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Professional sports and schooling rarely rub shoulders in the Indian context. Most schools are happy to see their students bring back inter-school shields and trophies but the enthusiasm generally wanes there. One can hardly expect much more from a marks-oriented system where extra-curriculars are dispensable embellishments on one's CV.

My experience as a fledgling chess player was not very different. I picked up the game at the age of eight and became a regular tournament player a few years later. I went to a school that had a formidable reputation for producing board exam toppers with brisk efficiency. Each leave application was accompanied by repeated requests to the principal to let me travel and play.

It's not that schools don't appreciate sporting talent. It is just too low on their priority list. Unless the player's exploits are splashed all over the newspapers, there is little hope of being taken seriously. Consequently a player gets very little support and encouragement before his first break, which can take years.

There is no sure way to convince a school management that your child, who doesn't have a championship to his name, is promising enough to play tournaments outside of town. And yet anybody with a shadow of a sports background would know that exposure to challenging national and international events is one of the key factors in producing a champion.

Having said that, there are enough ways to get around a rigid school system for the strong-willed. My mother's persistent visits to the school authorities, armed with a new press clipping or tournament circular each time, eventually paid off and my attendance requirement was relaxed.

There was no question of special classes or re-exams however. I would return from a one-month circuit tour and find myself floundering in a pile of notes while the class had raced ahead. Joining tuitions was impractical given my erratic schedule, and it was only in the last few months of class 10 that I stayed put at home and engaged a private mathematics tutor.

Learning from experience, my parents admitted me to a progressive international school in class 11, far away from the yoke of the central board. Lesson plans were fluid and each class threw up discussions which did not always link to a previous class - a setup that suited me perfectly.

My new school, headed by a very understanding man who waived my annual fees along with the attendance requirement, had evolved from the dark ages and gave me the option of emailing assignments to stay in the loop while on the move. While I had complete freedom to play I was also accountable to some excellent teachers who expected equal effort from me in studies as well.

A common perception about chess players is that they must be very intelligent – though I have friends who would beg to differ – and as a result we cannot get away with playing the dumb jock. The game builds enough qualities to help players cope with their academics. It may or may not have a direct correlation to mathematics but it certainly improves a child's concentration, memory and logic tenfold.

I am not sure how physical sports would impact academic performance, but I believe that any sporting activity contributes to an all-round personality which would go much further in the world than a mere 90%. The exposure gained from being a part of a global community that meets in different locales to play a game it collectively loves, cannot be quantified.

If nothing else, children should at least take up sports as a stress-buster which can teach them that there is life beyond exams. Those who make it beyond the amateur level also learn how to take highs and lows

in their stride while in a competitive environment - something no academic curriculum addresses.

Meanwhile, many of my chess-playing friends had dropped out of school to devote their days to the study of the game. I stuck to the system as a good education was non-negotiable in my family. There was a price to be paid of course as I could never completely be in one place.

One of the major impacts of my itinerant lifestyle was the time voids it punched into my personal relationships. Classes 7 to 12 are the years when one often makes lifelong friends, and I largely skipped that episode of school life. Had I been a basketball or hockey player I would have doubtless found companionship in my teammates, but chess was very different.

Individual games are essentially lonely. One can form strong bonds with other players whom one travels and trains with but it's impossible to let your guard fully down. There is a rival in each friend, and few feelings are as twisted as losing a championship to your best friend or winning it from her.



Being an individual sportsperson in a school can be either limiting or liberating depending on how you look at it. Unlike a school football or basketball team, individual sportspeople have to try harder to get the necessary permissions. Hardly any school offers free coaching for games such as chess, which is far more resource-intensive than you'd imagine. But at the end of the day the individual player gets to claim his achievements and future opportunities all for himself.

The nature of a player's sport also shapes his trajectory after school. I find that I prefer to work alone and take on the entire responsibility as well as the risk, while team players might work better in coordination with their colleagues. Which of these approaches succeed depend on whether one's workplace is more conducive to teamwork or to individual creativity.

I am glad that my family didn't let me give up on an education despite all the juggling I had to do. I know players who have achieved tremendous success in their game but cannot have a conversation outside of it. People make choices according to their priorities but life, by my books, is too rich and full of possibilities to be confined to one dimension.

In retrospect, I don't think there is much more that my school could have done to support my chess career. Not all institutions have the means to set up a fund for talented sportspeople though that would be the dream. I did not play a game which required top-class grounds or facilities for practice in the school campus. All I needed was the occasional pep talk from a teacher, the smiles on faces which saw me after long gaps, and the curious questions about my exotic tours. Which I got, mostly.

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