

## 'Jock Culture' permeates life

By Robert Lipsyte

If you've been listening to political candidates, you probably think that America is fragmented by religion, gender, race and ethnicity, as well as wealth, class, age and manual dexterity — do you text-message or are you all thumbs?

No wonder sports can seem comforting. In what I call Jock Culture, there are only two kinds of Americans — winners and losers.

The political season will be over in a few months (with its winners and losers), but the sports seasons will roll on, one after another, often concurrently, and the messages will be drilled into our minds: First place is the only place. Win or die a little. Losers slink home.

In sports, the pressure of those messages to win has given us recruiting scandals, academic cheating, helmet-spearings, bean balls, steroids and industrial espionage — the New England Patriots used video cameras to gain an edge. In real life, those messages about winning have been performance-enhanced to bring us dishonesty in banking, tobacco, pharmaceuticals, energy and foreign policy.

There's a connection between cutting corners to win a football game and to start a war. For many Americans, certainly for the majority American boys, the most vivid and lasting lessons are learned in the sports they play and watch. Jock Culture is the incubator of most definitions of manly success.

### Dueling lessons

Lessons about the rewards of discipline, playing fair and working hard compete against lessons about the punishment-free payoffs of cheating. Dads pour illegal additives into the quarter-midget race cars of their 7-years-olds. A Little League pitcher lies about his age. A coach winks when a teenage basketball star fabricates an address to join an out-of-town team. Kids who grow up seeing grown-ups shrug, if not actually pulling the strings behind the scenes, come to think it's the way of the world.

A new book by Tom Farrey, *Game On: The All-American Race to Make Champions of Our Children*, charts a disturbing modern sports timeline that begins before birth, with sperm banks for jock genes. As kids grow, parents hold them back a grade so they will be heavier and more coordinated than classmates; mortgage their houses to enroll them in tennis, golf, gymnastic academies; shove them into travel teams; and send them to private coaches, camps, psychologists, trainers, nutritionists, hoping that by age 13 they will be scouted by the pros. Families sacrifice to create winners. No wonder a kid

might be tempted to throw a crack-back block, spike a second baseman, shoot steroids, or cheat on an exam to try to justify that sacrifice.

It's hard to blame parents, especially those living in the have-not world. Who doesn't want to give his kid a leg up?

Organizations such as the Positive Coaching Alliance at Stanford University and the National Institute for Sports Reform are trying to defuse the worst excesses of elitism in youth sports. But they are up against heavy hitters such as the shoe companies that donate gear to little winners, TV networks that expand their high school coverage and beverage companies that vie for "pouring rights" at school events.

If all this were confined to the athletic arena, it would just be a sad commentary on how we exploit our kids, push them to get bigger, better, stronger, higher, faster to fulfill our entertainment fantasies. Or to get into Ivy League universities, which are reportedly lowering their admission standards for athletes.

But it doesn't stay in the ballpark. Those lessons learned in the littlest leagues are the ones that eventually run our lives, for better or worse.

### Spreading into society

Star athletes on every level are role models for younger athletes and fans. What happens when the cheaters and their admirers become police officers, CEOs, members of Congress? The jock credo "winning is everything" becomes the credo of the Wall Street Jock pushing the trading envelope until the system implodes, the Washington Jock lying to the public until the world explodes. If you can get away with it in the field house, why not in the White House?

Most insidious of all, the non-Jocks — the children, adolescents, young adults and fans who were weeded out of the games, who watched their elite athletic heroes bend the rules to win — become cynical. These are the Americans who will eat more, work out less, drug themselves with TV, video games, booze and chemicals. As they grow up, defrauded of hope, they will never be the activist voters of any party, the concerned citizens, the shareholders of democracy. They'll just kick back and let the cheaters run all the games.

We have to give the early gift of sports to the "losers" as well as to the anointed few, and we have to make the rules work for everybody. That way, by the time we get to the political season, we'll have the strength and the will to kick the cheaters out.

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