

## The Role that Hardship and Competition Play in Teaching Boys How to Manage Their Anger and Aggression (an excerpt from a soon to be finished manuscript by Pete Bertolero, entitled, *ManMakers*)

Masculinity and competition are synonymous. This means that for boys to become men they have to be tested, banged up, bruised and hurt. Their wounds need to be calculated and limited, of course. But they cannot become men without a danger to be faced, a risk to be taken, and the experience of pain. In other words, they cannot leave the ranks of boyhood and cross over into manhood without experiencing some kind of focused, intentional pain. Another name for this might be *trial by ordeal*. It is the same for men as well. For boys and men to be able to find a sense of identity, meaning and purpose they need to go through something that makes them feel they earned it. If there is a sense of risk and danger to it, all the better; if there is physical exertion, and their strength and stamina are pushed to their limit, and there is some scrapes or minor injuries and even some blood shed (again I'm talking minor wounds here) all the better. If this is experienced in a setting in which focused aggression is allowed and some sense of competition is felt, again, all the better. I refer again to Dr. Michael Gurian, who wrote,

“Boys need to compete and perform well to feel worthy...Boys compete verbally and physically, and base some relationships on competition. Competition for boys is a form of nurturing behavior.”<sup>1</sup>

Gurian continues,

“Nurtured competition is crucial to male development and self-image... Boys must find ways of competing and see themselves as performing well. If they do not, if society does not provide them with these opportunities, they'll compete against society itself, abusing their community and themselves.”

Dr. Gurian goes so far as to say that there is a definite correlation “between competition and aggression” and “between these and anger.”<sup>2</sup> In ancient cultures this was understood and honored in the way boys were brought into manhood. In Roman culture, for example, a soldier's ability to become angry was seen as part of the makeup of what was understood to be his “sacred anger” or the battle frenzy. So that anger wasn't repressed entirely but encouraged to the point where, in battle, it could be aroused and augmented into a furious rage. However, boys were initiated into manhood by being taught where and when their anger/sacred energy was to be appropriately expressed, so that in a sense, along with being taught when to loose their anger (fight/flight), they were also taught when to restrain their anger; or what we call today “anger management.”

In the past, it was assumed that a boy would one day be called upon to fulfill his duty as a soldier. So boys were taught that one of the codes of authentic

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Gurian, *The Wonder of Boys*, P. 29

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, P. 30

masculinity was to prepare himself for the potential opportunity to sacrifice his life for a greater cause. Exercises that included the need to summon courage in order to face the fear of danger with courage; the experience of pushing past current limitations in order to become stronger, and facing and overcoming the feeling of pain in order to fulfill and complete the task or mission, became an integral part of a boys training toward becoming a man, because it was assumed by the culture that as a man, he should be prepared at all times to protect and to sacrifice himself in the role of a protector or defender of the right, the weak, and the innocent. Gurian laments that our boys today

“...often lack this sacred teaching and often lack the anger management training that was intrinsic to it...we need nonetheless to deepen our adult sense of how competition can nurture, and then pass that on to kids in the form of anger and competition management training.”<sup>3</sup>

Brain researchers agree that hard wired into our boys is the search for a masculine identity and personal excellence that can only be found through competition. *“Boys need to compete and do combat, they need to feel tested in the physical and interpersonal world. Our job is to help them navigate – not squash – this need.”*<sup>4</sup> Fact is, as Dr. Leonard Sax has said, “Boys...thrive in a competitive atmosphere, even if they often lose.”<sup>5</sup> And as I see it, in order for us in this day and age to understand the inborn masculine love of competition and performance in our boys, will require us to gain some distance from our victim-based culture. The I-am-entitled-to-not-feel-bad-about-myself works against the development of a man-making culture and community. Every person has the responsibility to learn how to protect and provide for themselves and that no one else is responsible to meet their needs. Period!

If we are not willing to reject a victim-based philosophy, we will view such things as competition and winning- and-losing as a bad thing, because for someone to win, someone else has to lose. What do you call a Game where nobody wins? One in which everyone’s a loser. At least that’s the way boys are wired to think. Some parents balk if there is an element of danger or risk of injury, that someone might get hurt. And the problem is that parents won’t let this happen if they see it as their job to protect boys from pain and injury and overexertion, rather than helping them become mature men. I mean, if I left my two boys alone for five minutes, they’d be having a competition to see who could spit the farthest. If I left them longer, it could’ve become an altogether different contest involving different bodily fluids, if you know what I mean! Competition, especially when it involves team sports, “provides an outlet for aggression and a means of connecting socially with other boys.”<sup>6</sup>

A big part of successfully training our boys to become men is teaching them the proper way to be competitive and combative; and to understand that for

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid P. 31

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 32

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Leonard Sax, *Boys Adrift*, p. 42

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 45

the masculine temperament, driven by testosterone, meaning and purpose – love of life – is often found and experienced *in toughness and hardness...discipline and competition...risk-taking* and losing; getting knocked down and getting up again...it's in the physical and psychological wounding that occur along side of broken bones and broken hearts. In other words, boys, as well as men, grow because they are forced to grow through aggressive competition, courageous risk taking, and pushing through pain to complete a task of mission. And this information flows right in to the differences in the way male brains (the hunter brain) and the hen brain (the female brain) finds identity, significance and purpose in life.

## Competition Socializes Boys

Dr. Sax points out that, boys usually respond well to any kind of competition or challenge if these essential elements are a part of them:

1. There are winners and losers
2. The outcome is in doubt. Anybody might conceivably win, and anybody might conceivably lose. Everything depends on how hard you play.
3. The competition is between teams as opposed to individuals.

The right kind of competition actually socializes boys. That is, it trains them to enter into society with the proper social skills and attitudes learned. Leonard Sax, MD, PHD, referred to an all boys elementary school – Mater Dei School in Montgomery County, Maryland, as an example of a learning institution understanding the fact that boys need competition and do better in almost every area when the element of competition is involved. Upon enrollment, each boy is assigned to be on either the Blue Team or White Team. From then on each team competes in every aspect of school life: sports, examinations, and even which team manages to donate the most food during Thanksgiving. The team that scores the highest in each area gets a certain amount of points. At the end of the year, the points for both teams are tallied up and the winning team is officially recognized and given “props” by having its team name “Blue Team” or “White Team”, the year of its victory, and the names of its captains engraved on a plaque in the hallway. Competition goes a long way in getting boys interested in school again. They try harder when winning or losing is at stake.

Team competition helps boys learn how to function in society. It teaches them to value something or someone above of themselves. It teaches them to subordinate their egos for the sake of the team. Individual competition seldom teaches this, but team sports do. I referred to this in chapter six when I wrote about football coach Joe Erhmann and how he used competition to teach his players how to build community, be inclusive, and understand that a real man (as opposed to a false man) realizes he is built for others. Its easier to give up in self-defeat when facing a bigger, stronger, faster opponent, than it is when one is a member of a team. No matter how good the individuals are on the other team, and no matter how many games the other team has one, at any given game, either team might win. Anything can happen. The outcome is always in question. I get pumped just thinking about it!

You won't find this as often among girls. It is now a proven fact that most girls value friendship above team membership. Girls prefer playing alongside each other, rather than face one another off in a win or lose match. In fact, sports and battles are the two areas where boys prefer to face one another – to go at it face to face – in a “face-off.” Mano-e-mano. A girl who is on one team but has a best friend on the other might jeopardize her team's chances of winning because the most important thing for her is that her friends feelings are not hurt. It is inconceivable for most girls to compete and against and beat into a million pieces her best friend. In fact, if she did, chances are very good that they would not be best friends any longer.

Not so with boys, I'm afraid. Let's say two buddies are the *bestest* of friends, but they are on opposite teams and they are facing each other in a football game. One of them “creams” the other. Just “rattles-his-cage.” We're talking “smackdownsville.” I mean, first of all, these ole boys are happy to do it. Secondly, in most situations like this, the friend who got the whoopin will get up, dust himself off and say to his friend, “That's all you got? That's it? My momma hits harder than that. That was nothing. NOTHIN! You better be lookin out, sucka, because the postman is about to deliver a package too big for you to handle!” You see, this good natured “smack-talkin” and rough-housing is the kind of competition which, among men and boys, actually builds and strengthens, even deepens their friendship. Boys are much more likely than girls to be invested in the success of their team regardless of who is on the other team.