Do We Need a Competitive Society or a Cooperative Society?

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What is more worthwhile, playing a sport to win as part of a competition or just playing it for fun, without keeping score and making sure everyone gets to participate? (I am talking about adults here.) The answer pretty obvious, at least to me. Playing a sport as part of a competition, either against others or against yourself (as with golf), is a far more worthwhile exercise in life.

Now, such competition needn't always be dramatic. When my buddies and I play Wiffle Ball, it is hardly a fierce competition, but we do divide teams and make a game of it. The alternative — the cooperative game — involves giving everyone the same amount of swings at the ball, not keeping any score, not really trying, etc. That alternative is stupid and boring. The competitive game — and, I repeat, this is only barely competitive — is much preferable. Don't get me started on how much fun it is to play competitive baseball, basketball, etc. Even when I ski, I always pay to do the slalom course a few times to compete against myself.

Years ago, I read a quote from a biographer of FDR who stated how we needed to create a cooperative society, not a competitive society — although I can't now find this quote on the
web. I am sure I had some type of gagging reflex when I read that. Obviously, there is a need for a great deal of both cooperation and competition in life, but would you rather live in a place where the primary goal involved everyone helping out everyone else, or everyone trying to be the best they can be? I know I prefer the latter, and that is how societies evolve, advance, change, and grow.

Where I am going with this? Well, Mizzou researchers have found that the human brain grows most when associated with evolutionary competition. We all need cooperation in life, but it is competition that brings out the best in us and makes life the challenge and blessing it is.

About the Author

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David Stokes was a policy analyst at the Show-Me Institute from 2007 to 2014 and was director of development from 2014 to 2016.

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