Should Kids “Pick the Team” in K-12 Physical Education Classes?
by Grant M. Hill

The practice of utilizing captains to select teams or groups is as old as games themselves. Game participants, seeking to create “equal” teams or to be placed on a team with friends, have traditionally incorporated the process of first identifying captains and then alternating selections until all players have been assigned. The amateur drafts for professional basketball, baseball, football, and ice hockey also utilize this system to stock their teams with new players. But, while this practice may be appropriate for student-managed settings with discretionary participation, it should not be utilized in K-12 physical education programs.

When students select groups in recreational settings, some benefits occur. First, it provides captains with leadership opportunities. That is, they are responsible for addressing perceived team needs and selecting the best personnel available. Second, it tends to create fair teams since selections are normally alternated until all players have been chosen. Third, it tends to allow players the opportunity to play with friends and with those with whom they are familiar. Lastly, it creates identity for each team based on the captain’s desire to acquire particular players.

However, it is inappropriate to have students select groups in physical education classes for several reasons. First, it places the students who choose in a position to publicly assess the playing ability of each student. For those selected, this experience can be humiliating and may cause them to want to avoid taking physical education altogether. Too, having students select teams is time-consuming. For example, for a class of 30 students, assuming there are two leaders choosing, there will be 28 selections made, which could take 5-10 minutes. Having students select the groups may develop dysfunction in the relationships among all students in the class. Specifically, captains passing over one of their friends to pick another player may face future repercussions and lower-skilled players may receive “flack” from other members who may be angry at being “stuck” with them as part of the group. Students may use inappropriate criteria for selecting teams. For example, they might consider race and gender in their decision, leading to a result that is not desirable. Finally, but most importantly, having students make selections hampers a teacher’s ability to structure students’ learning experiences. This should be the focus of physical education classes, and selection of teams and/or practice groups should have educational purposes—these purposes may not occur when students pick the team. Several educational purposes that teachers may accomplish through appropriate groups of students include:

- Fostering growth in the physical skills of children with different competency levels (e.g., through ability groups);
- Enhancing social interaction and providing opportunities for students to positively influence the behavior of others by systematically rotating group membership; and,
- Challenging students to exert maximal effort by creating groups that are, and students perceive, as fair (NASPE, 1995).

When teams or groups are for convenience, “chance” is an appropriate mechanism for selection. A traditional method is to have students line up and count off by two, threes, etc., depending on how many groups need
to be created. This process has a good chance of resulting in equal selection, but care must be taken to insure that players are not arranging themselves in line so that they will be on a specific person's team. Other ways to divide students into groups include using birth dates (such as closest to January 1st or being born in a particular month), color of clothing, hair or shoes, first or last letter of student's name, or the last digits of phone numbers or addresses. Students may also be asked to stand next to another student whom they perceive to be of equal ability, and then divide into groupings using one of the methods cited above. If more than two groups are needed, then teachers should simply have students stand in groups of that specified size. To insure the same number of boys or girls on each team, students may be directed to pick the same sex partners.

Other, more creative methods may be utilized to select teams. For example, students may be allowed to draw numbers or colored slips of paper for placement. Groups may also be determined by having students flick a spinner or roll dice. Teachers may use a freeze signal during a warm-up run and then randomly assign students based on their "frozen" positions. Teachers may also utilize a deck of cards to divide students into groups. For example, after distributing two cards to each student, all of the red card selections may be directed to assemble on one side of the gym and the black card selections on the other, if the goal is just two groupings. If four teams are needed, students might be asked to simply find those with the same suite (i.e., spades, clubs, hearts, diamonds). Students could also be directed to fall in with others who have the same card rank (e.g., 2s, 8s, jacks, etc.). To ensure the numbers come out evenly, teachers may simply eliminate cards that are not needed. For example, if there are 28 students in the class, 24 of the 52 cards should be pulled prior to distribution—for example, all of the 3s to 7s. These methods may be more time-consuming than simply having them number off. However, students may find the process more enjoyable as a result of the inherent suspense.

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Teachers may also study class lists and determine team composition prior to the class meeting. The basis for these selections can be skills test performance or subjective ratings of player ability by the teacher. Regardless of how the teacher decided to select teams, there are several guidelines that should be considered:

- Will the process of assigning students be either demotivating or embarrassing to members of the class?
- Will the process create equal groups if competition will be involved?
- Will the process be efficient in terms of class time usage?
- Will the process encourage students to work with a variety of other students?
- Will the process assure gender balance for groups? And, will there be ethnic balance?

Teachers may also change group composition after games have already started. These changes may be made simply to give students opportunities to play with other students on their team, or because the teams are "uneven." In the case of "uneven," teachers should safeguard against trading star players on the better team for lesser players on the other. Instead, simply bring the players together and use one of the quicker ways to divide them, such as by birth date or alphabetical by first or last name.

One of the goals of physical education is to encourage all students, not just high achievers, to develop and sustain the desire to participate in movement activities throughout their lives. Any practice, such as having student publicly select teams in physical education classes, that has the potential to humiliate or devalue other students, should be avoided not only because it may be harmful to their self-esteem, but because it may discourage them from further participation in sports. Physical education should promote a more inclusive participation philosophy than athletics. Hopefully, by utilizing more humane methods of dividing students into groups, physical education teachers will foster a supportive and non-threatening environment in which every child will feel protected and valued.

References


*Grant Hill (gill@spu.edu) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Education at Seattle Pacific University.*