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For far too long, professional sports and the formal education system have been at odds. In an increasingly busy and competitive environment, it is time that these two worlds made peace, moved on from the mutual suspicion that has plagued both and built on the other's contributions.

In a land of limited opportunities, sport and education have historically been positioned as two distinct and parallel universes with little to offer each other. This positioning makes its way into both cultural attitudes and formal system design. In fact, the demands of each have been seen as an undesirable weight on the ability to fully achieve one's potential in the other. Now, with more resources available for holistic personal development and greater awareness and research, it is becoming increasingly obvious that these two complementary worlds must collide if we are to have a populace that allows its physical, mental and spiritual aptitudes to develop in parallel, both at the societal and the individual level. A broader view of education and personal growth can also enable our nation's professional athletes to better equip themselves with the many different skills necessary to perform, compete and win at the highest level.

From Sports or Studies to Sports and Studies

The average Indian child is sent clear cultural messages very early on that there are binary choices to be made if he or she is to remain competitive. One of these messages is that academics must be pursued with "seriousness".

To those children not in formal sport development programmes, sport is equated with play, fun and often, distraction from their personal intellectual and professional growth. Conventionally, few norms

have existed that make physical education a compulsory and necessary element of the primary and high school syllabus in India. This leaves educational institutions - and, in turn, parents - in a situation where discretionary 'play' is seen as a competitive disadvantage.

In-school and after-school academic demands leave children with little energy or time for sporting pursuits, even if only at the amateur or recreational level.

For those youngsters in formal training programmes, there are numerous challenges to overcome. There is a general lack of awareness among educators, administrators and some parents of the physical and mental demands of sport and of the valuable lessons that can be learnt on the sports field. This results in academic requirements, structures and institutions lacking flexibility and acting as constraints rather than anchors to talented sportsperson. Attendance requirements, heavy workloads and inflexible exam schedules leave little wiggle room, promote alienation and challenge the 'Sport For All' goals of encouraging more Indians to Start, Stay in and Succeed At (the three S's) sport at all levels.

The Formal Education Perspective

The Indian education system has focused primarily on literacy and numeracy, which are reasonable priorities for a nation historically saddled with over-population, unemployment, poverty and limited opportunity. Sport is often considered to be of peripheral and dispensable value only (regarded as extra-curricular, non-educational, non-productive use of time, treated as recreation/play time) and is not imposed as a compulsory 'foundation' subject. Given the lack of priority and/or prescriptive need, a majority of schools lack basic sporting facilities and knowledgeable coaching talent. Naturally, this results in a rickety, if any, sporting foundation for the average Indian child. The representative of the child – the parent – is very often also in on this bargain. But times are changing.

Recent research has turned this ‘either-or’ thought process on its head. Many significant child development studies postulate that those students that are enrolled in physical education and sporting activity not only have improved motor skills but also make more efficient use of their study time. They are able to concentrate better and consistently meet, if not exceed, the academic achievement of those that aren’t physically active.

This holistic notion of personal growth has, more recently, found recognition in the NCERT’s National Curriculum Framework of 2005, requiring compulsory curriculum design that “adopts a holistic definition of health within which physical education and yoga contribute to the physical, social, emotional and mental development of a child.” Further, it goes on to state, “In order to transact the curriculum effectively, it is essential to ensure that the minimum essential physical space and equipment are available in every school, and that doctors and medical personnel visit school regularly. Teacher preparation for this area needs well-planned and concerted efforts.”

As the Indian educational establishment implements change, focus must be on sports for all. Better school sports facilities, teacher training, parent counselling, early aptitude testing and skill enhancement will be key prerogatives. Alongside, rigid academic structures will have to make way for those that are more enlightened and mindful of sports’ contribution to learning and personal growth. These will also translate into demand-based push on educational institutions from the primary level to higher/professional educational institutions.

The Professional Sport Perspective

It is only in recent years that Indians have become competitive and successful at the international level across numerous sporting disciplines. Numerous theories have abounded regarding the reasons for our historical under-achievement – lack of a ‘sports culture’ and ‘physical attributes’ topping the list. That the sports and education systems have been ill-equipped to identify the best sporting talent and

to nurture what talent already bubbles to the top is without doubt a contributing, if not critical, element of this puzzle.

The high risks associated with sports careers, including that they often require abandonment of the formal education system, and limited support and rewards, mean that sportspersons do not see a potential upside commensurate to the risks that lie before them. Those who are talented at sport but have other options have chosen to pursue them and those that bravely pursue their sporting dreams have little to clutch on to other than public sector salaries and the prospect of uncertain government rewards. Consequently, it is unsurprising that we may not always be putting our best sporting talent on the field of play and that our best sportspersons continue to train and compete in environments that often keep them functionally disempowered and professionally insecure.

The lack of education among sportspersons has other negative knock-on effects – they have little negotiating power as against powerful sports administrators, have limited ability to insulate themselves from manipulation (including relating to doping and commercial opportunities) and limited post-retirement career prospects.

In a recent research study, the GoSports Foundation surveyed a number of former sportspersons who had ‘dropped-out’ from sporting careers before they felt they had reached their full potential. The study found that sportspersons attributed ‘non-viability of career’ and ‘educational and parental pressure’ as among the most prominent reasons for their premature withdrawal from competitive sport. Most drop-outs occurred between the ages of 18 and 22 when the sports-studies choice became a stark reality.

As professional administration plays an increasing role in the sports industry in India, and as the country grows economically and socially, much of this can change quickly. Today, cricket presents not just viable but very attractive careers to hundreds of players across the country. Parents can be convinced that their son should pursue a cricket career as much as

one as a doctor or lawyer. Change is inevitable in other sports as well with the huge gaps that exist between potential and reality. Educational institutions and the formal and informal education systems can play a significant role in talent identification, support and life-skills development of sporting talent.

A Blueprint for Convergence

Sport and education can no longer afford the divergence that characterises them, leaving both much the poorer. The transition towards convergence may not be immediate, but could take shape along the following lines:

- Global educational benchmarks, standards and competitiveness will push urban schools and colleges to use sports facilities, infrastructure and programmes as differentiating and competitive features. Rural schools will catch up gradually, even if their facilities might remain more rudimentary.
- National health concerns, including increasing childhood obesity, will drive the insertion of

compulsory physical education into primary and secondary school curricula.

- University sports and athletics programmes will take shape, offering talented sportspersons flexible yet meaningful professional education opportunities while continuing to pursue their sporting development.
- Better educated sportspersons will be far more secure, confident and capable of fulfilling their potential. More of them will find post-career opportunities and will create aspirations for and encourage and respect the role of education among newer batches of talent.

While the gaps will partially be bridged as a result of economics and the market, thoughtful policy design at the national and state level, education and sensitisation programmes and large investments (and some leaps of faith) are equally key elements. That the gap will be bridged is largely inevitable. How soon, how well and at what cost is very much in this generation's hands.



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