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The Atlantic Philanthropies has challenged

PCA supporters with a \$200,000 matching gift.

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Featured Interview

Preaching to the Choir: A Conversation with John Gardner

by Jim Thompson

John W. Gardner has been called the "Thomas Jefferson of our time." Cabinet secretary, foundation president, public service entrepreneur, starter of movements and writer of classic books, he is truly an American treasure. He founded the White House Fellows program, Common Cause and Independent Sector. His books include Excellence, Self-Renewal and On Leadership.

John was one of the earliest supporters of Positive Coaching Alliance and is a member of PCA's Advisory Committee. PCA founder, Jim Thompson, interviewed John on May 14, 2001. The entire interview is available on the PCA website.

Q: When I left the Stanford Business School to start PCA, my office was an old, dark little corner on the far side of campus. And it's just me. My phone doesn't work, can't get the computer to work. I had one piece of mail—a letter from you that said, "I'm very proud of you. Press on!" That got me through several rough weeks!

Why do you think youth sports are so important?

I believe it's immensely important to develop character in our kids. There just isn't any other youth institution that equals sports as a setting in which to develop character. There just isn't.

Sports are the perfect setting because character is tested all the time. It means a great deal if that time in sports is well used. I think your effort is shooting right at that target of developing kids of character.

Q: You were an outstanding swimmer and not such a great boxer. What did success and failure in sports mean to you?

The most important single thing I learned in sport was that you have resources that you can reach for after you've come to the point where you think you don't have more resources. You're exhausted, but there are hidden resources that can

be tapped. It takes a little character to tap them. I think of my years in top management. There were times when I thought I was at the very end of my endurance—the crises and tumult and tension and stress that accompany top management—you think you can't take any more, but you can. And I learned that in sports.



John Gardner, speaking at a PCA event in June 1999.

Q: In youth sports today, a predominant coach-athlete model seems to be one in which athletes are supposed to do exactly what the coach tells them to do. Is this conducive to developing young people as leaders?

No. The whole emerging pattern of leadership is of encouraging creativity and individual development below you. There is so much talent that goes undiscovered, and any leader who isn't seeking to pull out those hidden gifts is making a big mistake.

That means leadership that says, "I'm going to give you quite a lot of flexibility here. I may be the chief of this corporation, but I realize that the guys

“You’re exhausted. You think you can’t take any more, but you can. And I learned that in sports.”

on the shop floor understand some things that I don’t understand; they may turn up patterns that I never would have thought of. I’m going to give them the elbowroom to find those patterns.”

There’s a wave of renewal in the city today on all kinds of social problems—whether it’s child abuse or community-oriented policing or dealing with drug abuse or job training. Somebody who just decided they’ve got an idea for doing this better, and they start a program, and it works. And that kind of pluralism is the seedbed of our greatness. The idea that all kinds of people may be able to contribute innovatively if you give them a chance. And that ought to come into sports at an early age.

Q: In the past, sport was seen as part of the educational process, whereas now it’s gotten confused in peoples’ minds with professional sports, which is entertainment.

You’re absolutely right. The structure of financial rewards and the enormous emphasis on the whole selection process leads a lot of people to stay away from it. In the old days, sport was more integrated as a standard part of life. In the early days of the 20th century, most young people who were involved with sports hadn’t even thought of the pinnacles of the field for themselves, although they may have had fun fantasizing. Sport was one of the things you did, and it was very healthy aspect of life. And this intensely meritocratic situation today really works against that.

Q: Most people think about a meritocracy as good, though. It doesn’t matter how much money your dad has. It’s what you can do—that’s the theory.

Well, you can’t build a society on intense regard for the winners and neglect for everybody else. You need people at all levels striving, and the more intense the meritocracy becomes, the more it discourages the great majority from thinking they can achieve excellence. One of the points of my book, *Excellence*, is that whether you’re a bricklayer or a nuclear physicist—you can be a slob or you can be excellent. If the average guy, the average woman, says, “Well, I admire the folks up at the top and the marvelous things they’ve done, but I’m just a slob, and I don’t have to meet those standards,”—if that attitude is widespread, we’re done for. We just won’t make it as a society.

The missile may blow up on its launching pad because the physicist miscalculated or because the mechanic who adjusted the last valve miscalculated. We need excellence in our first-grade teachers, our middle-level people in all fields, striving, working, and this they can get from Positive Coaching. The kind of coaching that you’re combating, that we’re combating, is the kind of coaching that says, “We’ve got four stars on this team and all the rest are just

guys that we don’t need to respect. We’ll build around those four stars, and we don’t care whether the rest have self-esteem or not.”

That’s devastating—absolutely devastating. No great team was ever built on that. Obviously you’ve got to believe in the central aspects of meritocracy. You want the best people doing the crucial things. But if it isn’t tempered, we’re in trouble.

Q: You started Common Cause to create a movement to try to address the corrupting influence of money in politics. What did you learn about trying to start a movement that PCA might learn from, since we’re trying to do a similar thing?

You’ve got to reach out for your natural constituency. Corporations are very good at finding the constituency for their new toothpaste. Politicians are quite good at finding constituents in their districts. They go out and find them. People in the nonprofit world are not that good at it. They tend to think that if the cause is noble, it will sell itself. And this just leaves out the consideration that this is a big, noisy country. So I would say that the first thing is to look for your constituency.

If you’re starting a movement, it has to have some drama. I used to say to my Common Cause folks, “Look, we’re not building a cozy little Boy Scout fire where we can warm our hands. We want to start a forest fire!” I stopped using that because forest fires aren’t a very welcome thing. But that’s what you’re talking about.

Q: In PCA we talk about starting a social epidemic, something that is out of control after a certain point.

It is, and idealists don’t think in those terms. They think in terms of persuading their intellectual friends, and they don’t realize that in order to have an impact, you’ve got to get something moving that really catches attention, and keeps on catching attention.

Q: Any advice for people at the grass roots, who are trying to change the culture of youth sports?

The most important thing is to find allies. Common Cause folks would say, “How do I deal with my next-door neighbor? He thinks political reformers are crazy, and he doesn’t think that money corrupts, and he’s impossible, and I keep arguing with him.” And I’d say, “Stop arguing with him.” Get out and look for your natural converts, people with a gleam in their eye about Common Cause or, in this case, Positive Coaching. People who understand before you even talk to them about what the problems are. Who understand that kid who’s been crushed by a bullying coach, who carries a scar that really affects his future. Round them up. Don’t worry about the tough cases you’ll never convince. Build on the people who, before the conversation has hardly started, you realize that you’ve got an ally.

This goes against the whole theory of, “Don’t preach to the choir.” But the plain truth about movements is that they spend most of their time preaching to the choir. We’ve got to tell each other over and over and over why we’re doing the thing we’re doing. For a person who is not trained in argument to come up against an opponent right in his own neighborhood that he can’t convince is discouraging. And it isn’t necessary. Don’t work on that, work on the positives. Build the positives, build your troops.

John, thank you so much.

Glad to do it. I’m very involved with what you’re doing. I love it!

There’s more! For the complete interview with John Gardner, visit www.positivecoach.org/pcanewsletter.html.

Note: A one-hour PBS special entitled, “John Gardner: Uncommon American,” will air in October. Check your local PBS listings for date and time. ■