

# **CO-OP PLAY**

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**ABSTRACT.** Competition for children gets more serious and therefore more destructive with every passing year. Many kids, with the enthusiastic backing of their parents, concentrate all their energy on a single sport and end up either burning out or getting injured. Those who continue playing year-round cost their parents thousands of dollars for travel, equipment, and coaching. We need to provide a viable alternative to super-competitive activities and to solitary internet play. One solution is co-operative sports and games which emphasize growth, teamwork, camaraderie, exercise, inclusion, and, most importantly, fun.

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## CO-OP PLAY

Competitive play is an oxymoron. If you're competing, you're not really playing. Instead, you're trying to prevent someone else from accomplishing their goal. If you win, it's at someone else's expense. When Roger Federer beat Andy Murray in the final of the 2012 Wimbledon, all of England, once again, was denied their fondest wish. Murray himself was in tears. That hardly sounds like "play."

As many observers have pointed out, a win-at-any-cost philosophy can be destructive, especially when children are involved. Suzanne Lyons claims that overzealous competition "erodes self-esteem," "elicits envy," "promotes aggression" (think of Tanya Harding's attack on Nancy Kerrigan, or Zinedine Zidane's headbutt, or any hockey game), "arouses anxiety," "destroys trust," "discourages sharing," "compromises integrity," "intensifies inequity," and "decreases personal motivation" (by providing extrinsic rewards) (2012, pp. 5-7). In *Open: An Autobiography* (2009), Andre Agassi tells how his overly enthusiastic (and tyrannical) father coerced him to spend an inordinate amount of time on tennis, in the hopes that he would become a champion. This constant and extreme pressure led Agassi to despise his father and the game ("I hate tennis, hate it with all my heart" [2009, p. 27]) for many years.

Too many young athletes, often with the encouragement (or insistence) of their parents, play a single sport year-round, seriously overusing their frail bodies and ending up with tendinitis, heat stroke, weakened joints, torn ligaments, stress fractures, growth-plate damage, bulging discs, and even heart failure. So-called Tommy John surgery, used to repair the elbows of overworked pitchers, is being done on players "as young as nine or ten," says Mark Hyman in *Until It Hurts* (2009. P. 84). According to Hyman, "Overuse injuries now account for as much as

50 percent of all medical issues related to sports play” (2009, p. 130). Worse, many of these injuries show up several years down the road, so coaches and parents aren’t even aware of the deeper problem with over-specialization among 14-year-olds.

But overuse injuries are not the only problem. In football and rugby, multiple concussions are all too common and can have devastating long-term effects. Some young athletes, to satisfy coaches’ demands, develop eating disorders, including anorexia, bulimia, and obesity. Some take anabolic steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs.

In another book, *The Most Expensive Game in Town* (2012), Hyman spells out the cost—financial, emotional, and physical—of big-time youth sports. Over-zealous mothers and fathers, like Mike Agassi, expect results, amping up the pressure on their offspring, which often leads to early burn-out in athletes long before they’ve reached puberty. But it’s even worse when kids stick with it. Their parents pay thousands of dollars per year for equipment, training, and travel so that their children won’t fall behind in their chosen activity.

Corporations are only too happy to take advantage of these gullible and over-eager grown-ups, sponsoring nationally televised athletic competitions for high school students, getting new stadiums named after their company, and hawking various products of questionable value, like Red Bull and other caffeine-laden energy drinks. According to Hyman, “these companies have sponsorship deals with sports leagues and professional athletes who hold sway with young people” (2012, p. 66).

One unfortunate casualty of this hype is fun. When adults run youth activities, kids are no longer playing sports for enjoyment, fresh air, and

camaraderie. As Lyons says, “Struggling to beat one another isn’t really fun after all. It’s not the element of competition but the teamwork, zest, sense of accomplishment, exercise, strategy, playfulness, and immersion in the moment that accompany some competitive activities that make these activities fun” (2012, p. 9).

Another, less visible, problem with overemphasizing winning is that boys and girls almost never play together in official competitions, not to protect the “fragile” female body as some assume, but to protect the fragile male ego. (How humiliating to lose to a girl!)

Segregation by gender is the rarely questioned norm, even when women are presumably at no disadvantage, as in bowling, billiards, diving, or various gymnastic events. According to Eileen McDonagh and Laura Pappano in *Playing with the Boys*, “Organized sport truly is the most sex-segregated secular institution in our society. More than a reflection of actual physical differences between males and females, it reveals cultural norms and our present comfort zone” (2008, p. 259).

The message we still send to boys and girls is that females are second-class citizens in the world of sports. As McDonagh and Pappano point out, girls’ competitions are often coached and officiated by men, whereas boys’ competitions are almost never coached or officiated by women (2008), high school girls’ sports are usually offered at inconvenient times (2008, p. 213), and women athletes are given less TV coverage than their male counterparts, even in golf and tennis. (2008, p. 248).

In a nutshell, men play hardball, and women play softball. In tennis, the women’s ball is actually lighter than the men’s. In the major tennis championships,

women still play best of three sets, while the men play best of five. Only recently has women's prize money equaled men's in some tournaments.

Most telling, sports teams for females in high school and college are almost always known as the Lady Somethings, as if they are an auxiliary to the men's team (which in some senses they are). This tradition is so strong, no one seems to notice laughable cross-gender names like the Lady Bulls or the Lady Stallions. Even the UConn women's basketball team, which has more consecutive wins than any college sports team in history, male or female, is still called the Lady Huskies. (Why aren't they called the Huskies, and the men's team called the Male Huskies or the Gentleman Huskies?)

With these practices, our culture continually reminds women that they are inferior to men when it comes to any competition. Females of all ages are still discouraged from competing aggressively and are therefore severely under-represented, not only in sports, but in non-athletic competitions which are ostensibly gender-neutral.

As a result, no woman has ever won a World Championship in chess, checkers, dominoes, bridge, *Othello*, or *Magic: The Gathering*. Judit Polgar is currently the only woman ranked in the top 100 in chess. In checkers, there are only two females ranked in the top 100. And on it goes, even when the competition involves language skills, supposedly women's strong suit. In 32 years, only three women have won the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament—and only one in the last 30. No woman has finished first or second in nine World Scrabble Championships, although there are more women than men playing recreational Scrabble. (And yet females spellers do just fine in the mixed-gender and highly competitive National Spelling Bee.)

What can we do about this state of affairs? How can we get males and females playing together? How can we slow down the runaway train of corporate-sponsored competition? How can we get children to play sports, rather than to work at them? How can we encourage healthy, enjoyable activities that don't lead to injury and burnout?

On the other end of the spectrum, how can we get techies and other geeks away from their first-person computer games? Single players competing against a machine (or a million faceless strangers) is not as useful to the society or to the individual as person-to-person contact on a field or court.

Sadly, the current model of competition is the Forbes 500, which ranks the richest 500 people in the world. Apparently, it's not enough to be spectacularly (or if you prefer, obscenely) wealthy or successful. One must have the most, be the best, reach the top—outdo every rival. We rank sports teams and individual athletes all the time. ESPN rates the best plays of the day, week, month, year. Even when we can't offer a tournament to determine the best in the country, as with high school teams, we have a computer-generated rating system. Even if we can never see Muhammed Ali fight Vladimir Klitschko, we can digitally determine a “winner.”

A better model would be a team of scientists (including men and women, old and young, domestic and foreign, specialist and generalist) looking for a cure for some horrible disease. They find the cure, or they keep looking. They succeed or fail as a team. If they accomplish their goal, no one cares what their ranking is.

Another useful model might be a family. Each member has a role to play. Either the family is functional or it isn't. If everyone is getting his or her needs

met, it makes no difference if other families are doing better or worse. We need specified goals, not rankings.

We also need to question the assumption that children require extreme competition to succeed as adults. As Jim Deacove says,

Perhaps we spend too much time pursuing the ideal we aren't and not enough time enjoying and realizing what we are already. We strive to be this someone else whom we are constantly comparing ourselves to. If you look at it closely you'll see that this comparison is the very root of competition. For me, competition kills the pursuit of excellence. (2012)

Research tends to support this view. George W. Russell cites a meta-analysis of 109 studies of competition vs. co-operation: “65 showed cooperation to be a superior means of interacting, 36 showed no advantage to either style and only 8 favored competition” (2000, p. 13). In Agustin Fuentes’s opinion, “cooperation is what humans do best and what makes us such a successful species” (2012, pp. 150-151). Fuentes refers to “a study of fifteen societies” which demonstrates that “selfishness as a primary pattern was not found in any of the societies studied. Rather, patterns of cooperation and social reciprocity were dominant” (2012, p. 151).

To move toward changing our models and our mindset, the first step, in my opinion, is to introduce young people to the notion of co-operative (or “co-op”) play. A co-op sport or game is one in which everyone participates, plays at his or her own level, and contributes to the overall experience. The group takes on a specified challenge, follows specified rules, and wins (or loses) as a whole.

What we need to do as a culture is to offer a wide variety of co-op experiences that would accommodate the tastes of jocks and geeks and everyone in



between. That's a daunting task, of course, but the groundwork has been laid for us. In the 1970s, the New Games movement introduced the notion of non-competitive play and offered two books of physical activities that got large groups of people exercising and having fun together.

Although the "movement" is still around, it is not on many people's radar. It may have lost what little influence it had on super-competitive behavior partly because, in most of the New Game activities, there is no specified goal, so there is no closure to the experience, no "winning" or "losing." In Earthball, for example, large groups of people try to push a very large ball into the other team's goal (which sounds like an ordinary competitive game), but, usually, when the ball approaches either goal, some players from the "offensive team" abandon their posts and join the defenders. The same happens in Tug of War—players switch sides when one team starts to gain an advantage. It's great fun, but apparently has little carryover value.

One lesson from the New Games experience is that "co-op" games should provide players with a sense of closure, even if it means the team will sometimes "lose," that is, fail to accomplish its specific goal. In fact, the possibility of losing is precisely what gives meaning to winning. When players fail as a team in one round, they can use that as motivation to succeed in the next. If they accomplish the goal, they can try to do even better (faster, more efficiently, more elegantly, etc.) the next time. Win or lose, there is an inherent motivation to continue playing the game, just as with ordinary competitive activities.

Another possible reason that New Games is not a big part of our culture is that the movement emphasizes activities which do not encourage the building of skills. Since the goal is to get people playing immediately and feeling good about

the game and themselves (admirable goals, of course), eye-hand co-ordination and technical expertise are not usually developed or required by the activities. Generally, the players are not given any equipment, like a racket, ice skates, or parallel bars, which have to be mastered. As a result, there is little room for improvement. Thus, one of the key ingredients that gets people playing a sport over and over, the possibility of getting better, is missing from New Games.

We can learn from these “mistakes.” We can endeavor to create enjoyable play activities in which players can reach specific goals and can continually get better at doing so. To my knowledge, there are few such physical activities currently available to those who might be interested in downplaying competition.

So let me suggest some examples, starting with Co-op Ping-Pong. This “sport” involves four players, two men and two women, perhaps of varying skill levels. Two players stand on each side of the table, as in regular table tennis. Any person serves to the player diagonally across from him or her. That player hits the ball back to the server’s quarter of the table, and the other player on the server’s team returns the ball diagonally, and so on. However, as soon as a player hits the ball, she or he runs to the other side of the table and takes the next appropriate turn. Each player, after hitting the ball successfully, calls out how many times the ball has crossed the net. The object is to hit the ball to the appropriate quadrant as many times as possible in, say, five minutes. The “score” would be that total. On subsequent attempts, the team would try to break their previous record. As players improve, they can hit the ball faster and earn a higher total.

Co-op Tennis is similar, except that the ball has to be hit beyond the service line and in the appropriate half to be counted (and of course players have a lot farther to run!).

Ideally, every sport should have a co-op version, which can be played by both genders and adults of different ages. (There should also be variations for children, as well as variations for players of all ages.) In Co-op Volleyball, for example, 12 players (six on a side) try to hit the ball back and forth over the net without it hitting the ground, until every player has touched the ball x number of times (and no player ever hits the ball two more times than any other). The players' score is the time it takes for them to accomplish this goal. Co-op Badminton might follow similar rules. Jim Deacove describes Cooperative Musical Chairs in which the object is to fit everyone onto the chairs remaining. (2000).

In co-op soccer, hockey, baseball, basketball, football, and other related sports, the goal might be to kick, throw, slide, or pass the ball to players at designated spots around the pitch, field, court, or rink as often as possible in a given amount of time. (In a more sophisticated version, players would keep moving from one spot to the next.) Teams would keep track of their "scores" and continually try to improve on them.

These co-op sports might actually improve a team's ability to play the competitive version, but that's just an added perk, not the *raison d'être* of the activity. The actual goal is to give every player a positive experience, some exercise, some challenge, a feeling of belonging, a feeling of camaraderie, an awareness of improving, and a deep sense of accomplishment. Notice that there is no competition in the usual sense. There is no human opponent, no zero sum. Everyone ends up with the same score.

Of course, co-op activities do not have to be based on any already existing competition. We can make up new "sports" to our heart's content. For example, imagine the following game, called Roly-Poly: 4 to 30 players stand shoulder to

shoulder in a circle. Each is holding a 4-by-6-foot sheet of (very light) foam core, in front of them, parallel to the ground. One player is given a ping-pong ball, nerf ball, or other fairly lightweight sphere and puts it on her sheet. By careful manipulation, she gets the ball to roll off of her foam core and on to the sheet being held by the person to her left. That person tries to roll the ball across his sheet unto the foam core of the next person in the circle, and so on. The goal is to touch as many sheets as possible in, say, three minutes. Teams could play the game as often as they wish, keeping track of their improvement.

Roly-Poly can be played by almost anyone from 8 to 98, including those with walkers or in wheelchairs. It can be played indoors or outdoors, in hot weather or cold, even in the rain. It can be played with minimal cost. At any time, anyone could drop out and new players could be added without disrupting play.

A more demanding variation of this game would require each player to walk (or run or hop or jump) some distance to get to the next player who is waiting to receive the ball. Either version would allow room for improvement and would provide a sense of closure.

We can also carry these concepts over to non-athletic competitions. In *Co-op Scrabble* (or similar word games), for example, the goal might be for all the players, combining all their scores, to reach the highest total they can. The individual scores would be irrelevant except as part of the whole. In this version, players would deliberately set up double- and triple-word spaces for others to take advantage of. They would spell words that could be easily expanded.

Perhaps a group of five players (three women and two men) might some day tell their grandchildren about the incredible night their team produced a “co-op

score” of 3,000 points. If any child was silly enough to ask who won, the team members would shout in unison, “We all did!”

Similarly, in *Co-op Trivial Pursuit*, the goal might be to fill up two or more wedges in as few moves as possible. Two or more players put their brains together against the game. On the first turn, one player rolls the dice, moves any wedge, and reads the appropriate question. The other players offer possible answers, and the dice roller chooses one of these or comes up with another. If the dice roller’s answer is right, that player continues rolling. If it’s wrong, players add one to their total of moves, and the privilege of being dice roller passes to the left. (A perfect score, zero, would occur if the first dice roller gave all the right answers until all the wedges were full.)

Or consider *Co-op Bridge*. Each hand is played in no trump, each player is dealt 12 cards, the dealer plays first, and subsequent play follows bridge rules (with no dummy). The group “wins” the hand if all four players end up with exactly three tricks apiece. Their goal is to win as many hands as they can out of 20.

Here’s a version of *Co-op Chess*. Both player randomly place their pieces on their back row. Pieces move as in chess, except that all pieces must move forward, never sideways or backwards, and a player must take an opposing piece that is threatened. The goal for the two players (or teams) is to get make as many moves as they can before three pieces are taken.

What about checkers, Othello, go, and a host of other two-player games? How can these be made more co-operative? Well, one way is to put a male and female on each team and alternate moves within each partnership (with no explicit communication between partners). Such an arrangement would have the benefit of getting males and females competing together.

Better yet, you could play a so-called two-player game with several players of both genders and various ages. In this variation, the right to move passes to the left on each team. On your turn, each other player suggests a move, and you pick the one you think is best. (You would not be able to make a move unless it was mentioned by one of your teammates.) Players would agree whether suggestions could be made secretly or had to be spoken aloud for all (including opponents) to hear. Either way would work.

Although these are still competitive games, teammates of different ages, genders, and backgrounds would be co-operating with each other to bring about the desired outcome.

Perhaps the best idea of all is to challenge players themselves, especially young people, to come up with mixed-gender co-op versions of their favorite games and sports and to share their ideas with others. Or they can start from scratch and come up with co-op competitions that are not based on any existing activity. In the end, the best co-op game of all might be designing new co-op games.

To get the ball rolling, so to speak, here is an example of a co-op game that can be played and enjoyed by two to six players, males and females of almost any age or skill level. (It can also be played as a solitaire game.) It is easy to learn but difficult to master. You can get better at Efficiency, but it takes practice.

## **EFFICIENCY**

**EQUIPMENT:** A regular deck of playing cards with the Aces removed.

**OBJECT:** To get all 48 cards into groups by suit in as few moves as possible.

**TO START:** Shuffle the cards and randomly place them face up in a 7 x 7 array with no card in the middle space.

**TO PLAY:** Any player may start, and play passes to the left. On the first turn, the player may pick up any card that is in the same row or column as the empty middle space and place that card face up in the middle space. On completing the turn, the first player says, “One.” On subsequent turns, the player may pick up any card in the same row or column as the newly created empty space and place it face up in that space. The player then indicates how many turns have been taken to that point in the game.

**TO END THE GAME.** The game is over when all 48 cards are in four 12-card groups by suit—spades, diamonds, hearts, and clubs—or players decide to give up. If a card does not share a side with at least one card of the same suit, it is not in a group with its suitmates. The players’ score is the number of turns it took to accomplish the goal, assuming they did so. The lower the score the better.

**ANOTHER GOAL:** Get all the cards into groups by number. You can make this your goal after arranging the cards randomly or immediately after putting the cards into groups by suit.

**EASIER VERSION (FOR CHILDREN OR FIRST-TIMERS):** Any card may be moved into the empty space, whether or not it’s in the same row or column as that space.

**ALTERNATIVE MOVEMENT:** Make a 6 x 8 array of the cards. On each turn, switch the positions of any two cards in the same row or column. (For an easier version, switch any two cards.) The goal is the same as the regular version.

**HEAD-TO-HEAD VERSION:** Two or more teams can start with the same opening position and see who can put the suits together in fewer moves or less time.

The good news is that we can find plenty of cooperative games like Efficiency on the internet. In fact, some companies, like Jim Deacove's Family Pastimes and Suzanne Lyons's Cooperative Games.com, have websites devoted entirely to games that mixed-gender and mixed-age groups can play together. Unfortunately, few people know about these websites, so we need to make parents, teachers, and children aware of the abundance of resources available to them.

Of course, no one is arguing that cooperative play will solve all the problems created by our increasingly competitive youth sports culture, but it might help some kids (and parents) ratchet down the win-at-all-costs hysteria. As things stand now, children do not have a viable middle-ground alternative between year-round tournament play and solitary internet play. Neither of these is desirable, and offering a smorgasbord of co-op sports and games may provide an appealing option to a significant number of families.



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