

Sports Success Stories, Character, and Personal Development

Colette Lange

INTRODUCTION

I have found that sports can develop character. This curriculum unit aims to help my students develop character by studying sports autobiographies. The students I teach are sixth, seventh, and eighth graders at Sharpstown Middle School in Houston. Our district, Houston Independent School District, is also interested in character education, so my unit shares this interest with district leaders. The Texas Education Agency House Bill 946 regarding character education is new and goes into effect in Texas next year, so the state too, is interested in encouraging the development of character among students in schools.

WHAT IS CHARACTER?

Below I list three examples of character. By looking at them carefully we can begin to describe what it is.

In *The Old Ball Game: Baseball in Folklore and Fiction*, Robert Coffin writes “Another aphorism which has become proverbial for American sports officials, if not for the public at large, is Umpire Bill Klem’s ‘I never missed one in my heart.’ So seriously did Klem take this statement of umpiring integrity that he claimed to have retired in 1941, the first time he ever wondered if he had called a play correctly—a tag at second on an attempted steal” (Coffin, 46).

Babe Ruth made some bad choices and his bad behavior became known by the public. As a result he began to think about how children would judge him. “With tears streaming down his face, he apologized to the kids of America, right after Mayor Jimmy Walker had given him a public dressing down worthy of a school-marm” (Coffin, 85).

In the book *Baseball America*, Lou Gehrig was said to have performed through his pain to his death. “He continued to drive that slowly deadening body to play big-league baseball, scraping every last drop of strength and determination...” No wonder the Lou Gehrig foundation was established. “It was his death rather than his life that was to give him unique enshrinement in the national pantheon” (Honig, 224).

In the first example, we see that Bill Klem cares about the game, that he takes his responsibilities as an umpire seriously. He has a sense of honor and integrity. He can’t bear not to do the right thing. In the case of Babe Ruth, we see that he cares about being truthful, and that he took responsibility for his bad choices by apologizing. Lou Gehrig showed determination, drive, and that he would not be ruled by his illness.

From these examples we can surmise that character involves taking responsibility and not assigning blame for failure or shortcoming on others. Each shares a love of excellence in their different functions. Behind taking responsibility for their lives, is a keen sense of courage, of integrity, of honor. Though the examples cannot show this, we can guess that each of these men learned to be what he was and do what he did by establishing his way of doing things by habit, and before it could be internalized as a habit, their strengths were crafted from youth through mentors, parents, or a coach. We might even say that character needs someone to help it along in the beginning.

In the article “Do Sports Build Character?” by Sharon Stoll and Jennifer Bella, they explain Aristotle’s view of character in this way: “Character is right conduct...our humanness... resides in our ability and capacity to reason, and virtue results when we use our reasoning ability and capacity to reason, and virtue results when we use our reasoning ability to control and moderate ourselves” (Gerdy, 18). We learn here that it is not enough to be determined or honorable, but that reasoning comes into play, too, when we talk about character. So it appears that character also needs the ability to think and reason clearly about our choices, and not simply be led by our feelings.

Stolla and Bella also say that athletes do not demonstrate virtue—or character—without understanding and valuing certain principles. One principle is this, that “character is often confused with intellect,” but that the two are not the same (21). The ability to reason doesn’t mean that you have to have the highest intelligence to have character, but that you are able to use reason to rule your feelings. Intellect, if not complemented by a component of love, respect, fairness compassion and honesty, can be monstrous. Another principle of real character is that character shows itself to be character even when no one else is watching.

The habit, established at first through the training from youth, of taking responsibility for oneself, of being brave, of being honorable—even when no one is watching—and of using our reason or intelligence to guide our feelings, especially when our feelings might lead us to do something unwise, unloving, disrespectful, unfair, or dishonest, we might call our working definition of character.

WHAT DOES CHARACTER HAVE TO DO WITH SPORTS AUTOBIOGRAPHIES?

Sports do not magically or automatically build character in athletes or in the young. With regard to moral development, Robert Griffin, author of *Sports in the Lives of Children and Adolescents*, writes, “

There is some evidence that sports often involves a tradeoff among good things. That is, when traits such as independence and perseverance are emphasized in a sports setting, qualities such as cooperation, sharing, helping, empathy and altruism may be undermined and vice versa. (59)

Athletes may or may not learn positive behaviors that are socially correct while they are playing as a team. What traits and behaviors they learn may not be reflected in their daily lives. They may not display the same good qualities in other settings and contexts. On the other hand, they may learn the elements of character. It depends on the person, and on the coach as well, and in reading sports autobiographies we can see when, if, and how the growth of these good qualities that make up character take place. Sports autobiographies, after all, are the personal stories of the athletes themselves, and they tell of the struggle in themselves that took place as the elements we call character were built in them. Reading these books, we can see, too, the obstacles, both inside and outside, that the athletes had to overcome. We learn that character doesn't appear magically or automatically, but that it can slowly appear, over time, with struggle, and with the help of someone who cares and guides.

Griffin believes "character has a wide range of qualities such as traits like honesty, self-discipline, sportsmanship; emotional stability, assertiveness, independence and good citizenship and social skills are also included" (Griffin, 55). We could add these qualities to the definition of character we gave at the beginning. They have something to do with sports autobiographies because these books are often written by people who have, through acquiring these qualities, overcome obstacles. In reading their stories students can be inspired to see that they can overcome obstacles, too, by developing these same qualities. By seeing these qualities develop in athletes by reading sports autobiographies, students can learn about character as well as about sports.

Some believe that sports prepare you for life and can help overcome adversity, and by reading sports autobiographies students may be able to see how this is so. Sports can be "a place to live out your life" and learning how some athletes learned to play with "grace and dignity" (Griffin, 57). Sports can help students learn the "up close and personal." By studying sports autobiographies and by demonstrating how others developed character, we can provide opportunities for students to learn about building character in themselves.

Griffin writes that "it appears that for most kids, sports has no significant impact one way or another on what kind of people they become," and this may be the case not only with sports, but with many pursuits—like studying the piano or learning to play chess (67). But studying sports autobiographies is not so much about playing sports as providing the opportunity for teachers to reach children who are interested in the world of sports, as well as students who are can be interested in learning through hearing or reading dramatic stories—and sports autobiographies are often very dramatic stories.

If a teacher wants to help develop character in her students, studying sports autobiographies may help her reach students who might otherwise be inattentive. Studying sports autobiographies also provides the teacher with chances to show what character is and opportunities to make her students hunger for it as they see it displayed, in this case, in the field of sports. All her students can see it as they read these

autobiographies together and so begin to see that, like excellence in sports, character development brings rewards, but that it requires time, effort, and self-discipline. As John Gerdy says: “As former athletes and coaches, we believe that sports has the potential to build moral character” (21). I am not, like former athletes and coaches, so interested in helping kids be better at playing sports, but I do believe, as former athletes and coaches also probably do, that character development can be influenced by studying character in exemplary athletes.

BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM

By studying sports autobiographies with the aim of helping children understand what character is, children may begin to grasp the basis of self-esteem. They may begin to learn how self-esteem is built and the role they can play in building it.

Increasingly, educators are losing the battle against gangs. Children look to gangs for approval and belonging. Children are especially vulnerable during adolescence. They seek validation and belonging when they are faced with the peer pressure to join a gang. Choosing *not* to join a gang does not come easily. It is seemingly easier to live for today, rather than defer gratification to reach long-term goals. It seems easier to blame others, rather than take responsibility for our actions. By building character in our students we build self-esteem, and so perhaps we can fight back and help our students to choose a life with a positive future.

As Vicki Phillips points out in her workshop in personal development “at-risk students” have low self esteem, are emotionally expressive rather than assertive, refuse to accept responsibility for themselves and their behavior, fail to set goals, and are reactive rather than proactive. Our definition of character—and our examination of sports autobiographies will make it even clearer—points to the importance of taking responsibility for ourselves and for doing the right thing. By learning how various athletes stood against the tide and took responsibility for their own failures, as well as for overcoming obstacles, children may be encouraged to begin to do the same—and this is the first step toward building self esteem.

Further, Phillips reiterates Daniel Goleman’s ideas on emotional intelligence. She writes, “He emphasizes the importance of self-efficacy—the belief that you are powerful because you can control your reaction to what happens to you in life. He believes that we can teach students to understand the link between their thoughts, feelings and behavior and help them see that they always have choices about how they will respond to any situation” (Phillips, flyer of workshop). The great trait of a person with character is that he does not let circumstances rule him, but instead takes responsibility for himself and realizes that he can influence those circumstances. Character, almost above everything else, means that we can make choices and that the responsibilities for the choices are ours. Thus teaching children about character through case studies in the form of sports

autobiographies can build the vital emotional intelligence that Daniel Goleman stresses so much.

WHAT CAN MAKE US SUCCESSFUL

Griffin indicates that “more than anything, success has to do with values...those who are successful in every area of life, including sports, are those who have achievement oriented values. [Athletes] are committed to self-discipline, hard work and perseverance” (Griffin, 118). They use their minds as well as their bodies.

Discussing the value of self-awareness, Griffin says:

For the individual player, competition on the court is a chance to express his game, reveal who he is as a player at that point in his development. This may appear to be ego orientation, but it is self orientation. (Griffin, 119)

They play as an individual for self-actualization rather than for the approval of others or to win acceptance.

Playing in this way is an expression of the gifts of existence, and mind and volition. It marks the presence of a never before and never again replicated human being. It speaks to the joy of life. (Griffin, 120)

If only we could bring this sense of honoring the self into education! “A young person can view sports as an opportunity to learn and develop,” Griffin writes (120). You don’t have to play sports to find the lessons for success in sports valuable. By studying character through reading and talking about the lives of celebrated athletes, children can grow as individuals.

CHARACTER IN SPORTS AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

How, then, can one actually show students the meaning of character, as we have begun to define it, in sports autobiographies? I have chosen three books, Lance Armstrong’s *It’s Not About the Bike*, John Elway’s *The Comeback Kid*, and Sheryl Swoopes’ *Bounce Back* to show how a teacher can begin to use these books to help students learn valuable lessons about character. Notice that the titles of these books points beyond sports to the features of the athletes themselves. Armstrong’s title, for example, says that it’s not the sport itself; it is the journey and the characteristics of a person that really counts. The titles of the other two books make similar points.

In each of these three examples I summarize the story, very briefly talk about what the story shows or might teach about character, and discuss (again, just to give the reader a few ideas) how one might begin to share the lessons of the autobiography with students. In the final section concerning these three autobiographies, I talk about how the

principles about character in each book might be shared with children; rather than offer lesson plans per se, I offer ideas at the end of my curriculum unit. I simply offer a few thoughts on how a teacher might proceed to share some ways the particular books may be worked on with the students.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE BIKE: MY JOURNEY BACK TO LIFE

Summary of the Book

In Lance Armstrong's autobiography, we learn that he is a champion bicyclist from Austin, Texas who won the Tour de France, a 2,290 mile road race which is known to be the most challenging sporting event of any kind in the world. Then, at the age of 25, he got testicular cancer and was given a small hope, if any, of surviving. Although he was in excellent physical condition, he believed his survival was more luck than anything else.

He was born to a seventeen-year-old mother and everyone said neither she nor her son would amount to anything. He never knew his father and he said he didn't care because his mother gave him plenty of love. When he was growing up, there was a bike shop nearby that got kids started in the sport. He got his first bike when he was seven and loved it. He joined a swim team when he was twelve. In the beginning he was placed with seven year olds because he was a poor swimmer but within a year he worked so hard that he was fourth in the state. He entered his first junior triathlon, a combination of swimming, biking, and running, when he was thirteen. He won by a lot, and he liked the feeling. He was earning money when he was fifteen, competing against older athletes. A lot of people were shocked that he could perform so well at such a young age and the success made him a little cocky. But it wasn't all easy for him. In one of his first pro-triathlons he ate junk food before the race and almost collapsed. But on his mother's insistence, he walked to the finish line rather than choose to be a quitter.

By the age of sixteen he was the national rookie of the year in sprint triathlons. He still felt his mother was his biggest supporter and friend. He ran six miles after school every day and rode his bike into the evening. His wealthier friends, who wore designer clothes, teased him about wearing Lycra shorts but he didn't care because he wasn't a conformist. His goal was to be a top athlete and his focus on this made high school popularity not so important in the big picture. Although he wasn't so concerned about socializing, he loved his mother greatly and deeply appreciated all her sacrifices for him. He even took her to his prom with him and his date.

After high school Lance began racing fulltime. He raced as an amateur in the 1992 Olympics in Spain, then turned pro. He met a man named Jim Ochowicz who became his mentor and eventually his surrogate father. He was a leader and pioneer in the cycling world. When Lance told him he wanted to be the best, he was signed to a contract and sent to Europe. Lance came in last in his first race, and people laughed at him. He called his coach and told him he wanted to quit and go home. But he took his coach's advice

and stayed to prove he wasn't a quitter. In the next race he came in second so his perseverance paid off. He went on to win his first world championship at age twenty-one, the youngest cyclist to ever do so. His big goal was the Tour de France, the hardest race in the world. He had competed in one in 1995 and learned that it was about more than the bike. He realized the race represented life itself with all its ups and downs.

Then he learned he had cancer; it made his other problems seem insignificant. It was a frighteningly sobering reality. He went through chemotherapy and brain surgery in the next few months. In between the treatments, he tried to keep up his cycling. He had become so weak it was very difficult for him. But he never gave up on it no matter how badly he felt. At the one-year anniversary of his cancer diagnosis, he was cancer free. His old coach took him camping and cycling in the mountains, and he started getting back in shape. Then he got back into racing and encountered a lot of resistance from people who thought his bout with cancer had defeated him for good. But he had the last laugh when he went on to win the Tour de France. He became an international celebrity overnight. But in the end he says he would have rather had cancer than won the Tour de France "because of what it has done for me as a human being, a husband, a son, and a father" (Armstrong, 259).

It's Not About the Bike and Character

When Lance took his mother's advice to "make every obstacle an opportunity," he exercised self-control by taking charge of his own life and keeping a positive outlook (16). When he couldn't finish a race, he says, "I walked to the finish line" (28). This shows perseverance; he wasn't a quitter. He also believed that "if you can't give 110 per cent, you won't make it" (29). He was pursuing excellence and making all his efforts worthy of pride. He told his mentor, "I want to be the best rider there is...a pro. I don't want to be just good at it, I want to be the best" (49). He was vocalizing his quest to excel. When Lance wanted to quit a race, he took his coach's advice when he told him, "You are going to learn more from that experience than any other race in your whole life," and he continued. This showed openness to what other people have to say. He has teachability and humility. He also proved once again he had self-control and pride and that he wasn't a quitter.

When discussing what it meant to ride the Tour de France, he realizes:

It's a metaphor for life, not only the longest race in the world but also the most exalting and heartbreaking and potentially tragic. It poses every conceivable element to the rider...above all a great, deep self-questioning. (69)

This shows his integrity because he wanted to try new things even though it was costly and difficult. He was following his conscience. When his mother told a reporter, "Lance's whole life has been against all odds," it was a reflection of his integrity because he had stood up for his beliefs and lived by his principles no matter what others said. As Lance

said, “Winning the Tour was a symbolic act, proof that you cannot only survive cancer, but thrive after it” (259). Lance’s success was based on the fact that he took charge of his life, persevered and kept his integrity.

Teaching Character Using Armstrong’s *It’s Not about the Bike*

There are a hundred ways to take this book and begin to teach students about character; the following is just one idea. I start by helping the children understand just how challenging the Tour de France is as an athletic event. I will bring in a map of France with the route drawn on it. I would ask them to help me figure how many miles the race involves by looking at it, one leg at a time. I also bring a map of Texas and draw the same legs around the state of Texas; that will help them get the picture. I would read an example showing Armstrong struggling with a great challenge, riding his bike down hill at great speeds and use it as a lesson. I then ask them to tell stories of their own experiences, of when they wrestled with a great fear and overcame it. We look at how Lance dealt with downhill racing and see how he overcame his fears. Then I ask the children to talk about how they have tried to overcome fear. This discussion can then be connected to the idea of character, so I can begin to educate the children about the elements that make it up. He had quite a bout with cancer but came through it so the students might be asked if they would like to learn more about cancer to appreciate how hard it was for Armstrong in many ways.

COMEBACK KID

Summary of the Book

John Elway has won more regular season games than any other starting quarterback in history. He has been to the Superbowl three times and lost. He believes it’s not so much talent that is the secret of success as the will to win that lets you never give up.

He was born in Washington. His Dad was a football coach who moved four times with his family. He has a fraternal twin named Jana and another sister whom he played while growing up. He always wanted to play ball. Once when he was ten, throwing a ball almost cost him his life. He accidentally stepped on a dog while pitching, and it bit him near his jugular vein.

His parents taught John and his two sisters to be competitive. They competed for grades, in swimming, and board games at home. His parents were his role models, the people he looked up to for learning right from wrong. He respected what his Dad taught him—to keep it simple. He would explain why one technique was better than another. Then John practiced with them continuously.

He first played on a team at age eleven as a running back; he ran for four touchdowns during the first half of his first game. He was the fastest runner in the league and his team

won the city championship. His Dad disciplined him about his attitude. For example, he heard him mouthing off and questioning the officials during one game, so he took him behind the gym and lectured him. After that, he had him benched for the rest of the game. He taught John to always play hard, be a team player, and respect the coaches and officials. Around this time John's family moved to Pullman, Washington. His running speed slowed down because he was growing. He wanted to quit track but his Dad always made him finish what he started. In high school, he sustained his first knee injury. He finished out the game, completing a touchdown while injured. But he learned going through knee surgery that nothing is guaranteed in sports and he needed to be sure to get his college degree. After graduating from Stanford University with a degree in economics, he was drafted by a team he didn't want to play for, so he stood his ground refusing them and finally got to join the Denver Broncos instead. Some people thought he was spoiled for refusing the other team but he believes he did the right thing because he worked hard his whole life to be good enough to be in a position to negotiate from a position of power. He was also being honest with them.

However, John Elway got to the Denver Broncos and fell on his face after being paid the highest salary in history. He was benched for the first time and endured what he felt was the worst criticism of his life. He was full of self-doubt and wondered if he could make it in NFL. Then he got his first "come from behind" victory with three touchdown passes in the fourth quarter. During this time, he relied on a support group of family and friends to help him. He married his college sweetheart and experienced a new fire to improve his next season. He worked out and studied films and formations more than ever.

He went to three Super Bowls and did everything he could to win. But even though he didn't win, he knew he tried and did everything he possibly could to win so he felt he was still a winner. This has shown him everybody faces challenges and feels like giving up. Having support of friends and family, perspective and a sense of humor helps him through tough times. People wonder if he's getting too old but he keeps doing better. At the age of thirty-six, he had his best year ever. He has found that a winner is someone who always comes back from defeat.

Comeback Kid and Character

John Elway demonstrates perseverance. He says, "My strength has been my will to win—that competitive fire inside. I never give up" (3). He showed respect for authority by the importance he placed on obeying his father as well as his coaches. This can be seen when he says, "One time Dad didn't show me a correct technique and I fell flat on my face" (3). He showed self-control when he changed a bad attitude with the help of discipline from his father. He said, "Those tough early lessons showed me that changing a bad attitude is always possible" (17). He also had to say no to his friends sometimes when they went to have fun and he had to practice. Another way he showed self-control. Was by turning down drugs and alcohol. Later in his career he showed charity by setting up a foundation for abused children saying it has shown him "many people are going through

tough times everyday...and face challenges and want to quit” (35). In doing this work, he demonstrated compassion and empathy for others. He shows that he is a true winner in his pursuit of excellence when he says, “A winner is someone who is able to come back from defeat,” and quoting his father, “When you’ve taken your last step, take one more” (38).

Teaching Character Using Elway’s *Comeback Kid*

I suggest the teacher bring in a piece of equipment like a shoulder pad to help students begin to realize what a rough game football is. Explain that the game used to be played without all of the protective equipment and perhaps find an old film or still photos of a football game as it once was played. Elway had many traits that kept him going in this rough game. Ask the students what principal traits make a good football player. Elway also had normal negative reactions to certain circumstances. Discuss what they were. After reading the story again, have the students try to list the elements that make Elway a person with character.

The teacher may divide her students into small groups and give them the following words and definitions: respect, honesty, self-discipline, and perseverance. Students can be asked to give examples of times when they experienced the importance of each of these terms. He would play with pain and just not quit. What would they call that characteristic? What about the characteristic that leads someone to turn any negative thoughts around? What would they call the trait that the term “come back” represents? Why was he called the “comeback kid”?

BOUNCE BACK

Summary of the Book

Sheryl Swoopes is a basketball player, who has competed at the Olympics and won a gold medal and played Michael Jordan. Basketball has given her a lot of joy, but sometimes she has wanted to quit. She had a poor childhood. Her father left her mother with four children to raise alone. She didn’t go shopping with friends, get a car, or even go on vacation. She just played basketball. But it sure paid off. She also dreamt of having a perfect family but learned to be happy with the one she had. She learned at an early age to remain motivated and positive. She started playing basketball at age seven with her rough brothers. They kept pushing her down, but she would get up and try again. Because she wanted to be a strong player, she swallowed her pride and kept trying. Her brothers continued to beat her for thirteen years but when she came home from college, all her perseverance paid off and she beat them. Playing with her brothers prepared her well for team sports but not for all the teasing she got about her long legs. Fortunately they became a great asset. She went to play with the guys at night. They teased her at times but she didn’t let that stop her. She was already demonstrating a lot of perseverance

and determination to succeed. Although she was playing a lot, she still always kept her mother's rules.

During Swoopes' junior year in high school, her team won the first state championship for the school. After high school, she went on to college and continuously broke records. She dreamt of going to the Olympics and tried out in 1992 but twisted an ankle and didn't make it. When she went home she was depressed and questioned whether or not to continue playing basketball. But she felt she was given a clear sign from God to continue, so she did. She went on to win titles and break records during her next year playing college basketball. When she feared failure, she used motivational thoughts. She led Texas Tech to win its first national title and set an NCAA championship record by scoring forty-seven points. Also around this time, she played Michael Jordan in a one-on-one game to entertain a television audience. She fouled him, but he won 7 to 5.

Finally she made the 1996 women's Olympic Basketball team. They had to travel around the country and across four continents, 102,000 miles. Her husband, who is her best friend, also stuck by her and gave her inspiration during times of discouragement. Finally after 14 months and 52 games, it all paid off. Her team accepted gold medals for the United States.

Bounce Back and Character

Sheryl Swoopes had a poor childhood and a broken family. She dreamed of having the perfect family but "realized that no one has a perfect family and what counts most is how you treat the family you have" (10). This shows loyalty to her family in her character from an early age. When she became discouraged, she learned how to stay positive by saying, "It's not always going to be this way. I'm going to make something of myself" (10). This shows the pursuit of excellence in her character as well as the focus necessary to achieve a goal. When she was a little older, she was playing a lot at night but she always respected her mom's ten o'clock curfew saying, "I thought her strictness would wreck my life. I now know she did it because she loves me and wanted to keep me out of trouble" (17). It is clear that Sheryl had a respect for authority and loyalty to her mother.

During high school, after winning a big game she realized, "Our upset victory showed all of us to power of teamwork" (18). This attitude reflects her loyalty in standing by her school and her friends on the team. Later, when she didn't make it to the Olympics and was questioning her future goals, a little girl walked up to her. The little girl said, "I just want to tell you that my mom and I pray for you every night and I just want to let you know God says you're going to be OK and I don't want you to give up" (24). By listening to the little girl she demonstrated openness for a turning point. Another way she showed openness was by listening to her husband when he would ask, "Are you going to give up everything you dreamed about because of a few bad days" (34).

Her openness to the opinions of loved ones helps keep her strong. Sheryl shows that dreams can come true. No matter what adversity you face, if you strive to improve every day and set high goals, you will always bounce back” (38).

Teaching Character Using Swoopes’ *Bounce Back*

The teacher might focus on the family of this young woman. What is a perfect family? Discuss this with students, then brainstorm. Recognizing that Sheryl Swoopes didn’t have a father and had very little money, the students will be eager to talk. Discuss people they know who are making it under tough circumstances and help them begin to realize how prevalent this situation is. What was Swoopes’ reaction to her difficult situation? What became important to her? How did she learn to “bounce back” and have courage? How did her brother’s rough treatment while letting her finally play with them help develop her character and game? How did her experiences with her family help her when she was faced with ridicule in games before she was respected as a team player? Discuss strict mothers and teachers. Then point out that Swoopes ended up receiving a scholarship. What obstacles did she have to overcome to win in the Olympics?

CONCLUSION

I have offered these three autobiographies as examples of how such texts can be used to help our students begin to learn about character. In choosing such books, a teacher should keep the interests of the students in mind. Teachers must choose books that are accessible to their students. Since my ESL students range from the ages of eleven to fourteen, I have chosen books appropriate for them. My suggestions for practical application are just that—only suggestions and ideas. I have not developed these into full lesson plans, but this can easily be done by an interested teacher—indeed, I may have developed full lesson plans for some of these autobiographies.

Below I have developed lesson plans in more detail, lessons that I intend to use with my students, alongside the ones I have described above.

LESSON PLAN 1

Introducing Sports Autobiographies Using Odd Stories from the Lives of Athletes

To introduce the study of sports autobiographies, I will choose many short stories from the lives of athletes—about 1- to 1-½ pages long. These will feature weird and quirky things about these famous athletes taken from a book by Kathleen Krull, *Lives of the Athletes Thrills, Spills and What the Neighbors Thought*. I may copy these and give one to each student to read and ask a few to present their vignette to the class. Or I may simply read some of these to the children and ask them to comment on them.

This collection of short vignettes spotlight the weird and commonplace but essentially, downright human elements of the famous. Highlighting the very human elements of famous people reinforces to students that although they may be awkward (as most adolescents are), it doesn't mean that they can't become successful. This activity may take up to two class periods. The idea is to involve the students in a gentle manner with the ideas that relate to character development.

LESSON PLAN 2

Student Autobiographies

The Greek philosopher Socrates observed, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Students will examine their lives by writing autobiographies. I will ask each to emphasize a few positive and negative events. The instructor will help students realize the effect these turning points created and see how each experience determined other events. Students will be asked to identify critical turning points related to the events by drawing the timeline. They will briefly discuss the effect each event had, and if they had a choice about doing it over again, *would they?* We will ask:

- "What would you have done differently to have a more positive outcome in your life?"
- "What do you think you can do today to change tomorrow's outcomes?"
- "What choices would be difficult?"
- "Would you always choose the easy path—the route of least resistance?"
- "Are there some turning points over which you had no control?"

Students might be asked to design a meaningful cover and an illustrated booklet for the text of their autobiographies. They might work on these for a portion of several class periods.

LESSON PLAN 3

Using a Novel about a Sports Figure to Learn about Character

Robert Lipsyte's The Contender

The students will read *The Contender* to learn how the protagonist deals with obstacles and with failure, which is the true test of character. I want to show them that the theme of character is central not only to autobiography, but to fiction, as well.

The Contender is novel about a young boxer written by a sports writer for the *New York Times*, Robert Lipsyte. He had followed Muhammad Ali's career. Lipsyte's mother was a teacher, and his father was a principal. He felt that all children should be involved in some sports instead of raising unreal expectations. He feels that we force kids to judge

too much within sports so that they become scared. He appreciates books about sports that are not so much into competition and rejections. He doesn't want kids to have fears of being hurt, being ridiculed, or disappointing to their parents.

Summary of the Book

The Contender is a fictional account of Alfred Brooks, a black teenager living a poor neighborhood that is the center for drugs and gangs. Fortunately, he comes from a loving home where he is taught to have concern for others and to obey the law. He drops out of school, holding a job in a grocery store. He respects his employers and does his best for them. They are good God-fearing people. Brooks admires their faith and tells friends, "They don't even touch money after sundown on Fridays" (5A).

One night he goes to a neighborhood gym where he meets a fighter trainer named Vito Donatelli who teaches him about pursuing excellence. He further tells him, "Albert, you have to start by wanting to be a contender, the man coming up, the man who knows there's a good chance he'll never get to the top, the man who's willing to sweat and bleed, get up as high as his legs and his brain and his heart will take him" (25). Brooks makes a commitment to train to be a boxer under the guidance of this mentor.

Meanwhile his old friends are trying to get him to help them rob his boss. They try to tear him down telling him he's just a slave and that's all he'll ever be. But Brooks tries to get them to go to the movies instead and finally he gets assertive and tells them straightforwardly that there is "no chance" he'll help them (63). He stays true to his commitment to the discipline of training. He is proud of the fact that he stands up for what is right and has a purpose in life.

Later Brooks uses poor judgment and goes to see his gang friends. He ends up getting into bad situations with them all the while wishing he would have stayed away from them. But even though he falls, he gets right back up and goes to see his mentor. He asks Mr. Donatelli if could be a contender. Mr. Donatelli tells, "Anyone can be taught to fight but a contender, that you have to do yourself" (97). Brooks decides not to quit, but to try even harder at being a contender. Meanwhile, he was rewarded for his hard work by being given a promotion.

He develops new friends, a teacher and former boxer named Spoon and a gym worker named Henry. Due to his new pride and positive associations, Brooks realizes he needs to finish high school. While visiting Spoon and his wife, a teacher, he is surprised to see how her concern over a student who has stopped doing their homework.

Brooks continues to train and fight. Even when he wins, Donatelli wants more out of him. His aunt, who raises him, is very upset to see him fighting and begs him to quit, but he refuses. Even though he enjoys fighting and training, he does not like hurting people. When he wins, he's concerned about the health of his opponents.

Brooks' cousin, Jeff, visits and they discuss their goals and plans. They agree that change takes time and each generation is driven to improve on the last one. Jeff wants to make a difference by starting self-help programs, parents groups, tenants groups, and mentoring programs and recreation centers for young kids. Not long after that, his Brooks' friend James appears at his doorstep wanting money for a fix [to satisfy a drug craving] but is refused.

Brooks has won three fights and Donatelli wants him to quit saying he has learned how to be a contender, and he doesn't just mean in fighting. He means in life. But Brooks insists on one last fight. This time he is repeatedly knocked down and fights to the end but loses. He is a contender because he kept fighting knowing he might lose.

In the end Brooks and James are in their secret cave, a hiding place, representing safety and security, which they have shared since childhood. James has decided to be like Brooks and have him as his mentor the way Henry, Spoon and Donatelli mentored his friend.

The Contender and Character

I hope to use the novel to help students look for the meaning of character within text. To prepare for this, I have, below, briefly discussed what the novel teaches concerning character.

Brooks shows integrity in his character by respecting his employers and working hard for them. He stays loyal to his employers even though his friends want to rob them. He lives by his principles no matter what others say and has the courage to do what was right. He also shows loyalty by standing by his employer and honoring his trust. When he tells the gang members there was no chance that he would help them, he shows integrity by accepting responsibility for the consequences of his choices as well as setting a good example. He also shows integrity after joining the gang; instead of losing heart when he fails, he gets back up and keeps trying.

He also demonstrates reliability by staying committed to his training. He honors his word and commitments and is dependable. He shows a respect for the golden rule because he treats others as he wants to be treated. He shows concern for the health of the guy he is boxing. It also shows that he values, honors, and respects others no matter what they can do for you or to you. In the end, he shows loyalty to his old friend James, by looking out for him and helping him when he is ready to lead a good life.

The coach also illustrates noble traits. He is totally honest about whether he thinks Brooks has reached his potential. This openness is more of a gift than anything else because he is able to let the potential boxing champion know that he has learned his lessons

and is not able to go further. Brooks fights the last fight anyway so as not to be a quitter. He learns it's the journey and then there is another fork in the road.

Student Activities

The following activities include writing exercises and discussions that will help students understand character as they read *The Contender*. I will ask students first to write responses to the following questions, after which we will have brief classroom discussions.

While reading the book students will be expected to identify admirable characteristics of Alfred Brooks.

1. Write descriptions of places when he:
 - makes great efforts to overcome adversity
 - shows courage
 - shows determination
 - shows inner strength
2. Define the differences between these four things. Are they all examples of courage? What is courage?

I will ask students to identify choices Brooks makes or turning points he has that lead him in the right direction or down the wrong road. Winning is not necessarily the symbol of success. Children will be specifically asked:

3. Who influences Brooks to make the right choices?
4. Identify conflicts, both external and internal.

Students will then turn from the novel to their own lives.

5. Identify personal intermediate and short-term goals. Identify what set of patterns you need to achieve every day in order to achieve these goals. Compare your approach to those used by Brooks.

Understanding vocabulary words. Below is a chart containing eight words. Students will be asked to define them, and then we will discuss the meanings of each word. I will ask each student to provide an example of each word in their definitions.

Strengths	Weakness
Obedience	Discipline
Goals	Courage
Responsibility	Consequences

LESSON PLAN FOUR

Choosing and Reading a Sports Autobiography

Gather sports autobiographies from your school library, place them on the desks in the sports divisions, and allow students to pick a book. They will need to reflect on character traits and pull quotes from the books reflecting these traits. Ask them to describe the element of character that is most strikingly shown in the positive quotes.

APPENDIX: A SELECTION OF QUOTATIONS RELATING TO CHARACTER

Teachers may find these quotations useful. They are from *The Book of Positive Quotations* by J. Cook. Selections from this list might be written on the board without comment; each student might choose one and offer to stand and share it, with a comment; or these may be used in any way deemed relevant by the teacher. Some students, working alone or in groups, might identify a trait showing character in a quotation and compare it to an example in an autobiography.

Character

Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved.

~Helen Keller (Cook, 442)

Courage

One of man's finest qualities is described by the simple word "guts" - the ability to take it. If you have the discipline to stand fast when your body wants to run, if you can control your temper and remain cheerful in the face of monotony or disappointment, you have "guts" in the soldiering sense.

~Colonel John S. Roosman (253)

Team

A team that has character doesn't need stimulation.

~Tom Landry (343)

Effort

Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.

~Motto of the Special Olympics (482)

I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live up to what light I have.

~Abraham Lincoln (483)

The secret of discipline is motivation. When a man is sufficiently motivated, discipline will take care of itself.

~Alexander Paterson
(337)

I tried to treat them like me, and some of them weren't.

~Coach Bill Russell, on difficulties he
had with some of his players (338)

Football linemen are motivated by a more complicated, self-determining series of factors than the simple fear of humiliation in the public gaze, which is the emotion that galvanizes that backs and receivers.

~Merlin Olsen (338)

Some people are molded by their admirations, others by their hostilities.

~Elizabeth Bowen (338)

Human behavior flows from three main sources: desire, emotion, and knowledge.

~Plato (338)

Perseverance

Success seems to be largely a matter of hanging an after others have let go.

~William Feather (443)

Perseverance is a great element of success. If you only knock long enough and loud enough at the gate, you are sure to make up somebody.

~Henry Longfellow (443)

I am not the smartest or talented in the world, but I succeeded because I keep going, and going, and going.

~Sylvester Stallone (494)

Failure

Failure is only postponed success as long as courage "coaches" ambition. The habit of persistence is the habit of victory.

~Herbert Haufman (408)

Everyone has a talent. What is rare is the courage to follow that talent to the dark place where it leads.

~ Erica Jong (408)

Courage or Perseverance has a magical talisman, before which difficulties disappear, and obstacles vanish into air.

~ John Quincy Adams (408)

There are a lot of fellas with all the ability it takes to play in the major leagues, but...they always get stuck in the minor league because they haven't got the guts to make the climb.

~Cookie Lavagetto (408)

Success

Success is a journey, not a destination.

~Ben Sweetland (447)

The two hardest things to handle in life are failure and success.

~Anonymous (449)

Creating success is tough. But keeping it is tougher. You have to keep producing, you can't ever stop.

~Pete Rose (450)

To laugh often and much.

To win the respect of intelligent people, and the affection of children.

To earn the appreciation of honest critics, and endure the betrayal of false friends.

To appreciate beauty.

To find the best in the others.

To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition.

To know that even one life has breathed easier because you lived. This is to have succeeded.

~Ralph Waldon Emerson (451)

Leadership

I sincerely wish you will have the experience of thinking up a new idea, planning it, organizing it, and following to completion and having it magnificently successful.

I also hope you will go through the same process and have something "bomb out".

I wish that you could achieve some great good for mankind, but have nobody know about it except you.

I wish you could know how it feels “to run” with all your heart and lose...horribly.
I wish you could find something so worthwhile that you deem it worthy of the investment of your life.
I hope you become frustrated and challenged enough to begin to push back the very barriers of your own personal limitations.
I hope you make a stupid, unethical mistake and get caught red-handed, and are big enough to say those magic words, “I was wrong!”
I hope you give so much of yourself that someday you wonder if it is worth it all.
I wish for you magnificent obsessions that will give you reason for living and purpose and direction and life.
I wish for you the worst kind of criticism for everything you do, because that makes you fight to achieve beyond what you normally would.
I wish for you the experience of *leadership of yourself*.

~Anonymous

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Internet Resources

<http://www.ayf.com>

American Youth Foundation

Develops leadership capacities of young people; hosts camps, conferences, and “I Dare You” Leadership Awards; encourages positive character traits in youth.

<http://www.ascd.org>

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)

Has publications available on moral education and character development; has established a Character Education Network.

<http://www.cortland.edu/www/c4n5rs>

Center for the 4th and 5th RS

Encourages the practice and teaching of respect and responsibility; serves as a resource in character education; publishes a newsletter; and has a browsing library.

<http://www.CharacterEducation.org>

Character Education Institute

Has comprehensive teaching kits for teachers of kindergarten through middle school (high school pending); poster contest. Focuses on twelve to fifteen traits.

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