

PART ONE

**Introducing
and Implementing
Junkyard Sports**



Part one consists of three chapters. The first chapter defines the concept and explores some of the purposes and potential benefits that led to the development of junkyard sports. You will find the first chapter especially useful when you find yourself needing to get permission from parents, faculty, or community sponsors. Sometimes it's hard to put the obvious into words. Chapter 1 will help you do just that.

Chapter 2 examines how a junkyard sport is designed and developed. Specifically, the chapter explains the components of a junkyard sport: people, place, junk, and games. It will also examine the process of game creation.

Chapter 3 develops some ground rules for coaching and facilitating junkyard sports, and gives you a strategy for implementing leadership and for sharing the fun with your peers and students. This chapter, in particular, demonstrates that leading a junkyard sports event is more like coaching than teaching, more like facilitation than coaching, and more fun than either.

Introducing Junkyard Sports

Junkyard sports are “real” sports and games played with the “wrong” equipment. Because the sports are made up by the people who are playing them, they offer a welcome alternative to the traditional sport programs. Junkyard sports stress personal involvement, active participation by a diverse community, physical and psychological safety, creativity, and most of all, the opportunity to create and share fun.

CONCEPT AND PURPOSE OF JUNKYARD SPORTS

The concept we’re calling *junkyard sports* is as ancient as sport itself. Earlier in the 20th century, this idea was demonstrated on the streets, sidewalks, vacant lots, and backyards of most cities, when games like stickball, box ball, and pie-tin Frisbee could be found virtually everywhere there were kids. Even today, when so many kids spend their precious play time in front of the television or in organized league sports, you’ll find kids playing basketball with a trashcan and a paper wad, or playing baseball with a frying pan bat and a ball of rolled-up socks. Playful minds find inspiration in the limitations of equipment, environment, and physical abilities.

Junkyard sports are so inviting because they are based on sports that everyone knows. The inventiveness begins when people play the sports in some unusual place with some wacky piece of

equipment that has nothing to do with how the sports are supposed to be played, and then they mix these sports with other sports. This is the spark that ignites the imagination. Junkyard sports are also played with as diverse a group of players as are available—young and old, novices and experts, those with and without disabilities—to create a sport that is truly inclusive. There is no need to adapt a sport for a specific population when the very population that will be playing it is creating it. There is no reason to worry about how willing people will be to play a sport when the sport they are playing is their own.

Junkyard sports are a rich, exciting, and growing resource for physical activities that will work in any environment and with any player. The activities can take anywhere from a half hour to a half day. In five minutes or less you can easily initiate completely new activities for any audience. Kids will use their bodies and minds to develop and exercise their capacity for play, to develop social skills, and to learn from and with each other. They will design and experiment and play as a team.

The process of invention in junkyard sports develops the whole player—body, mind, community, and environment. In the process of developing a new, informal, just-for-fun sport, players combine physical education with cognitive skill development and socialization. From both the educators' and players' perspectives, junkyard sports are invitations to play and opportunities to transcend differences in physical abilities, social status, gender, and age.

There's a big difference between a sport that you learn and a sport that you make up. Sports that you learn, despite their numerous benefits, have a way of separating people. There are those who are good enough, and those who aren't. Sports set the bar, creating a challenge that its players rise to meet. But when you're making up a new sport, the question isn't so much about whether you are good enough to play it. It's about whether the sport is good enough to make you *want* to play. Junkyard sports, then, make it possible for anyone to play with anyone else. As long as they're making up the sport together, they'll find a way to play together. From the perspective of a recreation or youth leader, this makes junkyard sports an ideal vehicle for serving the community. As a class project or as an event, the invention of a new junkyard sport is an opportunity for integration and celebration.

Involvement

There is only one real criterion for measuring the success of a junkyard sports event—involvement. Count the people who are playing and how deeply they are playing. If your star athletes are having the time of their lives and your weaker players are sitting on the sidelines, the design has failed. If your oldest players are dancing with delight and your youngest are hanging back, bored, something's wrong with the event. You might call this a “the more the merrier” principle. And it really works. The more people involved and the more fully they're involved, the better the experience is for everyone.

Complete involvement is a very harsh measure because it's impossible to meet. Even in the best of all sports, and in the best of all junkyards, there'll be times when people just aren't engaged. It's as much part of the nature of play for players to disengage as it is for them to engage. What you hope is that these periods are brief and rare.

Sometimes it's obvious when a game isn't working. It stops being fun. When that happens, above all, don't blame yourself, and don't blame the players. Blame the game. That, after all, is what makes junkyard sports so much fun. The game is only a means to an end. The end is fun—for everyone. You can't force involvement. But you can change the game. You can call a time-out. You can add more junk. You can take away, change, or add a rule or two.

And, of course, while you're changing the game, you're getting everyone involved in the game change. Naturally, during the design session your unrealistic but avowed goal is 100 percent participation.

Diversity

Nothing affects the experience of play as profoundly as the people we are playing with. Their moods, intelligence, abilities, ages, and gender influence what we play and what we think we can play. Bringing together people who don't normally “belong” together to create a new sport that they can all play together is a powerful and humanizing experience for all involved.

It's remarkable how many kinds of people we can bring together with a little applied playfulness. We can play with animals and get

so close to them that we and the animals can actually take equal roles in determining the direction and duration of the game. We can play, as equals, with babies and toddlers, with alcoholics and schizophrenics, with people who are blind, and others with a variety of disabilities. Diversity is the name of the game. We bring together diverse materials and environments, diverse games and rules, and a diverse selection of population.

Playfulness is the key. Creating and supporting the willingness to try, to see what happens while we change the rules and materials and environment until everyone who wants to play can play together, equally, are what junkyard sports are for.

Safety

In junkyard sports, one way to ensure safety at every level—physical, social, and emotional—is to make it possible for participants to engage at the level of their own choosing. This way, even if someone feels threatened, she can easily withdraw, regain composure and perspective, and return to the fray in her own good time.

Another way to help create a safe experience is to make and keep things fun. When people laugh a lot, they clearly aren't taking things too seriously. When you hear people laugh together it's a sign that they feel safe and healthy. When animals play, even if we can't recognize their own version of laughter, the same holds true. If they are playing, they feel safe and healthy.

Creativity

Nothing fosters creativity more than a good sense of humor and a willingness to play. Nothing dampens creativity more than a somber, pressured, formal discussion about how to design a game. Get the junk into people's hands as soon as possible. Get them to start playing with the stuff separately, then together. Give them no more than a few suggestions or instructions at a time, like, "Think we can make a baseball game with this stuff?" or "Can we make something we can play on the steps?" As soon as there's a difference of opinion, see if you can get two separate groups going—each focusing on testing out yet another alternative. Help people understand that the only real way to tell whether an idea is a good one is by putting it into practice by playing with it.

Because junkyard sports are played by their inventors, the pressure to perform is shared. Everyone wants the game to succeed. Everyone wants everyone to succeed.

Slanted High Bar Principle

Even when a junkyard sport gets played and refined and players begin to focus more on challenge and performance, and what was more or less a game begins to become a definite sport, you can build fun and safety into the design of the competition by creating challenges that are individually negotiable. In adapted physical education, teachers are given an elegant model, called the *slanted high bar principle*, that puts the concept of individually negotiable challenge into practice.

If you're a physical education teacher, one of the things you do with students is help them develop their high-jumping skills. In "nonadaptive" physical education, you did this by holding jumping contests. You'd hang a horizontal high bar at a certain height and everybody would take a turn jumping over the high bar. If they succeeded, they'd go to the next round, and the high bar was raised. The contest would continue until only one person was left, and that person would be praised as the one who established the high-jump record for the class. A problem with this kind of competitive-incentive structure is that the people who need the most practice are the people who get to jump the least often. The worse they are at jumping, the sooner they're out of the game. Another problem is that no one feels safe. Not even you, the teacher.

Make the high bar diagonal instead of parallel to the ground. Let everybody jump over any part of the high bar, and they can take as many turns as they want. Each kid sets his own challenge. The jumpers who are not so good at jumping can still jump across the high bar as many times as anyone else—they just cross at a lower point. And, when they feel the need to increase the challenge, they can just station themselves at a higher part of the high bar. No one is eliminated. No one is given prizes. Everyone plays at his own level of safety. Everyone wins, repeatedly.

Slant the high bar and the authority rolls right out of your hands—out of any one body's hands, actually—into everybody's hands. The challenge (jump as high as you can, and then jump higher) remains the same, but the challenger has changed. You,

the instructor, aren't the one who increases the challenge; the kids create it as a group and individually.

A challenge that is determined by the individual players is more complex because it requires reflective action. The players must evaluate not only their own success but also the success of the challenge. And even though they can get very competitive, the challenge is ultimately self-selected, ultimately guided by sheer fun.

Without an external evaluator, each player can devise and revise the challenge. Of course, evaluation is taking place, and whether the competition is inner directed or outer directed, the jumpers (both higher skilled and lower skilled), and their inner referees are evaluating their performance, challenging them to challenge themselves. Even though nobody's eliminated, even though everyone is free to increase or decrease the challenge, even though they don't even have to take turns, the challenge is directed toward the individual.

Raising the horizontal high bar, you intensify the competitive relationship between the diminishing few. The game, internally and externally, becomes increasingly unsafe. Slant the high bar, and you relax the relationship so that it becomes supportive, empowering, healthy, safe.

SPORTS FOR THE FUN OF IT

One of the most radical of the implications of junkyard sports is the notion that regardless of what gets invented or played or who wins, the only thing that really counts is how much fun it is for everyone. As a criterion for success, especially for those who need to answer to many objectives of educational and public programming, the "fun for everyone" goal can be surprisingly difficult to communicate and defend. Most sport programs are funded by organizations that measure success in terms of the development of very specific athletic competencies—a belief shared by the majority of the people served by these programs. Try telling parents who sent their kids to soccer camp that, although their kids lost almost every game they played and didn't show any particular athletic skill, they succeeded because they had a lot of fun.

The "sports for the fun of it" concept was developed specifically for those people who are not served by sport clubs and

competitions—the people for whom participation, and not competition, is the goal. It was developed because we have all begun to recognize that this is a far wider audience, with perhaps even more telling needs than the audiences served by traditional sport programs.

Many of our so-called athletes who excel in sports and eagerly embrace the rigors of traditional physical education and sport programs also ultimately find themselves in a similar position of disenfranchisement and obesity, because they did not achieve or even maintain their star status. Motivated solely by the promise of professional sports, they end up embittered and ill served by the very institutions that had once provided them both purpose and identity.

The “sports for the fun of it” approach subscribes to a very different set of premises. It is based on a faith in human motivation. When people have fun playing, they put more of themselves into play. They engage body, spirit, and mind, challenging themselves to excel because in excellence there is even more fun. When they play, not for score or recognition but for enjoyment, they play for life. Central to the notion of “sports for the fun of it” is the idealistic and often unreachable goal of fun for *all*. As difficult as it may be to achieve, setting this as a goal establishes a focus that is both individually and collectively experienced. It introduces the notion of community and urges the development of both personal and social competencies.

In traditional sports, the game itself determines who is good enough to play. In junkyard sports, the players determine whether the game is good enough. The better the game is, the more fun for the more people for more of the time the game is played. By including players of different ages and abilities, you create an even greater challenge and a more profound accomplishment. The victors of junkyard sports can never be confined to the winning team. Victory is something that happens to the entire community of players and spectators.

By aiming at an experience that is fun for everyone, players have an objective criterion for measuring the success of the game. In the process of attempting to succeed, they also develop social skills that include compassion, communication, acceptance, shared leadership, and shared victory.

