

# Upon the Fields of Friendly Strife

## An “Athletic Charter” to Reform the Army’s Sports Culture and Build Better Leaders

Maj. Scott A. Clark, U.S. Army

What role do sports play in support of the Army’s mission to fight and win our Nation’s wars? General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, former Army chief of staff and United States Military Academy (USMA) superintendent, best articulated the athletics-combat relationship: “Upon the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that, upon other fields, on other days, will bear the fruits of victory.”<sup>1</sup> His mantra encapsulates the immense benefits sports can bring to Army formations, such as honing coaching and leadership skills, developing character and grit, and improving fitness in garrison to build esprit de corps in a safe but competitive context. Athletic facilities abound on nearly every Army post, none more than at West Point, where every cadet is an athlete.<sup>2</sup> Over the last century, competitive athletics in the Army gradually expanded with the establishment of Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) to govern garrison sports teams and all-Army competitions, as well as through the creation of the World Class Athlete Program (WCAP), an Olympic training program for elite Army athletes.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, USMA steadily enlarged its sports program to field eleven intramural teams, sixteen competitive clubs, and twenty-eight sports affiliated with the NCAA.<sup>4</sup> The Army’s Holistic

Health and Fitness and combatives programs complement athletics as an essential element of physical and tactical readiness, but both fall short in replicating the benefits unique to competitive sports. Despite an abundance of opportunities, athletics in the Army fall short of its potential. Fundamentally, the culture of athletics in the Army has gone awry.

The Army writ large fails to capitalize on its sports structure for the widest possible benefit, and the purported “lifetime athletes” matriculated through USMA inadequately reinvest their athletic talents back into operational forces.<sup>5</sup> Highly trained cadet-athletes display an alarmingly low propensity for continued service after commissioning or achievement of higher ranks and positions of responsibility.<sup>6</sup> To build better leaders and stronger tactical-level organizations, the Army must redress the untapped potential latent within its leaders and appreciate a return on a significant investment in its sports programs. This only begins with leader involvement. The “Abrams Charter” offers a ready solution to the Army’s athletic shortcomings, whereby Gen. Creighton Abrams envisioned that his elite Army Rangers would “Lead the Way” by serving as role models for the conventional Army. These specially selected and trained leaders would then return to the



Staff Sgt. Lucas Sheridan pins his opponent to secure a national title in the 97 kg weight class in the finals of the 2022 USMC U.S. Open Wrestling Championships on 1 May 2022 in Las Vegas. (Photo by Sgt. Michael Hunnisett, U.S. Army)

regular force to pass on their higher standards, ethos, and skills.<sup>7</sup> By adapting the Abrams Charter into an “Athletic Charter” to reform the Army’s athletic culture, highly skilled leader-athletes might later lead and coach unit sports teams throughout the Army, raising the fitness and quality of the soldier by imparting essential leader competencies, attributes, and values.

## The Value of Sports: Leadership Skills and Building Teams

After forty years of military service, MacArthur developed a strong conviction that sports have value for the Army. Writing to his immediate successor as the president of the American Olympic Association in 1939, MacArthur cogently explained,

The training of the athletic field which produces in a superlative degree the attributes of fortitude, self-control, resolution, courage, mental agility, and, of course, physical

development, is one completely fundamental to an efficient soldiery.<sup>8</sup>

Subsequent senior Army leaders echo MacArthur’s view that sports improve the soldierly disposition. Of the most prominent examples, Dr. Mark Esper, former secretary of the Army and U.S. defense secretary, contends that athletes are more likely to succeed in the Army.<sup>9</sup> Gen. James McConville, Army chief of staff, also attests to sports’ positive relationship to soldiering, success, and resiliency.<sup>10</sup> Another former Army chief of staff, Gordon Sullivan, empirically defends the long-term benefit of military sports, concluding that sports impart a lasting, positive effect on a soldier’s social and emotional development.<sup>11</sup>

Sports participation alone does not automatically make better military leaders.<sup>12</sup> Deriving the utmost value from sports participation and culture requires deliberate leader involvement and a collective vision. Army leaders are akin to team captains or coaches: both serve to build and lead a winning team. Recent

Army research identified many consistent commonalities between Army leader competencies and successful athletes to support the Army leader-coach construct, such as “Judging Talent, Communicates, Develops Staff, Builds Trust, and Gives Clear Guidance.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Army doctrine maintains that coaching is a principal role of a leader. The best Army leaders effectively coach others by teaching and guiding subordinates toward a focused goal to reach their highest potential.<sup>14</sup> Demonstrating this growing recognition of coaching in leader development, the Army piloted four different personal skill identifiers for the mastery of coaching.<sup>15</sup> Though great coaches are not necessarily great athletes, and athletic prowess or experience is no guarantor to becoming a great coach, participation in sports nevertheless provides maximum exposure to reliable and tested coaching styles and techniques that are directly applicable to Army leadership.

Sports also add value to the Army by supporting an effective command. They are a conduit to generate a positive command climate through team building while also creating an effective way to practice making timely decisions.<sup>16</sup> The time-constrained, high-stress context of a competitive athletic contest affords the leader an unscripted opportunity to hone leadership skills, build and lead teams by habit and reflex, and exercise intuition for decisive action.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, sports present a commander with a safe, familiar practicum to nurture the soldier’s never-quit mentality and to develop military-specific skills through such competitive sports as rifle, pistol, biathlon, orienteering, and wrestling. Most importantly, sports in the Army cultivate such skills and values without the risk of professional retribution, in turn developing a critical component of strong teams: trust. Sports can systematically support Army leader development but only if properly institutionalized.

## USMA: The Wellspring of Army Sports

Gen. Colin Powell famously referred to West Point as the “wellspring of my chosen profession,” to emphasize the vital role USMA plays as an Army institution for the leader and character development of all Army officers, regardless of commissioning source.<sup>18</sup> USMA’s sports warrant added scrutiny

considering its historical impact on the Army’s sport culture, its substantial institutional investment, and its high visibility amongst the American public. USMA effectively functions as the wellspring of Army sports.

While only one sixth of the Army’s officers commission from USMA, this thousand-strong annual cohort forms a powerful plurality and expression of the Army’s identity, both in leadership and in sports.<sup>19</sup> For example, 87 percent of applicants admitted to USMA in 2021 lettered in a high school varsity sports, with nearly two-thirds captaining a varsity team.<sup>20</sup> At the USMA Preparatory School, a federally funded junior college at West Point originally intended for prior-service soldiers, over half admitted were recruited athletes.<sup>21</sup> While only 6 percent of high school graduates continue into intercollegiate sports, nearly 20 percent of the Corps of Cadets at USMA compete in a NCAA sports, with the rest participating in club or intramural sports.<sup>22</sup> By comparison, just 2–3 percent of Army Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) cadets are NCAA athletes.<sup>23</sup> West Point’s most talented cadets-athletes even have the option to play professionally upon commissioning, though USMA designs its curriculum to prepare all cadets to emerge as “lifetime athletes” in the profession of arms through one of nineteen “lifetime sports” (see table 1, on page 136).<sup>24</sup>

USMA’s concept of lifetime athletics

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**Table 1. Lifetime Physical Activities Courses**

USMA Department of Physical Activity's Mandatory "Lifetime Sports" for Upperclass Cadets			
Aerobic Fitness	Badminton/ Pickleball	SCUBA	Skiing
Basketball	Cycling	Snowboarding	Soccer
Combat Grappling	Emergency Water Safety	Tennis	Strength Development
Golf	Lifeguarding	Racquetball	Rock Climbing
Volleyball	Olympic Weightlifting	Modern Army Combatives Level 1 Certification	

(Table by author)

emerged under Capt. Herman Koehler's transformative tenure as the head of West Point's Department of Physical Education from 1885 to 1923. Koehler meticulously reformed the curriculum to incorporate martial sports like boxing and wrestling. He envisaged the academy's new culture of sports spreading throughout the Army as cadets dispersed to myriad posts after graduation.<sup>25</sup> Koehler presciently cautioned against elite, exclusive sports since "if indulgence in athletics is to be confined to a limited few ... and if winning is to be made the sole and only desideratum, then athletics fail of their object."<sup>26</sup>

Athletics continued in a modest capacity until MacArthur's superintendency in 1919. His personal experiences in World War I convinced him of the need for universal participation in athletics, noting that physically unfit soldiers were "worthless" in combat.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, MacArthur championed competitive athletics' unique ability to develop "the qualities of leadership, quickness of decision, promptness of action, mental and muscular coordination, aggressiveness, and courage."<sup>28</sup> His passion for sports in the military led him to implement lasting institutional reforms at USMA. A century onward, competitive sports constitute a core pillar of USMA's character and leader development program by providing a "higher purpose" that challenges cadets to realize their aptitude for leadership and prepare to win the Nation's wars as future Army officers.<sup>29</sup>

## The Army's Approach to Athletics: MWR and WCAP

West Point and the wider Army separate athletics from physical fitness, utilizing mutually supporting but nevertheless different efforts. The Army's new Holistic

Health and Fitness (H2F) Program forms the core doctrine of routine and periodic physical training that "combines the sciences of health and fitness with the art of coaching."<sup>30</sup> However, H2F lacks the dynamic nature and pressure unique to athletic competition that forges leadership while strengthening unit pride and cohesion. The Army's closest approximation to a universal unit sports program under an established training and competition structure is the Modern Army Combatives Program (MACP), a close quarter, hand-to-hand combat-oriented mixed martial art. While MACP promotes important skills such as personal courage, confidence, and resiliency, combatives do not sufficiently develop leadership skills or reliably build and maintain effective teams.<sup>31</sup> MACP and H2F inadequately meet the intent or purpose of competitive sports, leaving the Army's MWR and WCAP to fill the void.<sup>32</sup>

Sports under Army MWR oversight began in earnest in 1903, expanding gradually to encompass intramural to international competitions.<sup>33</sup> Army MWR offers a comprehensive, year-round Garrison Intramural Sports Program to cultivate teamwork skills, soldier readiness, military bearing, and the warrior spirit. MWR promotes familiar, safer sports maximizing group participation like flag football, basketball, soccer, softball, and volleyball.<sup>34</sup> The availability of sports reflects the installation athletic infrastructure, constituent unit training calendars, and soldier interest.

In 1973, MWR established the All-Army Trial Camp Support Activity to support higher-level competitions and better standardize regulation of apparel, play, and facilities.<sup>35</sup> The MWR's All-Army Sports Program organizes credentialed coaching staffs to select outstanding soldier-athletes for competition in interservice, national, and international



**Table 2. Interservice/International Sporting Opportunities for Army Soldiers (as of May 2022)**

INTERSERVICE/INTERNATIONAL SPORTING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ARMY SOLDIERS AS OF MAY 2022		
WCAP (12)	ALL-ARMY (13)	CISM (6)
Boxing	Boxing	Judo
Rugby Sevens	Rugby Sevens	Parachuting
Taekwondo	Taekwondo	Sailing
Wrestling	Wrestling	Skiing
Cycling	Basketball	Swimming/Lifesaving
Modern Pentathlon	Bowling	Modern Pentathlon
Shooting	Cross-Country	International Military Sports Council [CISM] opportunities are available to All-Army Sports competitors through Armed Forces Sports, which fields twenty-four programs.
Track Field	Golf	
<i>Winter Sports</i>	Marathon	
-Bobsled	Soccer	
-Nordic Combined	Softball	
-Luge	Triathlon	
-Skeleton	Indoor Volleyball	

(Table by author)

championships in conjunction with the Department of Defense's (DOD) Armed Forces Sports Program and the International Military Sports Council.<sup>36</sup> Conspicuously, MWR categorizes both intramurals and All-Army Sports under "recreation," highlighting the perception that team sports are an extracurricular or off-duty activity rather than representing a regular adult activity or an integrated command prerogative. This reflects a tendency from former collegiate athletes to shun participation in MWR sports unless command directed.<sup>37</sup>

While MWR opportunities offer short-term competitions for the general masses, a select few talented athletes can pursue permanent assignment to the Army's premier sports body: WCAP. Elite U.S. military sports programs began under federal law in 1948, allowing Armed Forces personnel to train for and attend international amateur sports events.<sup>38</sup> By 1997, MWR ultimately founded WCAP in Fort Carson, Colorado, near the U.S. Olympic team's headquarters and training center. WCAP could thereby serve as a well-resourced, full-time opportunity for soldiers to train for the highest levels of competition in up to forty different sports at Olympic facilities around the nation (see table 2).<sup>39</sup> WCAP athletes

may spend years away from their military occupational specialty in pursuit of athletic success but with the intent to one day return to the operational force. WCAP athletes strive to balance basic Army requirements while conducting outreach opportunities for recruitment and strategic messaging.<sup>40</sup> Namely, the Total Soldier Enhancement Training (TSET) returns WCAP's talents to the larger Army through mobile training teams of WCAP soldier-athletes who lead tactical-level units through customized resilience and performance enhancement skills training.<sup>41</sup>

Other athletic opportunities exist for ROTC cadets who cannot participate in WCAP or MWR programs, though unlike USMA, they have negligible institutional oversight, nor do they possess a deliberate vision for leader development. The Army's Cadet Command has no prescribed approach toward athletics, yet some schools like the University of Southern California's Army ROTC adopt a scholar-athlete-leader slogan to harness the power of their robust sports programs.<sup>42</sup> Also, four of the six senior military colleges, the Citadel, Texas A&M, Virginia Military Institute, and Virginia Tech, support large cadet populations and share a leader-development structure like USMA's while competing in NCAA



Sgt. 1st Class Elizabeth Marks, a five-time paralympic medalist and multiple world record holder, prepares for the 2022 Para Swimming Nationals on 10 December 2022 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Marks, an active-duty combat medic, is assigned to the World Class Athlete Program at Fort Carson, Colorado. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Michael Hunnisett, U.S. Army)

Division I.<sup>43</sup> The University of North Georgia participates in NCAA Division II and Norwich University plays in NCAA Division III. Although all six senior military colleges are analogous to USMA in their intercollegiate, club, and intramural athletic programs, the key difference is optional participation.

## To Whom Much Is Given, Much Is Expected

The Army's WCAP and All-Army Sports Program draw talent from USMA's graduates, and like ROTC, inspiration from USMA's successful athletic program. Nevertheless, the net benefits to the Army remain uncertain because the premium placed on athletic development often comes at the expense of other initiatives. Even at ROTC, which enjoys greater flexibility to tailor its military programs to their university curriculum, integrating athletics is equally daunting as most of its higher-performance athletes cannot

balance the competing demands and scheduling conflicts of intercollegiate sports and military training.<sup>44</sup> USMA's athletic program elicits strong resentment among Academy faculty by consistently overriding the academic, military, and physical programs when competing over West Point's finite resources for cadet development.<sup>45</sup> The success of West Point football in the 1940s precipitated the Athletic Department's present hegemony, causing its unintentional divestment into "an institutional goal unto itself."<sup>46</sup> Further considering repeated instances of academic misconduct and notoriety for accommodating lower standards, athletics at USMA face intense scrutiny.<sup>47</sup>

The popularity or success of Army sports cannot mask that the return on investment remains speculative. For example, the Army West Point Athletic Association generates considerable revenue, totaling over \$14 million in 2020.<sup>48</sup> This revenue stream is vital to West Point's margin of excellence in intercollegiate



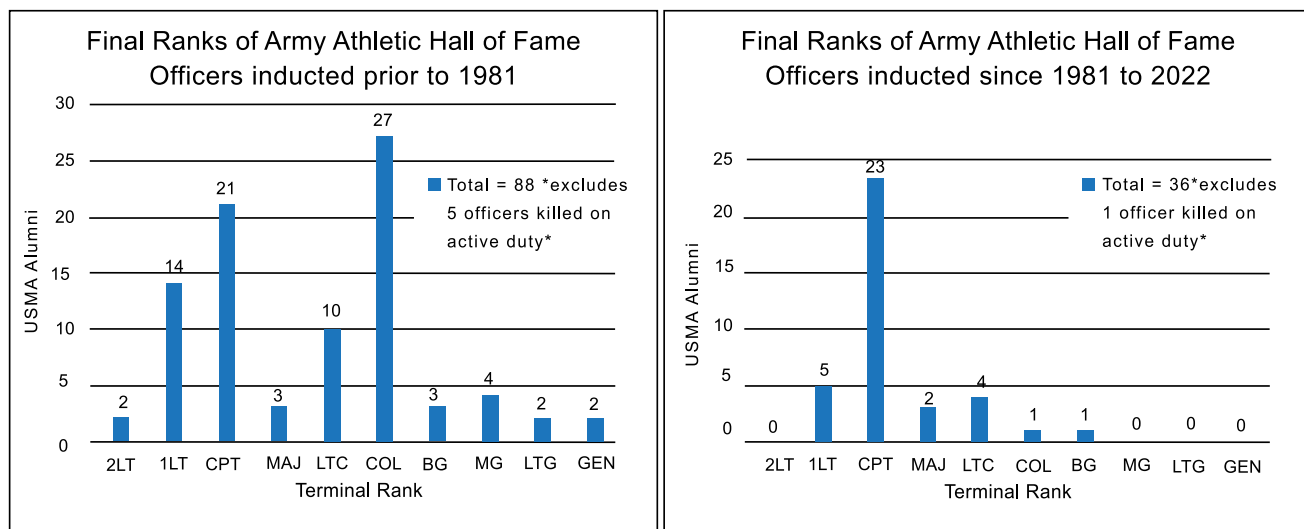


1st Lt. Sarah Beard, a shooting soldier-athlete assigned to the World Class Athlete Program, takes aim during the 2022 Winter Airgun Championships, hosted by USA Shooting in Colorado Springs, Colorado, 11 December 2022. Beard won the gold medal at the championships and recently earned a spot on the U.S. team for the 2024 Olympic games. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Michael Hunnisett, U.S. Army)

athletics to sustain a competitive edge over NCAA opponents.<sup>49</sup> In comparison, the DOD's entire Armed Forces Sports Program cost ranged no more than \$2.1 to \$2.8 million in fiscal years 2014 through 2016.<sup>50</sup> Athletics aside, an officer commissioned through USMA costs the U.S. government between \$400,000 and \$600,000, an investment that is four times more per new officer than an ROTC scholarship student and eight times more than Officer Candidate School.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, a USMA cadet-athlete receives more financial investment in development toward commissioning than any prospective peers, hence intuitively the Army could expect more from former cadet-athletes. The efficacy of MWR's WCAP and All-Army Sports is no less ambiguous. In 2017, the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that regardless of DOD Armed Forces Sports' successes (championships, Olympians, records, etc.), there is insufficient evidence or linkage to achievement of its stated

goals of readiness, recruitment, retention, or positive exposure.<sup>52</sup>

The time and effort required of a soldier or cadet for success in high-performance athletics precludes many other unique opportunities for career development. ROTC cadets struggle to manage time for intercollegiate athletics, whereas USMA's intercollegiate athletes struggle to accommodate time for cadet life. For example, USMA cadets participating in competitive athletics have up to three fewer hours per day dedicated to academics and military training, with weekday and weekend competitions replacing classroom instruction or field training.<sup>53</sup> WCAP navigates similar challenges to professional development since participants must reconcile annual military training requirements, certifications, and qualifications with athletic training schedules but without the added pressures of rigorous undergraduate coursework. Inadvertently, however, officers competing in WCAP potentially hinder their



(Figure by author)

## Figure. Military Career Length of USMA Alumni Inducted into the Army Sports Hall of Fame for Exceptional Athletic Achievement as a Cadet

military careers, as Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Professional Development and Career Management*, does not recognize the assignment as a suggested broadening or developmental experience.<sup>54</sup> Both USMA and WCAP invest highly sought-after resources toward a small cohort of high-performance athletes, though USMA lacks WCAP's purposeful focus on returning its alumni and promulgating those skills developed through sports to the rest of the Army.

### Recruiting versus Retention: A Battle of Purpose

MWR and WCAP's core purpose is support of the warfighter and the Army's mission. Have USMA's sports lost sight of their intended purpose? Football happens to be the most prominent example illustrating the aberrant culture of athletics that starkly contrasts with the original goals of Academy athletics set forth by Koehler. When USMA's Army Athletic Association formed in 1903, they deliberately aimed to "encourage athletic sports throughout the Army," a position later advocated by MacArthur.<sup>55</sup> Yet by 2009, USMA's initial strategic vision for intercollegiate athletics mentioned nothing of supporting the greater Army.<sup>56</sup>

Retention trends for USMA's intercollegiate athletes after graduation expose a startling contradiction

to West Point's mission that endeavors to transform cadets into commissioned leaders of character "prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an officer in the United States Army."<sup>57</sup> The Army categorizes officer career success as the attainment of the grade of lieutenant colonel, yet recruited athletes graduating from USMA have "less longevity and professional success than their nonathlete classmates."<sup>58</sup> Like WCAP, USMA's intercollegiate sports deliver invaluable but often intangible contributions to the Army such as national exposure, strategic messaging, or alternatively as an avenue to increase access to the Army for historically disadvantaged demographic groups.<sup>59</sup> USMA's main challenge is not athletics itself but rather the return on recruited athletes.

The Army qualifies itself as a profession like that of doctors or lawyers, yet few other professions would stand idly in the face of a hand-selected demographic producing a retention calamity.<sup>60</sup> Additionally worrisome, recruiting in NCAA Division I is often more important than development.<sup>61</sup> USMA recognized this facet of top-tier athletics when, in 1978, the superintendent approved a class-composition goal for recruited athletes. This change prevented a higher-quality candidate from another category, like leadership or scholarship, from supplanting an athlete during admissions by creating "blue-chip" recruits, many of whom





Spc. Benard Keter, a track-and-field soldier-athlete assigned to the World Class Athlete Program, competes in the men's 3,000 meter steeplechase at the 2022 USA Track and Field Outdoor Championships, held in Eugene, Oregon, 23–26 June 2022. Keter, a 2020 Olympian, qualified for the 2022 World Athletic Championships by placing third in the final race. (Photo by Sgt. Michael Hunnisett, U.S. Army)

attend the USMA Preparatory School to remediate their academic shortcomings.<sup>62</sup> Whereas MWR and WCAP sports recruit internally from the Army, meaning their athletes must be soldiers first and athletes second, USMA's sports teams recruit eligible civilians for their athletic talents with the caveat of military service. As a result, recruited athletes displaced superior-quality leader, scholar, and soldier applicants to West Point for several decades.<sup>63</sup> The figure (on page 140) illustrates an important ramification to retention linked to this class-composition change, which first took effect with the class of 1981.<sup>64</sup> This shift in recruitment priorities supports a general trend of shorter career service among USMA's athlete alumni, especially amongst the most talented and athletically accomplished. Just over half of the Army Athletic Hall of Fame USMA alumni inducted prior to 1981 served a full career, with multiple former exceptional athletes achieving the rank of general officer. However, since 1981, the number of

Army Athletic Hall of Fame inductees serving a full career by attaining at least the rank of lieutenant colonel dropped to approximately one-fifth, with only one reaching general officer.

USMA's former superintendents justify admitting recruited athletes with lower demonstrated aptitude due to perceived institutional gains in strategic communications, admissions, and fundraising.<sup>65</sup> The role of Academy football in institutional objectives cannot be understated since its disproportionately large revenue makes it the linchpin of the USMA's athletic programs. Like most other schools in NCAA Division I, USMA football subsidizes a sizable portion of the expenses of the other sports teams.<sup>66</sup> Without football's profits, USMA's leader and character development through athletics would wither since low-revenue sports like wrestling or swimming would likely cease operations.<sup>67</sup> USMA football's pivotal institutional role and outsized emphasis neither

guarantee success as a cadet nor as an officer. Internal studies proved that “recruited football players are more than twice as likely to fail courses, more likely to leave the Army early and less likely to be promoted to higher ranks in the Army compared with their non-recruited counterparts.”<sup>68</sup> Such low retention rates raise uncomfortable questions of the wellspring of Army sports, both in its investment into these future commissioned officers and to their commitment to a career of Army service. Operating a profitable athletic program in the short-term at the expense of leader development or long-term contributions to the larger Army mission threatens to undermine the considerable value sports brings to the Armed Forces.<sup>69</sup> The Army must find a way to exploit its leader-athletes’ full capability and change the Army’s sports culture.

Gen. George Patton represents the epitome of the lifetime soldier-athlete. He was a record-breaking track hurdler at USMA before the era of athletic recruitment, a 1912 Olympic pentathlete, a lifelong competitive polo player, and an extraordinarily successful Army field commander in World War II.<sup>70</sup> Other notable high-profile exceptions to USMA’s poor retention trend among athletes attest to the promise of cadet-athletes, such as Brig. Gen. Pete Dawkins, PhD, the 1958 football team captain, Heisman Trophy winner, Cadet First Captain, and Rhodes Scholar; or Lt. Gen. Theodore Martin, the 1983 swim team captain and former Combined Arms Center commanding general; or Col. Ryan Worthan, the 1997 club rugby team captain and inaugural recipient of West Point’s Nininger Award for valor.<sup>71</sup> Despite outstanding outliers, the problem remains that scholars and leaders are the USMA cohort most likely to serve long-term as a commissioned officers, not recruited athletes.<sup>72</sup> This implores urgent reevaluation of the Army’s long-term plan to capitalize on the immense leader potential inherent within these high-performance athletes.

## Inspired by Abrams: An Army Athletic Charter

Athletics are a proven approach to leader development, yet the Army’s current system of athletics obfuscates its purpose and potential. Army MWR amply invests in sporting infrastructure, resourcing, and event scheduling yet the greatest value

of Army sports requires maximum participation, starting with leader involvement. Given the abundance of resources devoted to USMA athletics, its officer-athlete graduates fall short of expectations as lifetime leader-athletes. Compared to West Point, ROTC’s ability to develop leader talents through sports remains unexploited. If the Army wishes to retain high-performance athletics that consume precious resources for the benefits of an elite few, then the Army deserves more of a return on investment. An athletic charter could fulfill the responsibility expected of its athletes.

The Abrams Charter as it is typically understood is a posthumous synthesis of Abrams’s 1974 order establishing the first modern Ranger battalion, together with the subsequent Wickham and Sullivan Charters. Each of these Army chiefs of staff articulated Abrams’s vision that highly trained, elite, special operations Rangers would return to the rest of the Army to promulgate their stringent standards and values.<sup>73</sup> In the context of Army sports, the Abrams Charter readily serves as an effective template for leveraging the benefits from hyperspecialized training and resource intensive programs. His charter sought to ensure the professional stewardship of the Army by creating a positive feedback loop to progressively improve the quality of soldiers. In the spirit of Abrams’s vision and in homage to the founder of Army sports, Koehler, the Army should adapt Abrams’s vision to create the *Koehler Athletic Charter*:

The Army’s specially trained and elite athletes return their service as the preeminent leaders of the Army’s operational forces. As coaches, captains, and leaders of garrison sports teams throughout the conventional Army, USMA’s lifetime athletes, former intercollegiate athletes, All-Army Sports competitors, and WCAP high-performance athletes form the soldier, scholar, statesman, sportsman who is uniquely qualified to use competitive sports to impart their ethos and character to cultivate better leaders and build stronger teams.

## Recommendations

Immediate implementation of the Koehler Athletic Charter is imperative considering the



implications of emerging trends in youth athletics involvement. New recruits may no longer be inclined toward unit athletics, as high school sport participation registered its first decline in thirty years.<sup>74</sup> Despite sports' social and health benefits throughout adulthood, intercollegiate athletics tends to be the culmination of an adult's competitive career.<sup>75</sup> Army MWR can bridge the benefits of elite athletes already serving in the Army while introducing sports to the uninitiated, but leader involvement predicates success to change the Army's athletic culture. Without command emphasis and leader involvement, soldiers will continue to perceive sports merely as a recreational pursuit. The following ten systemic solutions could readily support the Koehler Athletic Charter.

**1. Active-duty service obligations.** To systematically address the retention issue of USMA's intercollegiate athletes, the Army could amend Army Regulation 350-100, *Officer Active Duty Service Obligations* (ADSO), to require an extended service commitment for cadets delaying active-duty service to play professionally.<sup>76</sup> Though additional ADSOs invariably impact recruiting efforts, a more amenable alternative could be to require matriculating cadets earning a varsity letter to register as coaches with their first post MWR or local youth sports program to ensure a return on investment and reinforce the value of selfless service. WCAP requires one year of ADSO for every year of competition; however, both USMA and WCAP could increase the ADSO for recruited athletes to a duration commensurate with the DOD's expected long-term service goals.<sup>77</sup>

**2. Regimental system of athletics.** Army companies or battalions could reinstitutionalize sports teams within divisions or brigades to create a measurable and comparable competition structure. By adopting the British army's regimental system of athletics, units forge a deeper sense of unit loyalty and pride that encourages leaders to directly involve themselves in their command's sports teams.<sup>78</sup> MWR should support, not lead, unit sports.

**3. Command-directed additional duties.** Formalized additional duties for competitive athletics among regular Army units, in addition to those supporting H2F or MACP, could invigorate

unit planning for and leader integration into MWR sports.

**4. Military-specific sports training.** Given the time constraints facing many operational units, commanders can use military-specific sports to reap the benefits of competitive athletics while simultaneously developing military skills. Operationally relevant sports include combat sports (boxing, judo, taekwondo, wrestling, etc.), military pentathlon, orienteering, parachuting, or shooting sports (biathlon, pistol, rifle, etc.).

**5. Officer professional development.** To reflect the importance of athletics, Department of Army Pamphlet 600-3, *Officer Professional Development and Career Management*, should also identify WCAP service as a developmental or broadening experience to support positive career progression.

**6. Expanded TSET.** USMA's intercollegiate athletes could develop outreach programs to emulate WCAP's TSET program to methodically spread the values and skills developed through high-performance athletics.

**7. USMA reforms.** West Point's strategic vision for intercollegiate athletics should specify a long-term goal of generating career officers from its athlete alumni to better realign with the Academy's mission. Similarly, USMA's office of admissions must ensure that recruitment and retention of athletes share a common long-term vision.

**8. ROTC.** Senior military colleges and ROTC programs with robust intercollegiate athletic programs should mirror USMA's "every cadet an athlete" approach to the greatest extent possible to complement leadership and fitness development.

**9. All-Army Sports and WCAP.** MWR should apply the GAO recommendations for the DOD's Armed Forces Sports Program to develop and implement performance measures "that, at a minimum, demonstrate linkage to the program's goals or mission, have a measurable target, and include a baseline that can be used to demonstrate program performance."<sup>79</sup> This can systemically and quantifiably ensure that the purpose and outcomes of Army sports programs align.

**10. Scholar-Athlete Intelligence and Leadership Program.** Senior Pentagon officials are considering adopting Scholar-Athlete Intelligence and Leadership Program (SAIL-P), a recruitment and retention initiative to fund college athletic scholarships in exchange for mandatory



active-duty service after graduation.<sup>80</sup> By providing an avenue for non-ROTC intercollegiate athletes to nurture their innate talents to the benefit of the Armed Forces, the Army can absorb higher educated, high-performance soldiers. SAIL-P would increase prospective WCAP and All-Army applicants, contribute more non-Academy intercollegiate athletes to regular Army units, and potentially offset the deleterious effects of declining athletic participation among high school students.

## Conclusion

Fundamentally, sports in the Army serve to improve the warfighter, whether through morale, fitness, the warrior ethos, esprit de corps, or most usefully, leadership. Harnessing the full potential of competitive athletics will develop better Army leaders and build stronger teams. Yet the Army's current culture of athletics is awry. Change needs to begin at the well-spring of Army sports, USMA, which must reevaluate the direction of its intercollegiate athletics program to realign with the foresight of Koehler and MacArthur to cement character and leader development of the

future career Army officer as athletics' core purpose. The Army can then leverage its existing MWR structure to prioritize leader involvement in unit athletics and capitalize on the high-performance athletes abundant in the Army's ranks.

To further develop superior leadership skills and return invaluable warrior standards and ideals to the Army, the Army ought to combine MacArthur's Academy vision for sports with Abrams's strategic vision for elite Ranger formations. MacArthur sought universal cadet participation in competitive athletics to develop character, fitness, and grit. Abrams created world-class fighting units through high-performance training that would promulgate its benefits throughout the rest of the Army when Rangers returned to serve amongst their conventional counterparts. Merging these two generals' ideas creates the Koehler Athletic Charter, which will reform the Army's sports culture to ensure the fields of friendly strife continue to build better leaders ready to support the Army's mission to fight and win our Nation's wars. ■

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*Military Review* calls for short works of fiction for inclusion in the Army University Press Future Warfare Writing Program (FWWP) for 2023. The purpose of this program is to solicit serious contemplation of possible future scenarios through the medium of fiction in order to anticipate future security requirements. As a result, well-written works of fiction in short-story format with new and fresh insights into the character of possible future martial con-

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