports.

5. **Promote adoration of victors:** Sports stars achieve a godlike status, and hero-worship abounds.

6. **Foster pride:** The “successful” easily become self-centered and proud.

7. **Replace positive values:** Biblical norms, such as love and truthfulness, are ignored, while hatred and deception are promoted as positive virtues.

**Biblical Values**

If Christian educators are to develop biblical values in every aspect of campus life, especially in sports and games, they must conduct all of these activities in such a manner as to be:

- **Christ-centered:** The self-sacrificial, humble spirit of Jesus is the model;
- **Character-building:** Virtues like kindness and honesty are fostered;
- **Cooperative:** A community orientation is promoted through teamwork;
- **Compassionate:** Love and mercy are fostered;
- **Controlled:** Emotional control and self-discipline are encouraged;

- **Complementary:** Recreation is treated as only one part of a balanced lifestyle;

- **Confessional:** Every sport/game provides opportunities for participants (and even spectators) to focus on God and His goodness.

To implement these essential principles, teachers will need to creatively alter one or more of the basic rules of every sports activity. For example, the competitive aspect of basketball can be effectively neutralized by simply swapping one or two players from one team to the other at the end of each of the first three quarters. Thus everyone gets to play on both “sides” throughout the game, yet the group actually constitutes one “team.”

In volleyball, after winning a volley served by their rivals, team members normally rotate on their side of the court before one of their players serves the ball. To decrease the competitive elements of the game, teams can “mix” their players before they start the game (as shown below), and then “inter-rotate” only when the server is changed on one side of the court, as indicated in the following diagram:

![Diagram of volleyball court with players mixed and rotated]

The concept of play diagramed above is not simply an “ivory-tower” theory. Years ago, a missionary friend challenged me to incorporate this method into the competitive volleyball team of which I was a member. I demurred. However, when I became the physical-education teacher of extremely rivalrous 7th and 8th graders, I decided to try his system. I was pleasantly surprised at...
the immediate improvement in student attitudes and in the spirit and atmosphere of the game.

Major Factors

Similar changes can be made to the rules of many, if not most, other games. In brief, the major factors to consider when modifying rules are as follows:

1. **Time**: Set reasonable time limits for completing the game;  

2. **Target**: Establish a goal for players to reach, such as 15 points in volleyball;  

3. **Technique**: Teach players the basic rules of the modified game;  

4. **Tactics**: Encourage participants to master the necessary skills;  

5. **Talent**: Help players develop their individual talents;  

6. **Teamwork**: Encourage the players to form one team against inanimate targets;  

7. **Testimony**: Find creative ways for students to regularly share the positive lessons learned from playing the game.

Approaching sports in this way will help students put into practice the biblical injunctions for Christians to exhibit a self-sacrificial, cooperative attitude. "Honor one another above yourselves . . . Live in harmony with one another"; "Through love serve one another"; and thus "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." As Ellen White noted: "In true education the selfish ambition, the greed for power, the disregard for the rights and needs of humanity, that are the curse of our world, find a counterinfluence." Indeed, "the evidence clearly shows that cooperation is superior to competition in producing desirable affective learning and in helping students develop skills in dealing with other people." Since "God's ideal is cooperation," all educators are thus challenged to provide this kind of education for every student.

Promoting cooperation does not mean de-emphasizing quality. On the contrary, the Christian is challenged to "do all to the glory of God," and to "do [everything] with all your might." Furthermore, "condemning" competitive sports does not negate the need for physical exercise, as can be seen from the suggestions above on how to "transform" competitive games into cooperative ones.

In the absence of sufficient manual labor opportunities, Adventist sports and health researcher David Nieman notes that aerobic exercises such as jogging, brisk walking, swimming, and cycling, along with activities such as flexibility exercises and weight-lifting, will help enhance fitness. In addition, "Outdoor recreational activities such as sailing, canoeing, wilderness survival, camping, and backpacking might be given more room in our student programs."

Edward Norton's challenge to all committed redemptive educators regarding the indispensability of creating a classroom atmosphere where self-sacrifice reigns can be applied to all campus activities, including sports and recreation:

"[The curriculum committee must create] a learning environment in which cooperation and service to each other replaces the spirit of competition and a 'me first' social psychology. . . . For too long the grading and honors system has been based on self-glorification and conquest of others, an alien philosophy that of the Christian principle of selfless service and affirmation of others. How much better it would be if teachers would encourage students to assist each other to reach the highest level of achievement possible, not to best someone else, but to develop skills and attitudes which glorify God and benefit others! In this manner the classroom becomes a laboratory for the Body of Christ—a mini-Christian community: **Supporting, caring and serving** each other. The teacher presides over this laboratory, modeling the compassionate lifestyle of Christ and assisting the students to imitate Him also."

This is the challenge to all educators, not just physical-education teachers!

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An international race-walker and triathlete, he is actively involved in endurance activities and has a grave concern for the psychological effects and spiritual impact of competitive activities.

**NOTES AND REFERENCES**

1. See, for example, the emphasis placed by the books of Numbers (especially chapters 1 and 2) and Ezra (chapter 2) on the specific number of exiles who returned from Babylon and the thousands converted in the early
While acknowledging that there is a place for financial figures, quantitative analyses, and numerical records, do we really need to elevate statistical reports to the “number one” position, as is so often done?

13. Hilde, pp. 150, 151.
14. 2 Corinthians 10:12; Galatians 6:2-4, NIV; Philippians 2:3, NIV.
17. Ellen G. White, Manuscript Releases (Silver Spring, Md.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1990), vol. 6, p. 117.
19. The word American was added, since this was the type of “football” Ellen White was referring to. This does not mean that soccer (known as “football” in many parts of the world) does not come under this note of caution, as can be seen in the fourth sentence of this quotation.
21. George H. Akers, “An Appeal to the Health and PE Teachers of the North American Church School System,” Ministry (August 1988), p. 7. Though Akers was dealing specifically with interscholastic sports, the concept he outlines clearly applies to all competitive sports, indeed all competitive activities.
23. See, for example, Hilde, page 160. Hoffman (p. 18) says: “Sports psychologist Bruce Ogilvie reported: ‘Almost every true great athlete we have interviewed during the last four years . . . has consistently emphasized that in order to be a winner you must retain the killer instinct.’”
24. This factor seems to be corroborated by the large numbers of people crowding sports stadiums, while many churches have few attendees; some writers also see sports as “religion,” see, for example, Hoffman, pages 20 and 21.
25. As Hoffman notes, “the spiritual graces of compassion and sensitivity can place second to winning” (p. 18).
26. This is especially true for table/board games, such as the modified game of Monopoly, called “Co-opoly.” While the major aim in Monopoly is to accumulate as much wealth as possible, even bankrupting other players in the process, the principles and guidelines of Co-opoly seek to promote and inculcate the Christian values of compassion, community concern, self-sacrificial service, other-centeredness, a Christ-focused striving for excellence, etc.
31. For an example of scores of cooperative games, see Susan Butler, Non-Competitive Games for People of All Ages (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publ., 1986).
32. 1 Corinthians 10:31; Ecclesiastes 9:10.
34. Ibid., p. 9.