

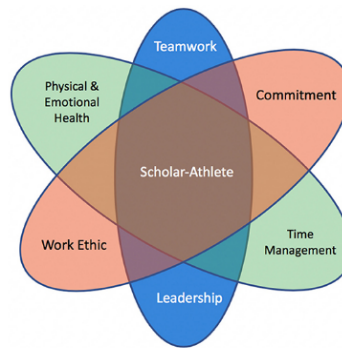


## ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

*To Challenge and Nurture Academically Capable Students*

*From the Office of the Head of School, Dr. Christopher A. Schoberl*

### **Is it Monday Yet? 10/3/23**



### **The Developmental Importance of Interscholastic Athletics**

In the wake of an incredibly robust season for Ashbrook's Cross Country team AND just prior to our greatly anticipated Gaga Tournament on November 18 (not to mention the Badminton and Kickball Tourneys planned for later in the year!), this month's *Is it Monday Yet?* article focuses on the developmental importance of interscholastic athletics.

Interscholastic athletics serve a developmentally vital role in the holistic development of middle school students, providing an important teaching-learning arena that extends far beyond the traditional classroom setting. In this vein, a common refrain you have likely heard from me in conversations about the importance of interscholastic competition is, "there are lessons you can learn on a field of play that you simply cannot learn anywhere else." At a stage in life when adolescents are undergoing rapid physical, emotional, and cognitive changes (arguably more changes than at any other point in their lives), competition experiences afforded through sports on teams representing their school, can anchor student experiences with lessons and values that last a lifetime (particularly as a proving ground for Ashbrook's monthly character traits!).

The benefits of athletics at the middle school level are multifaceted. Youth athletics programs of all types, interscholastic or not, promote physical health. With no end in sight to the very discouraging data about childhood obesity rates, regular physical activity through sports can help our children to establish exercise habits that combat sedentary lifestyles. In a forum that allows our children to socialize in fun and purposeful ways, students competing on their school teams learn the importance of maintaining their bodies, understanding nutrition, and setting personal fitness goals, especially when you consider how these lessons work in tandem with what they are learning in our Health and Physical Education programs. Together, these experiences and information contribute to a healthier adolescence through the coalescing of

good habits and, ultimately, the groundwork for a healthier adulthood. This much is obvious, and likely not a revelation for anyone who has read this far.

Beyond the physical benefits of physical activity, however, there are other benefits that are less obvious. For example, the middle school years are a critical period for emotional development, and sports provide a structured environment to explore and manage emotions. The playing field is a place where students experience the highs of victory and the lows of defeat, independent and group effort, performing in public, and the cause-effect relationship between preparation and outcome, all the while learning to cope with the spectrum of emotions. Losses AND wins teach resilience and perseverance as students work to improve their skills, fostering an understanding that growth often comes from failure, and that ongoing effort is as commendable as success, especially on the heels of repeated successes, which might be a bit counterintuitive.

Interscholastic athletics also aid in cognitive development. Sports require quick thinking, strategy, and concentration. Students must learn to make split-second decisions during competition, which can enhance cognitive flexibility and aid in the laying down of neural pathways and the shedding of others, all of which results in more efficient thinking and decisive problem solving. Additionally, student athletes must balance academic responsibilities with their athletic commitments, which can promote time management skills, an ability to make “in the moment” decisions, and iterative thinking— a challenging yet fundamental skill set for any student. In terms of my own experience striking such a balance, I learned how not to be overwhelmed, in a relatively low stakes way, when I had to work between my sports, school, and social life schedules to meet these varied responsibilities. This is a skill I know I honed at that young age and that has allowed me to manage my busy adult life.

Social development is another cornerstone of middle school athletics. Sports provide a sense of belonging and community among peers. They learn the significance of teamwork, cooperation, and communication, as success often hinges on the ability to work together towards a common goal. Indeed, the structure of interscholastic sports promotes goal-setting and the process of working systematically towards achieving those goals. This practice of envisioning a desired outcome and understanding the steps needed to reach it can translate to the grit needed to pursue and meet academic and personal goals..

Moreover, interacting with coaches and officials helps students to respect authority and understand the importance of rules and structure within a community. In terms of interscholastic competition, interacting with coaches often means interacting outside the classroom with teachers and even parents in the School community, and these additional touchpoints pay dividends in terms of our athletes’ engagement in their classrooms and the broader family community of the school. In addition, the camaraderie that comes from competing with and then attending school with classmates, leads to a tighter student body culture and fewer incidents of bullying, peer pressure, and risky behaviors.

Leadership and character development are intrinsic to the interscholastic athletic experience. Students are often placed in leadership roles, whether as a captain of a team or in a less formal capacity, learning to lead by example and inspire others. They are also put in situations where

integrity is tested – adhering to the rules of the game, showing sportsmanship, and learning to win and lose with grace.

Finally, interscholastic athletics can open doors to future opportunities. For some students, excelling in sports can lead to scholarships and the chance to continue their education beyond middle and high school. Even for those who do not pursue sports professionally or at a collegiate level, the discipline, teamwork, and leadership skills gained are invaluable assets in the workforce.

The importance of interscholastic athletics for middle school students cannot be overstated. These activities provide a comprehensive platform for young adolescents to grow physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively. They instill life skills and values that reach far beyond the playing field, enriching the educational experience and preparing students not just for high school, but for life. Because many of our students are already committed to the myriad offerings of a well established youth sports programs in the Corvallis area, Ashbrook is thinking creatively about how to provide non traditional opportunities for our students, so stay tuned for more information about how your children can don Explorer colors and compete in the interscholastic contests we are developing.