

Episode 20: Boys Need to Play to Learn

Brave Hearts Bold Minds

Episode Transcript

Leigh Hatcher: Hello and welcome to the Brave Hearts Bold Minds podcast: Growing Fine Young Men. I'm Leigh Hatcher. Thanks for joining me as we explore a whole world of ideas and inspiration as we seek to help the boys of today grow into the fine young men of tomorrow. Each week I'll be interviewing an educator from The Scots College in Sydney to find out how best to build a boy and to offer all parents of school-aged boys practical ideas and strategies to shape the character of a young man for life, for good. So, let's ring the bell, meet our guest for this week's podcast.

With me today is Ben Sawyer. Ben is Director of Cricket at The Scots College and his topic is 'Boys Need to Play to Learn'. Hello Ben.

Ben Sawyer: Hi, how are you?

Leigh Hatcher: Great, thanks very much for coming in.

Ben Sawyer: No worries.

Leigh Hatcher: I'd imagine Ben, some parents being horrified at this notion, learning surely isn't about mucking around and playing, it's much more serious than having a bit of fun.

Ben Sawyer: Yeah look it definitely is. I'd say it's not so much that it's just playing but it's setting up games and little events that they can then discover, you know, for themselves. Giving them the opportunity to make mistakes and then to go to an endpoint where they can figure out the answer for themselves. And they do that, by playing games.

Leigh Hatcher: We'll flesh it out in practice, in practical terms soon. You think it's important to distinguish between two terms, and you borrow this from baseball. You're talking about play ball, and not work ball.

Ben Sawyer: Yup.

Leigh Hatcher: What do you mean by that.



Ben Sawyer: Well I got this from a book that I read that's an umpire at the start of every game yells out "play ball". Never ever have you ever heard anybody say "work ball". So, even at that professional level where there's millions and millions of dollars on the line, it's still a game. And I like to use that with all my teams, that even if you were to ever become a professional player, it's still a game. And to never, ever forget that.

Leigh Hatcher: This is a bit about holding a boy's interest and in your experience boys lose interest quickly.

Ben Sawyer: Yeah, I think going through the motions would lose anybody. I think it's better off when you discover things for yourself. So setting up drills for young boys, they get over it really, really quickly, whereas if you can add a game, bit of competition between yourself or some friends, it tends to keep them involved for a lot longer. So, listening to me as a coach or other coaches...

Leigh Hatcher: Drone on.

Ben Sawyer: Yeah, exactly, about a technique, doesn't hold them for very long. So give them a quick few instructions and get them out there playing.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah, I was going to say, they still need the drills though. They still need some instruction.

Ben Sawyer: Hundred percent, it's the basis point. It's where we start from, and you definitely need a good base, but I think when you get to the finer points you need to discover that for yourself. In cricket in particular, and I think in any ball sport, everybody talks about a feel. I can't teach a feel, you've got to learn that for yourself. How did that shot feel different to the other, and you know that within yourself so ...

Leigh Hatcher: And he's got to enjoy it.

Ben Sawyer: That's exactly right.

Leigh Hatcher: That's where the play comes in.

Ben Sawyer: That's where the play comes in so, points, competition is crucial I think.

Leigh Hatcher: I've heard that numbers of times in our podcasts, for boys, if you can instil some competition in the classroom, at home, on the paddock, you've got the boy's attention.

Ben Sawyer: A 100 percent.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah.



Ben Sawyer: We all enjoy competition, again going back to cricket I read a book once called *First Tests* and in it, Greg Chappell talks about playing with Trevor Chappell and how playing test cricket was easy after he played backyard tests with his brother Trevor. So, he had all that competition growing up through his life, and it set him up for what he ended up doing.

Leigh Hatcher: No underarm bowling though.

Ben Sawyer: I'm sure there might have been a couple.

Leigh Hatcher: The nature of play, has changed a lot over the last couple of generations. You've been reflecting on this.

Ben Sawyer: Yeah definitely, I think it's got a lot to do with just the way we live. Backyards are getting smaller, you're not allowed out after dark and things like that. So, and also, kids can actually now, I think, get that competition sitting on a PlayStation. They can compete in a game of soccer, in a game of cricket. So, I think they crave that competition, they can actually do it indoors now.

Leigh Hatcher: Interesting it's called PlayStation.

Ben Sawyer: Yeah exactly right, you're right actually. I never thought of that. Whereas before, maybe that competition you needed to find outside and against other people. You know I've got a little boy that can play against somebody else across the other side of the world and he gets that competitiveness that he's looking for, but it's not exactly great for him in terms of skills.

Leigh Hatcher: So it's good for a boy to get out a bit.

Ben Sawyer: I think so, definitely.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah.

Ben Sawyer: I'm lucky enough to live on a bit of a property and I love the fact that the boys can get outside and play.

Leigh Hatcher: In those days when they had the wide open spaces they were just kind of knocking around. You're saying that there was more than play just going on.

Ben Sawyer: Yeah definitely again just in my cricket background from everything I've heard. You know you hear about Ricky Ponting be able to play a pool shot, well he did that because he couldn't play on the other side because that's where his mother's favourite garden bed was. Or things like that. So while they're playing, they're actually honing a technique without any adult interference and again they figure it out for themselves. And there are numerous stories about test cricketers growing up that have a particular favourite shot because of a broken window or couldn't hit in that



position so, it's a really big thing. I've been lucky enough to work with Cricket Australia and they're really, really big on it.

Leigh Hatcher: Sounds like Don Bradman.

Ben Sawyer: That's exactly.

Leigh Hatcher: Legendary, used to hit golf balls with a cricket stump up against his water tank in his backyard.

Ben Sawyer: Yeah and the deeper part of that was he wasn't just hitting balls, I've heard him speak about how he played a test match. So he'd hit a ball and he'd yell out that that was four or, he played the game in his head. Not just hitting the ball, you know in videos that we've seen later on he probably did that but he often spoke about the fact that he played that test match in his head.

Leigh Hatcher: Which demonstrates that you're developing your mind, as well as physical prowess.

Ben Sawyer: That's exactly right, yeah definitely. You're getting that game sense again, it's a term that we throw around as coaches a lot that, we need to teach players game sense. How to play the game not just the technique. And there's no better way to do that than to throw them into a game.

Leigh Hatcher: And they play in out in their head as well.

Ben Sawyer: That's exactly right.

Leigh Hatcher: But a boy needs to move beyond his backyard. Coaches for that matter, parents and teachers, I think need to be creative and thoughtful, clearly as you have been, about how to equip a boy with a range of skills.

Ben Sawyer: Yes that's exactly right. So again I've been lucky enough to do a bit of work with Cricket Australia and they speak a lot about a thing called a 'battle zone'. Set the boys up in the centre of a game and give them rewards for playing various shots. And the reason they are asking to play those shots – so if a boy, for instance, wanted to develop a cover drive, instead of me sitting there and showing him a video, and telling him to keep his elbow up. I might give him extra points if he plays more cover drives, and he will learn that himself. It takes a little bit longer but the learning you get out of it is a lot deeper.

Leigh Hatcher: You're instilling it in him.

Ben Sawyer: That's exactly right.

Leigh Hatcher: You set targets.



Ben Sawyer: That's exactly right.

Leigh Hatcher: Instead of those kind of drills.

Ben Sawyer: So if I don't want him to hit to one side he might only get one point for that, but if he hits to the side where I want him to develop the shot he might get ten points for that. And again he's competing; he's getting that competition against himself, against his teammates. And without him knowing, you're encouraging him to play the shot that you want to develop. And he figures it out for himself.

Leigh Hatcher: So you call all this discovery learning when a boy is working things out for himself? You said it's actually the most powerful way a boy learns, and the way he's exposed to this kind of thing. Why does this style, do you reckon, click with boys?

Ben Sawyer: I think because there are very limited rules around it. Again if I was to teach somebody a technique I would probably have six or seven steps. Whereas if I say to a boy just play that shot and see what it feels like, I think there is very limited rules around that and limited adult interference and they figure it out for themselves. They make lots of mistakes and it's probably easier for me just to show them, they're never going to learn as much by doing it themselves, so, I think it's that unrestrictiveness they enjoy so much.

Leigh Hatcher: Takes patience, takes time.

Ben Sawyer: It definitely does, it's not as easy, it'll take a lot longer, but again I think the rewards at the end are much better.

Leigh Hatcher: Because it's drilling down deeper.

Ben Sawyer: That's exactly right.

Leigh Hatcher: What other ways in which this then can be applied away from sport, at home with parents, also in the classroom? Give us some practical ideas how discovery learning can be applied in those contexts.

Ben Sawyer: So I know with my little boys at the moment, just a little example is they love their Master Chef, they love watching that.

Leigh Hatcher: Okay.

Ben Sawyer: And we've had a bit of fun around that, so no great cook, they're not either, but just figuring stuff out along the way. Lots of messes, lots of pots and pans being thrown out. Making a bit of a mess of the joint, but to me, that's a really practical example of that. I don't know what I'm doing, I don't often read off a cookbook if I'm making something at home, and to watch the boys try it out for themselves and they're getting a little bit better at it.



Leigh Hatcher: I suspect that these kind of instances and memories will stick with them for a long time actually.

Ben Sawyer: Yeah, they'll learn how not to make things.

Leigh Hatcher: Takes imagination though, takes creativity, takes time.

Ben Sawyer: Yeah that's exactly right. You've got to have a plan beforehand because it's not just simply about pulling out a drill that you've known before. It's about setting up a scenario that you know they'll enjoy, putting some competition to that, but you have to know what you want as the end product. So if I want them to develop a certain skill, I've got to figure out some pretty imaginative ways to get them there, if I'm not just simply going to show them.

Leigh Hatcher: Give us a personal or practical instance, in your own life, and in that of a boy who you've coached, where this discovery learning has kind of turned lights on, it's really worked.

Ben Sawyer: I guess in my own life, it's the way that I enjoy to learn. So I wasn't great with people telling me exactly how to do things.

Leigh Hatcher: You rebel.

Ben Sawyer: Yeah, a little bit. But I like to figure them out for myself because I felt that if I knew what I was doing, I wouldn't have my coach with me when I was bowling. So, I really needed to understand it myself. In the life of a boy, and I can think of one boy in particular, I know he won't mind me mentioning but Henry Thornton, whose gone on to good success with the Sydney Sixers and the Big Bash. We would often set up a video on the centre wicket out here, at Scots and that video would be on a three or four-second delay. Henry would play a shot and then he'd be able to watch that back straight away.

Leigh Hatcher: On the video screen.

Ben Sawyer: Straight away, without me saying anything and he was able to watch himself, oh that wasn't great, I'll fix the next one. And to watch the learning that takes place with that without me saying anything. If I was to video it, go back and sit with him three hours later, go through it with him, it's not as powerful as him just watching it immediately and getting that immediate feedback and basically teaching himself. He's obviously got a great base, but it's just that tweaking that he needs to feel that himself.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah, this will probably work best, and maybe only with those who are really keen.

Ben Sawyer: Yeah.

Leigh Hatcher: Won't work for everyone.



Ben Sawyer: No, you definitely need that base and I think you need that in the school classroom. You're not going to let a boy do a science experiment, which is discovery learning, without teaching him the basics of how to use the beaker and mix the chemicals and all those types of things. It's exactly the same here at cricket, I don't think you could do it with the real juniors. But again, I know with my little boys, throw them the ball, tell them to hit it over that side and they figure it out. They get bored if I tell them to keep your elbow up, step to the ball. If you just throw a ball at them ...

Leigh Hatcher: Oh dad.

Ben Sawyer: That's exactly right, if you throw a ball to them and say I want you to hit that side of the field, they figure it out.

Leigh Hatcher: So you do that with them and your cooking. Take yourself into the average parent's home with their boy, give them some other practical things they can do to kind of instil this creative, imaginative, and also fun, play learning.

Ben Sawyer: I think it's just anything that they're going to do. It's probably hard to think of an exact example but it makes a game out of it, give it a competitive, you need an end result so, it takes a little bit of imagination. But if you're playing a puzzle or something there's a game to it as well, they're not just sitting there doing it mundanely, you might put a time to it. And I just think that you add any bit of competition into it, I mean you don't want to turn them into competitive gorillas but, if they can ...

Leigh Hatcher: That belongs on the cricket field.

Ben Sawyer: I just think boys love that competition and that's what I mean by play is that it's a competition against others, but mainly against yourself. So again, with little boy's out in the backyard kicking a soccer ball, can you get ten in the goals next time, can you get 12? I just think it's anything that you can turn into a game.

Leigh Hatcher: They love beating their parents.

Ben Sawyer: That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

Leigh Hatcher: You've known that Ben?

Ben Sawyer: I have, in my short little parenting life, they definitely want to beat you.

Leigh Hatcher: But it's also important for parents not to have their egos, leave their egos aside because parents can be very competitive as well. Just let them win.

Ben Sawyer: That's exactly right.

Leigh Hatcher: Every now.



Ben Sawyer: And I must admit, a perfect example yesterday of playing with the two boys and playing a little game of soccer and held one back. So that the little one could score and he got so upset. So to teach him that yeah we want to be competitive but at sometimes, you got to let others win. So again teaching them the right way and the wrong way to be competitive, to learn to lose, be a good winner and be gracious when you're defeated.

Leigh Hatcher: Great lessons for life.

Ben Sawyer: Yeah, absolutely.

Leigh Hatcher: Ben thank you so much for joining us.

Ben Sawyer: No worries.

Leigh Hatcher: Great conversation. If you'd like more information about growing your boy into a fine young man, you can subscribe to receive really useful articles and news from The Scots College. It's free, offered to every parent who wants the very best for their boy in their journey to manhood. In your internet search engine, enter 'The Scots College enewsletter' to subscribe. I'm Leigh Hatcher. I hope you can join me again next week on the Brave Hearts Bold Minds podcast: Growing Fine Young Men. He's been dying to do this; he's been watching this button all the way through this conversation.

Ben Sawyer: I have to leave.

Leigh Hatcher: Ben, hit it now.

Ben Sawyer: Thank you very much.

