

VOICES OF AMI TRAINING

Competition in Sport from a Montessori Perspective

Ruben Jongkind, AMI Montessori Sports Trainer

In the Montessori community, the competitive element in sport is often viewed with suspicion. We at Montessori Sports understand very well that the wrong form of competition can be detrimental to children's development. However, there is also a healthy and positive form of competition that can contribute significantly to your growth. This good competition arises naturally and can be a source of motivation, resilience, and learning. For this type of competition to flourish, the prepared environment and the role of the adult are absolutely essential.

In Maria Montessori's thought, sport and physical activity are not simple pastimes, but an essential way for the integral development of the child. She observed that even in the simplest of moments, children create personal challenges that drive them to improve. In her work *The Montessori Method* (1912, p. 142), she writes: "A game like this is really very beautiful after a snowfall, when the little path traced by the children shows the regularity of the line followed and stimulates a pleasant competition among them, who each try to make his line in the snow as regular as possible."

This observation reflects how competition can be healthy when it is born spontaneously, without external impositions, and is driven by personal perfection rather than comparison with the other.

On the other hand, Montessori warned about the dangers of a form of competition that does not arise from the child, but is induced by adults. This type of competition, very common in traditional sports environments, has specific characteristics:

- comparison is constantly promoted
- is based on external rewards
- the selection of "capable" and "incapable" children is promoted
- adults create environments that promote immediate outcome by 'using' children as pawns.

Often, these types of environments create anxiety and frustration, encourage destructive behaviours, and eventually lead to abandonment of the sport. And unfortunately, it is the reality. Participation in organized sports peaks between the ages of 12 and 14, followed by a significant decline. For example, in Europe, the participation of boys in cycling decreases by 92% between the U14 and U18 categories, while for girls, participation in swimming falls by 71% in the same age range.

In the United States, approximately 70% of children drop out of organised sports before the age of 13, often due to overtraining, lack of fun, and burnout.

In other words, we have to change sports environments and prepare them according to the needs and characteristics of children at all levels of development to create good competition. Montessori Sports proposes a competition that arises from within the child. This type of competition is not about beating the other, but about surpassing yourself and enjoying the process. Its characteristics include:

- Spontaneity
- Absence of external rewards
- Development of creativity and concentration
- Fostering collective intelligence
- Building resilience and adaptation
- Authentic joy
- Role of the adult as a respectful guide

The purpose of sport is not to win. Winning is a result of excellence, perfection, repetition, concentration, overcoming complicated situations. It's the process that counts, not the victory." As Dr. Montessori said: *"Tennis, football and other sports are not just about moving a ball accurately, they challenge us to acquire a new skill – something we didn't have before – and that feeling of improving our abilities is the real source of joy in the game."* Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, p. 164

Montessori saw sport as an activity that is not limited to technical execution but as a tool to acquire new internal skills such as coordination, perseverance, resilience, self-control, concentration, and body awareness.

It is not the goal, the point or the victory that really fills us with satisfaction, but the internal experience of having learned something new, of having mastered something that we could not do before. That is the "authentic" joy to which she refers.

All children have the natural desire to improve, to stand out, to win. This motivation is valuable. But it is essential that we understand that, in sport, as in life, you do not always win. Sometimes you succeed, other times things don't go as you expected. The essential thing is that adults – parents, coaches, teachers – respect their children and allow them to discover for themselves what it means to face challenges, fall, get up, strive and grow.

The value of justice is a deep need in the second stage of development. In the second layer of development (approximately 6 to 12 years old), children show an intense sensitivity to justice. It is a stage where they begin to build their moral sense, distinguish right from wrong, and develop a strong sense of fairness.

When poorly structured sports competitions are introduced, where not everyone has the same opportunities or where the results depend on external factors, children can experience it as a profound injustice. It is essential that the adult is prudent and acts sensitively, ensuring that all children have a voice, that individual rhythms are respected, and that an environment is fostered where mistakes are not punished, but are valued as part of the journey. Winning in youth sport is usually an illusion. Research has shown that it is not possible to reliably predict whether a child who excels before the age of 14 will reach elite sport ten years later. This is due, in large part, to the so-called relative age effect: children born in the first months of the school year have an advantage over the youngest in the same group, simply because they are more physically and cognitively mature. This apparent advantage allows them to stand out, receive more attention, and be selected for special teams or training. However, this difference is temporary and has no direct relation to actual talent. Many children with great potential are left out of the system because they do not stand out at an early age. For example, in tennis, a study showed that success in junior categories does not reliably predict later professional performance (Li, 2020, *The Role of Junior Success in the Development of Professional Tennis Players**). That is why the Montessori approach – which respects individual rhythms and values continuous development without premature judgement – is particularly relevant to formative sport.

Competition, in itself, is neither good nor bad. It all depends on the origin, the context and the intention with which it is promoted. From a Montessori perspective, competition should be an instrument of personal growth, not pressure or exclusion. Sport can and should be a powerful educational tool, where children discover their potential, learn to deal with failure, develop their creativity and experience the joy of shared effort. Respecting the process over the result, valuing justice over favouritism, and guiding with humility instead of imposing with power: that is the way to form not only better athletes, but better human beings.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Movement and sport have always been Ruben's passion. He coached several Dutch champions in athletics, triathlon and pentathlon before taking on the responsibility of running the academy of Dutch football club Ajax Amsterdam, in collaboration with Johan Cruyff. There he began to implement Montessori principles in the training of players with great results. Rubén was director of Cruyff Fútbol spreading Johan Cruyff's football legacy around the world. He was also a director of FC Volendam, a club in the Dutch first division. Ruben founded Montessori Sports with the goal of improving sports environments for all children. Ruben also started the Montessori Sports Fund, which brings Montessori Sports to children in need. Ruben holds a master's degree in environmental science and business administration and was trained in 3-6 by Guadalupe Borbolla.

From the Voices of AMI Training Series
Association Montessori Internationale © 2025
Please credit Association Montessori Internationale
and the named author(s) if using text.

