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New Community Jewish High School student Jonathan Miller, left, competes against an Oakwood rival.

Photos by Rabbi David Vorspan



# GIVING VALUES

# A SPORTING CHANCE

by **RABBI BENJAMIN RESNICK**  
and **BRUCE POWELL, PH.D.**

It's easy to talk about values and ethics in the classroom. It is much harder to follow through when the classroom discussion suddenly requires a real decision. This is the benefit of a sports program: It puts students

in a pressured situation while still in a safe environment. It allows thinkers to become doers.

At Jewish day schools, the curriculum is often defined by long hours of rigorous study of both secular and religious studies in school, followed by hours of homework. There may be little time for co-curricular activities, and even gym can take a back seat to weightier subjects.

However, in addition to valuing learning, Jewish law also requires that we take care of our bodies. Sports in school provide not only a means of carrying out that mitzvah, but also a way of teaching life lessons in real situations.

There are two main reasons to support high school athletics: the inherent values of playing sports and the values inherent in playing sports correctly. The main goals of playing sports are, of course, physical and mental fitness. The main values learned from sports include teamwork, individual development, discipline and sportsmanship. This flows naturally from the idea of high school athletics as an extension of classroom learning, bringing values from the classroom onto the playing field and into the world.

Our soccer team at New Community Jewish High School begins each game with a *kavanah* (focused thought; literally, a direction) — a verse from the Torah, a piece of Mishnah (a section of the Talmud), a thought to help focus and guide us. With this one-liner we review skills we have worked on, reinforce the need to work as a team and instill confidence by building toward a common goal. Although it may sound corny, it certainly has parallels: Many teams kneel and pray before a game. In the film “Dead Poets Society,” Robin Williams’ Mr. Keating has his soccer players recite poetic verses at practice.

Last year, our flag football team was having trouble with interpersonal strife, leading to finger pointing and arguments during games. In order to pull together as a group, the players arranged a team lunch. With sports as their motivation, they overcame their differences. Instead of blaming one another and descending in a downward spiral, they learned to work together. As a result, their next game saw real teamwork, strong defense and four touchdowns — the most they had scored all season.

The point of a high school athletic team program is to give students opportunities to both win and lose and to learn how to appropriately deal with both. In sports as in life, there will always be a team or an individual who is faster or stronger, has more stamina or is smarter; likewise, there will always be a team or individual who is slower, weaker, has less stamina and is less capable. As educators and as coaches, we must help student athletes focus on improving personally and as a team instead of focusing on being better than their opponents. We must also show students how to behave with good sportsmanship, regardless of the outcome of a game.

Athletics requires decision-making by our students — both players and spectators. On the field, most decisions are made instantaneously. Pass or shoot, advance or regroup, challenge or fall back. Some decisions allow a bit more reflection: cheer or jeer, “put me in, coach” or “give the player at the end of the bench a chance.” For all those decisions, our coaches strive to include sport-specific wisdom as well as the accumulated wisdom of our sacred texts.

For example, the first time our boys soccer team qualified for the California Interscholastic Federation playoffs, the best player on our team (soon to be named league MVP and all-CIF) marched into the principal’s office to insist that the playoff game, scheduled for a Friday, begin early enough so one of our less able players —



New Community Jewish High School volleyball players Jade Goldstein, left, and Blair Chatfield.

**WE HAVE HAD JUNIOR VARSITY TEAMS THAT DID NOT WIN A GAME ALL SEASON. BUT THEY PLAYED WITH HEART, LEARNED HOW TO WORK TOGETHER AND WERE JUSTIFIABLY IMPRESSED WITH THEMSELVES WHEN, BY THE END OF THE SEASON, THEY WERE ABLE TO DEFEND AGAINST TEAMS THAT HAD SOUNDLY DEFEATED THEM EARLIER IN THE SEASON.**

a boy whose Shabbat-observant family lived some distance from the field — could participate and still get home before sundown.

We have had Junior Varsity teams that did not win a game all season. But they played with heart, learned how to work together and were justifiably impressed with themselves when, by the end of the season, they were able to defend against teams that had soundly defeated them earlier in the season. Of course, at New Community Jewish High School, we have also had our share of playoff successes. But that is an added bonus and opportunity, not the reason for playing.

The important point is not just the destination, it's the path taken to get there — an important Jewish value, rooted in stories about great rewards for the poor but honest worker, concepts such as *mitzvah habaa b'veira* (a good brought about through sin) and ethical questions. So, at New Community Jewish High School, we have tryouts but don't cut players based on skill; everyone is invited to play for the team. During basketball games, our fans don't yell and taunt during free throws.

Everyone wants to win — it gives hope to the players, pride to the coaches and recognition to the school. And there's nothing wrong with winning, as long as it's done right. As John Wooden aptly said, "What you are as a person is far more important than what you are as a basketball player."

At New Community Jewish High School, we set up our athletics programs based on both skill and values. There's a saying from *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers, 2:16) that encompasses athletics and the process of changing our perspective on athletics: "It is not incumbent upon each individual to finish the work, but neither are we free to desist from it." We must put forth our greatest effort, try as hard as we can, even while knowing we may never finish the process on our own.

We are the People of the Book, but we also must be people of action in support and defense of the principles in those books that so famously line our walls. **T**

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## ATHLETICS REQUIRES DECISION-MAKING BY OUR STUDENTS — BOTH PLAYERS AND SPECTATORS.

