

Dear Parents

I hope this letter finds you well.

I have had the privilege of attending many talks by Gary Kirsten, an iconic South African cricketer and coach, on numerous occasions. At one of his talks on Parenting in Sport, he posed the following questions to the audience:

How many of you played sport at school? Most of the audience stood up.

How many of you continued to play sport after school? About 50% of the audience stood.

How many of you played at the provincial level? Probably 10% of the audience stood.

How many of you played professional sport? No one in the audience stood.

He then asked why we treat our children as professional sportsmen or sportswomen. Sport for prep school children should be fun and focus on development. This really got me thinking as a parent and coach. Over my 40 years of coaching, I've considered how few of the boys have made a living from sport or played for their national teams. They are very few.

Danie Craven, a legendary figure in South African rugby, also had strong opinions about the impact of professional sport on schoolboy sport. He believed that the professionalisation of sports could have both positive and negative effects on young athletes. Craven emphasised the importance of treating young players as children first, rather than mini-adults, and warned against the pressures and expectations that professional sports can impose on them.

At Bishops, we believe that sports are an integral part of a child's development, providing invaluable lessons in teamwork, discipline, resilience, and sportsmanship. Our sports policy requires boys to participate in both a summer and a winter team sport, and we encourage them to engage in all sports offered. This approach is designed to help them develop a wide range of skills that will benefit them throughout their lives.

Over the past few years, prep school sports have certainly changed. There seems to be a developing "win at all costs" mentality. Teachers' coaching and refereeing skills are increasingly scrutinised and often criticised, especially when teams lose. Gone are the days when we simply acknowledged that the opposition played better or that our team did not perform well. Some boys are choosing to drop a summer sport to concentrate on a winter sport out of fear of missing out. In my opinion, if you are good enough, you will always rise to the top if you work hard enough. Schools that offer a sports programme are finding it extremely challenging to compete with sporting codes that follow the professional model, where a sport is played year-round. Schools typically offer distinct summer and winter sports, which can lead to scheduling clashes. In some extreme cases, outside sports commitments are being prioritised over our sports offered at Bishops, which is concerning.

We understand that you want the best for your children, but it is crucial to remember that primary school sports should be about fun, enjoyment, learning, and personal growth. It must be remembered that we use sport to educate our young men for life. School sport should be a safe space where boys learn to win, lose and fail. A failure creates an opportunity to grow.

Here are a few key points we would like to emphasise:

Holistic Development: Sport is part of our boys' education and at this level is meant to develop well-rounded individuals who are equipped with the knowledge and skill to take on anything the

world throws at them. Focusing solely on winning can overshadow the broader benefits of participation.

Respect for Coaches and Officials: Our teachers and referees are committed to providing a positive experience for all students. Questioning their decisions and skills can undermine their efforts and set a negative example for the children.

Balanced Participation: Encouraging children to participate in both summer and winter sports helps them develop diverse skills. Dropping one sport to focus on another can limit their overall growth.

Team Dynamics: Positions within a team are fluid and can change due to various factors such as injuries, illnesses, or growth spurts. Similarly, their team selection might change according to the needs of the team, the coach's plan, etc. As parents, selections need to be accepted and not questioned. It is the coach's decision—not a discussion or negotiation. It is important for children to learn adaptability and understand that their role in the team may evolve.

Commitment and Attendance: Regular attendance at practices is essential for team cohesion and individual development. Injuries, illness, or unavailability provide opportunities for others trying for higher honours, so there is no automatic path back into the team if a player misses a match or matches.

Specialisation: Leading experts recommend that specialisation should take place during late adolescence, when the majority growth in physical maturity and development has occurred, as children are more aware of their bodies and educated on how to prevent injuries. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach as some sports do require early specialisation, such as gymnastics, but it is widely encouraged that cross-training within the youth is more beneficial for an overall athletic ability base, as many sport movements have skills and attributes that transfer across the disciplines.

We kindly ask for your support in reinforcing these values at home. We aim to remain competitive as a school and need as many boys involved in our team sports as possible. By working together, we can ensure that our sports programme remains a positive and enriching experience for all boys.

Thank you for your understanding and cooperation.

Kind regards

Chris Groom

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