

Parents' Guide

to

Youth Sports

Surviving Youth Sports

A parents' primer

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Surviving Youth Sports

Could sports hurt your child?

Are your children more important than a game?

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In addition to his academic achievements , he has consistently coached championship basketball and soccer teams at the city, regional and state level. He coached the Oklahoma State championship youth team in 1996 and his teams have competed at the national level. His basketball team was ranked as high as seventh in the nation and competed for the National Youth AAU Championship.

As a youth he played organized sports until one championship season, when due to overbearing coaches and an overzealous parent he walked away from the field. He continued to train and play sports for fun and still does so today .He has dedicated over ten years to coaching America's children. He has written and spoken about the problems in youth sports and has taken a personal stand against unfair and dangerous practices.

He has taught and lectured all over the U.S., as well as in Mexico, Canada, Spain, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Germany and England. His other publications include internationally recognized writings on Criminology and Sociology. This book is based on his personal coaching and parenting experiences in the sociological tradition of participant observation.

He is the father of four children. He has applied the principles in this book to their sports lives. His oldest daughter was an honorable mention All-State player in High school in the states top school league. She received numerous scholarship offers and is currently a college soccer player . His son is a highly recruited high school athlete and competes in two varsity sports. He competes nationally and is a member of the State select Soccer team and a member of the U.S.Olympic Development Program .

His youngest children are three-year-old twin girls. Following in the tradition of their mother a former gymnast they have recently begun gymnastics training.

Introduction

You get in the van with five screaming kids and drive like a madman through heavy traffic. You gulp down a Big Mac and spill coffee on your new sweater but you drive on, weaving in and out of traffic. You're running late for a Little League game that has taken on entirely too much importance. You're like millions of Americans who will spend up to twenty hours per week watching their child play sports.

At the game you worry whether your child is doing their best, is the coach giving them a chance, will they fail and be scarred for life. If they play well, you worry if they are getting enough coaching, the right coaching, should you hire a private trainer. You may sit and chew your nails, or scream at every play. One thing is clear: kid's sports are sometimes more stressful than fun.

I have wrestled with the urge to write this book for some time. Over the years I have seen marriages end, friendships dissolve and people act like fools over kid's sports. Perhaps you, too, have long thought that something should be done, but what?

I am, by training, a Sociologist, but I realize that academic works are seldom read by the masses. I have decided to write a book that parents might actually read. It is my hope that this book will be of use to parents and coaches and others interested in helping kids and themselves survive youth sports. I wrote this book over a ten-year period as things occurred in my life with respect to youth sports.

My examples come from composites of many people drawn from years of experience with youth sports. Should an example hit home, please be assured that I am speaking about an event that occurs so often in sports that it is a cliché. You the reader are not alone in your experience, even though some of the things we have seen and experienced are so unbelievable to us. Sport seems to bring out the best and the worst in people.

My background also includes the joy of being the parent of two athletic -students (not student athletes) and pre-school aged twin girls, who will probably participate in sports later in their youth lives. My two older children have done their part managing to keep their grades in the honor range, while playing competitive sports. They have won math and science awards and one has been voted the school's top student at two separate schools. Besides being their proud father, I am also a licensed coach and a teacher of classes on sports and the family. I dedicate this book to your child, to all the children I have coached and, in particular, to my own children, James, Katie, Haley and Holly.

An Unreal Journey

Sport is a journey, one we should travel together with our children. At its best, it can bring us closer together and provide us with opportunities to experience life-like joys and tragedies. In dealing with those experiences we can all grow in wondrous ways. But **sports are not real** and to treat them as such can be dangerous.

If your child drops a ball he can still grow up to be a good person. He can still become a surgeon even if he can't shoot a three point shot. Of course, he could end up on a tower with a rifle if we parents take this stuff too seriously. Is this too strong a statement?

On the other side of the coin too many youngsters grow up thinking that excellence in sports will solve all their problems. They do not develop as human beings away from sport and they lose their identity and self-image when they can no longer compete. They should love to play, not play for love. Remember that the attention of parents is all most children want!

We should be concerned with kids having fun while they learn. They will probably not stay with sport if it is not fun, even if they win. I quit at an early age because the coaches and one of my parents took all the fun out of playing. I returned to amateur sports years later for the fun of it and competed at a high level. When I suffered a knee injury, following my participation in a national coaching school, I was forced into retirement a few years before my 50th birthday. As an adult I rediscovered the fun of sports. Remember that if your children are not having fun, they are not having a childhood.

Sports won't make your children good people. Sports are often said to strengthen the fabric of our communities. Kids in sports might learn to be good citizens and deal with adversity but there are no guarantees of that. The learning environment they are in will determine if that happens. In my memories I can recall some pretty bad role modeling by my coaches. I have had coaches who have told players to hurt talented players on the opposing team. I have had coaches who ranted and raved and demeaned players and opponents. And yes, I have had coaches who have blatantly cheated to win games.

We should allow players to enjoy the process as much as the effect. Most professional athletes will tell you that the final goal is never as sweet as the quest. Practices should be fun-filled learning experiences, not work camps. Many youth coaches do not have a clue about the game they are coaching and the techniques for teaching it. Doing a lot of something is no good substitute for learning. The quest can have meaning and truth or it can be just a dull job. When asked what they were doing, one bricklayer said "lying bricks," the other said "building a cathedral." Let us talk about building a cathedral.

Play versus Sport

Where did sports come from?

Though most societies in some form or another has played sports, Americans are particularly obsessed with sport. In the Colonial period, sport was generally viewed as foolish since it was time and energy spent on things other than work. Life was often lean and most sports had little practical application in the real world.

The colleges originally made sports respectable by giving them a home and a place to develop a tradition. With the growth of professionalism and the media, sport quickly became a major item of consumption. Today we live in an age with comparatively large amounts of leisure time and almost everyone seems to participate in or consume sport on some level. Parent involvement has also escalated. Parents think they know how to coach, coaches think they know how to parent and more children are no longer playing games for the fun.

An important question must be asked: Are we robbing our kids of their childhoods?

A friend's daughter arises at 4:00 a.m. to skate at a local ice rink. She skates from 4:30 until 5:30, then does her homework before attending school. After doing this for years, if she excels, she may be selected to leave home and live at a training center where her entire life will be skating. She is 12 years old and soon to choose a career

We must be careful that such children not miss chances for normal social and child development. This same girl was a skating french-fry at a professional hockey game recently. It looked like a fun job even if it was not her greatest skating performance. As she approached her first year in high school, her parents decided that she should cut back on competition and explore her other interests. This is a very wise decision for most children. She is in college now and teaches skating part time .

One of my own children was competing at the highest levels in the state at an early age. One day he confided in me that everyone could ride a bike except him. Furthermore, other kids rode all over the neighborhood and visited each other after school. It never occurred to me that one of the best athletes in the community couldn't ride a bike. We skipped a few training sessions and he became an excellent bike rider. I still don't let my children roam the neighborhood but they can hang out with the other children if I know where they will be and they return on time. Of course, within weeks of learning to ride, he was jumping over things and ramping with a group of local daredevils.

These two stories illustrate the point that kid-athletes are different. Their athletic skills are superior, but they are still going through childhood like any other child. They need friends and they need to do things that are not career oriented. The movie "In Search of Bobby Fischer" should be mandatory viewing for all parents of gifted children. In the movie, the father of a gifted chess player states that his son has the ability to be great at something, and that the parent has an obligation to develop that talent. A greater obligation is the one towards the child and the need to be in contact with the things of childhood.

Are children who are forced into organized activities at a young age losing their ability to develop creatively?

It is difficult to measure the full importance of creativity but it is certain that in the corporate world, the government and educational institutions, creativity is a highly prized commodity. We have seminars and workshops in every important sector to promote it and identify it. It is often said that America's greatest resource is the freedom to create.

What happens when we eliminate free play? Will children become robotic and unable to deal with change and the unexpected? If you structure all of your child's time, will he/she be damaged? If you are a parent or coach, ask yourself, "Do I listen to my players and do I ever act on their suggestions?" It may be the problem is not structured activities, but the failure to allow children some freedom within that structure.

A coaching friend of mine always had trouble coaching a very talented young athlete. I never experienced his frustration with the athlete and instead found him to be a delight. My fellow coach wanted the young man to be disciplined, first and creative, second. I encouraged him to create within a looser structure and he responded by working harder than any player works I have ever coached works. Not everyone was born to lay bricks, some people were born to build cathedrals.

Will kid sports produce better adults?

What is a good adult? If it is a hardworking person who plays within the rules and competes to be the best they can be, then a good sports program may contribute to that end. There are no guarantees a game alone can make this happen. If your coach is not a good role model, if the practices do not have hard work and self-

improvement as the goals, and if virtue is lost in favor of winning, the child will not be the better for the experience.

In the last year that I coached recreational soccer I pulled a championship team from the league at mid-season because of a few adults' attitudes towards running our local league. I refused to allow my team to be exposed to bad role-modeling and overall poor conditions.

It was a tough decision to make and similar to the one made by our girls' state champions the year before. That coach, and myself were the most successful coaches in club history, but our opinions did not seem to matter and the symbolic nature of our withdrawals are still not fully understood by the club. My boys were disappointed and underwent some verbal abuse at school, but in the long run they were better off out of that league. I hope some day they will grow up and see the point. Some people said we were damaging the boys' chances of playing in the select league by our withdrawal. In truth my players were the only ones from that club chosen for the State Select Teams the following year. Taking a stand in youth sports is tough but if we all do so we can change things.

Is it all a misuse of time?

Sport is generally viewed in three ways:

1. It is good and productive
2. It is bad and destructive
3. It is a neutral activity.

If it is good, we should get as many young people into it as possible. In the last ten years, we have cut funding to inner city athletic projects and gang problems have proliferated. Perhaps there is a connection? If sport is bad, we should ban it in the schools and spend our dollars elsewhere. Stories of runaway competition and serious physical injury are used as evidence that it is a growing problem.

Some early sociologists saw sport as a neutral activity, that it is an activity that is neither inherently good nor bad. It is an activity that keeps kids busy and uses up their energy, but has no intrinsic value. In truth, sport has elements of all three of these positions, depending upon how we define it.

A friend of mine once criticized me for allowing my children to become "jocks." My response was that if we lived in the jungle, I would teach my children to hunt tigers, and if we lived in the arctic, we would learn to fish through the ice. In our modern world we must learn to compete. Knowing how to compete has survival value in business, education and getting on the freeway. Learning to do so fairly and honestly is critical to the continued humanization of the small clearing in the jungle we call civilization.

Please remember...sport is not play and play is not sport. In general, psychologists seem to agree that children need play to develop normally, they don't always see the need for sport. ¹Caillois notes the following differences between non-play and play. I have expanded these ideas for our purposes.

1. Play is voluntary whereas sport is filled with obligations. Kids, like puppies, play naturally until they are bored or tired and then they stop, no matter what the score, no matter what the game circumstances. In organized sports the child is encouraged to "suck it up" and to care greatly about the game's greater implications. Stalling or intentionally knocking a ball out of bounds to kill time are examples of game-

¹. Stephen K. Figler and Gail Whitaker, Sport and Play in American Life: a Textbook in the Sociology of Sport, 3rd ed. (Madison: Brown & Benchmark, 1995), p. 10.

related tactics. In play there is no advantage to such tactics since they merely delay the game and interrupt play.

Another example is playing when hurt or exhausted. These are not options in a play situation, but they are often encouraged in sport. If kids are encouraged to play when hurt they may suffer permanent injury. I have seen children play while hurt and their own parents think they are making them tougher. This is child abuse and should be stopped.

Young athletes need many controlled repetitions to develop skills, but if we remove play from their early experience, they may be damaged psychologically and physically. Running drills over and over may create muscle memory, but it can also result in over-use injuries and burnout. I know of pre-teens who have already retired from sport due to chronic injury.

Many parents today force their children to take sport too seriously. Many parents burn kids out on sports as they attend too many tournaments and training sessions. Kids experiencing burnout blow up in games, throw temper tantrums, or they go the opposite way and develop a blank stare and a flat attitude. They resemble the effects we see in abused children (flat-lined unenthusiastic or hyper overly aggressive).

One thing I have found that may help burnout is to vary the activity and cross-train in different sports. You might even try to mix in some other activities that improve thinking and creativity that are non-athletic. Coaches may object but then they don't realize the long-term benefits. Coaches develop tunnel vision about their own sports and their own win-loss records.

Again, please consider the physical effects of overtraining on young bodies. As I said, I know of 8 and 9 year olds suffering chronic injuries and other over-use injuries, but still parents permit them to play. One of my own children suffered from chronic bouts of strep throat until I reduced the number of teams they were permitted to play on over the winter. Parents seem afraid their children will fall behind if they drop out for even a few games.

2. Play has no boundaries

Play is not bound by spatial and temporal limits. Sports have rules concerning the field and the time frame. Players must learn to limit their movements between the lines. The clock becomes very important and this heightens the stress level.

In play, a player is free to run anywhere with the ball. The child is also free to spend as much time as he chooses to accomplish his own form of perfection. When great athletes like Michael Jordan do unbelievable things on the basketball court we all marvel. In fact, it is likely those moves were invented in play-like situations against friends without pressure.

Let me cite another example. A common criticism of American soccer players is that they are not creative in their play. This may be a function of the lock-step training techniques originally borrowed by US Soccer from the Germans. Latin American countries have produced some of the world's most imaginative players. If you travel to these other nations, as I have, you will quickly observe young children playing soccer wherever they are with no regard for time or space.

The 1994 U.S. World Cup Coach noted this immediately and recommended the use of unrestricted space in training sessions. The USA team advanced further than anyone expected, beating England in qualifying and Columbia in the Cup. US Soccer has begun a new movement that is called Micro Soccer, which is a small, 3-on-3 game with simplified rules where everyone gets to express themselves in more space due to the reduced numbers of players. Of course, parent-coaches are quickly inventing ways to structure play in Micro Soccer, too.

3. Play is generally set up to be fair

In play, children choose sides. If one side is too good, the other one quits. Eventually, as they go along, the sides usually even out. Rule following is generally done voluntarily and repeat offenders are ostracized from the play.

In sport, coaches recruit the best teams they can find and youth leagues become battlegrounds, where only the strong win. A child may be a great player, but if he is stuck with the wrong team or the wrong coaches, he will likely fade away.

In sport, players learn to commit “smart fouls” and learn to conceal infractions of the rules to gain advantage. Every coach has coached matches where the other team’s strategy was to have a rough player foul your top players out of sight of the referee. When one opposing team’s enforcer was finally ejected from a game against my team, ironically, the opposing coach took his team and left the field, complaining the game was getting too rough. Such behavior is considered a normal part of sports. Oh, did I say the teams were 8-year-old players?

4. Play is unproductive.

Play has no natural reward, except the fun. I have watched my son and friend play soccer on the front yard for hours with brief breaks for water. They play entire imaginary seasons without remembering who won or lost, scoring hundreds of goals with each one a delight to both boys. Their behavior is totally without product.

When they play league games against each other on opposing teams, they console each other when one is scored on and they cheer each other’s success. It may be that play can develop feelings that transcend sport.

Sport is not like the story above. Sport is inherently productive. We give bigger trophies to the winners and we keep league standings from 6 years of age in some sports. Coaches play players in specialized positions from the age of 5. Players are not played if they cannot contribute to the productivity of the team. We use terms such as work-rate and shifts to describe the activity. In many people’s minds such activity is preparing young people to be good productive employees later in life. Some would disagree.

²Novak said that play is reality and work is escape. Think of this in an interpersonal sense. Work as we now know it is a relatively new development in man’s evolution. In primitive societies people spent a great deal of their time in leisure activity. I do not mean to imply that pre-modern societies were Utopias, but sociologists generally agree that interpersonal life has declined in modern times. Perhaps the decline of play is the cause.

Many of today’s children are raised by single parents and in small family units. Their chances to develop normal behavior patterns through play are greatly limited. If we fill their free time with highly organized sport, we may actually be eliminating their chances to grow through play. We must remember that our children are limited and defined by the social contexts they are in.

Play is for everyone, but sport is survival of the fittest. Most kids are taught that they are better than some and worse off than others. Some are left with unrealistic expectations, and still others are left with no self-esteem. Sometimes tragic damage is done to a child before they are 7 years old by insensitive coaches and parents.

Children who are rejected early must make a tough adjustment that often is not complete until they are in their 20’s. The rejection is not too bad if it is just by the coaches, but it is often by the parents. Dads who have too much personal ego at stake reject a child who cannot measure up.

². Stephen K. Figler and Gail Whitaker, Sport and Play in American Life: a Textbook in the Sociology of Sport, 3rd ed. (Madison: Brown & Benchmark, 1995), p. 11.

I do not mean to say that we should contrive situations where kids succeed without any effort. Everyone must learn to try and sport is as good a place as any for that. Dwight D. Eisenhower said, "Our real problem, then, is not our strength today; it is rather the vital necessity of action today to ensure our strength tomorrow."

Sport can be developmental if the leagues are constructed to teach and produce good players. This is seldom done because parents who are involved with sports associations can seldom see beyond their own child's progress or their own administrative roles in the club. When I removed my team from a bad league, it resulted in one local club's administrator getting so insulted he swore to get me if it were the last thing he did. We are all volunteers and that means we can un-volunteer anytime we want. Children, coaches and parents should be allowed to leave the field anytime it is in their best interest.

I believe we do not learn through competition, we learn through learning. Competition that simply places us under pressure to complete tasks we have not yet mastered will bring little benefit. Youth sports should be learning labs. We can add competition to the learning process if it is done in a measured and controlled manner.

If you, the parent, instill unrealistic expectations in your child, then the child will fail, even if they are actually doing well. I have seen so many parents disappointed by their child's failure to produce the big play or to win the star position, when they should be delighted their child is on the starting team.

Parents should try to develop a deeper understanding of the game so they will be able to appreciate their children's contributions even when they are not playing high profile positions. Besides, kids put enough pressure on themselves.

Why not tell your youngsters they are entering their early years in sport for:

1. Exercise
2. To meet new people
3. To learn the sport
4. To see if it is fun

Do not tell them they are entering sports to:

1. Get a scholarship
2. Land a huge professional contract
3. To show people what they are made of
4. To win anything

Some Myths

In the years of coaching and watching my children play sports, I have accumulated a list of things parents believe about sports. Let's consider these myths objectively.

MYTH 1: My kid will use sports to pay for college.

I teach college and I can tell you that sport participation does not guarantee that a school will accept your child. More importantly, it does not guarantee they will finish their studies. In truth, you would be better off hiring a good academic tutor for your child if you want to assure their future success in life. In my twenty years of university teaching I have never met a great student who owed his academic success to exercise. On the other hand, I have known many great athletes who owe their success in life to a good college education.

Even if kids do play ball in high school or college, they have little chance of a professional career. Harry Edwards, the sports Sociologist once said, "You have a greater statistical chance of being struck by a meteor." The vast majority stops playing without having made one red cent. So what have they gained, a fast ride on a team bus to a mediocre academic career?

Sports should be something we do while going to school, not the other way around. The Selmons are legendary football players from Oklahoma who went on to play and coach professionally. I had the pleasure of coaching one of the Selmon Brothers' boys on the Oklahoma State Champion Basketball Team. It is of course great fun for the players on the team to see and talk to that boy's father. Dewey Selmon, who has been a famous NFL player, is retired from football and goes to work like anyone else and earns a living. His attitude towards his children's participation in sports is very laid back. He has been to the mountain and seen what is on the other side. Most parents have not.

MYTH 2: Sport builds character.

An old German motto says, "When wealth is lost, nothing is lost; when health is lost, something is lost; when character is lost, all is lost." We say that sport builds character but we cannot prove that sport creates character. Actually, it is more accurate to say that success in sport requires character.

The training, the sacrifice and the courage to win generally require character. If parents are not building those things in their child, it is unfair to expect a coach to build character in a few sessions per week. It is naive to think children will magically develop character because they learn to bounce a ball or knock people over.

MYTH 3: Sport will keep my kid out of trouble.

Sport teams are gangs looking for direction. They sometimes become a negative force and lead to the destruction of their members. It is true that you can't get into trouble if you are in a structured activity all day. But trouble comes in many forms today and sport will not insulate your child.

If your child does become a star athlete, remember that the temptations placed before stars on any level are greater. Athletes are constantly confronted with pressures to cheat, to take drugs or to engage in acts of violence. It is probably harder for them to stay out of trouble since they are offered so many more temptations. Look at the coach and see what kind of adult role model your child is playing for. I played for a coach who was a captain on the local police department. I had great respect for him and, though I did not become a famous athlete, I am considered one of the state's top Criminologists.

MYTH 4: Winning is everything.

The former great professional football coach, Vince Lombardi, proposed an ethic, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." Over the years people have interpreted that to mean many things, including win at all costs. It is time to rework this idea. I believe that we should not accept personal failure without maximum effort. If we begin with a commitment to win and we do our utmost, we have then won. Interestingly, it seems from my experience, this produces winning. Lombardi's own players would later say that it was not winning but the commitment to excellence that truly set their coach apart.

Winning is not everything. I have coached many winning teams and sometimes winning did not produce any great feeling of elation. Some seasons the tensions and problems of key individuals were such that the season was not fun at all. The winning was not enough to counterbalance the pain caused by distorted egos and selfishness on the part of players and parents. Remember the cliché, "Life is what happens to you while you are preparing for life." If the process is devoid of fun and caring, then even success is less than rewarding. Chamfort says "The most thoroughly wasted of all days is that on which one has not laughed."

MYTH 5: Sport is for dumb jocks.

At the higher levels, sport is mental. Inner games finally become the most important games. In addition, the normal vehicle for sports development is the school system. If a child can't read, he can't play, at most schools. Even if your child is a star, top colleges can't touch him if he is a problem student. The difference between playing for a name school like Harvard, or for what I call "Multi-directional Schools," like a Southwest Eastern Community College, is obvious. Should your child be lucky enough to play for either school, the greatest career potential will still be in the real world, not in sports.

In the beginning, schools offered sports for health reasons. Club sports were started by student organizations and some students played other schools for pride and competition. The schools did not offer scholarships, yet the games still had meaning. Most American Colleges and Universities do not need sports programs to survive and in truth most lose money on sports. The revenues produced by sports go to sports, not to promote the academic side of the school. The schools know this so don't fool yourself into thinking that good schools will put up with illiteracy.

Promote academic excellence because it's a win win situation. If your child makes the team he will be eligible for the best schools. If he fails at sports, he will still have a chance at a free ride on an academic scholarship. To prepare for this, try making schoolwork mandatory. Limit playing time to the child's grade point average. For example, if the child makes an 80 percent they get to play 80 percent of the time etc...

MYTH 6: Youth sport is not a business.

It matters not if you win or lose, it matters if you make a profit. Community Sports Associations generate a great deal of revenue. Shoe companies and wearing apparel firms make billions each year off would-be child stars. Nike corporation is worth more than the NFL, NBA and MLB combined. Dads seeking an edge for junior will buy anything no matter the cost. Little league bats made from space age titanium costing hundreds of dollars sell like hot cakes. Basketball shoes are into three figures costing in the hundreds.

Some sports use the money generated by kid sport to support national offices and national teams and tournaments with large staffs and travel budgets even politicians would envy. The money funnels to the top where it is spent on perpetuating this system.

Youth sport should be developmental with emphasis on proper form not fancy uniforms and equipment. One thing is clear good form will still produce results long after the titanium bats have been replaced by some newer space age plastic. If your child wins because of some technological advantage, he is not really winning.

I coached the most successful soccer team in my town for six years using the town's worst practice field complete with one crooked goal and a gopher colony. We used old flat balls, a torn net and plain white jerseys. When I left coaching my players were recruited and play on the region's top teams because they had been taught proper techniques.

Spending on kid sport is an epidemic. Once one team starts to spend everyone feels they must. Leagues should require everyone to purchase the same uniform in bulk to save money and screen-print different logos. In basketball and most other sports you can buy a two color reversible jersey and wear opposite colors. Pick the colors of your local college or high school and save everyone some money. Buy them at your local sports store, which is of course a disappearing entity in America.

MYTH 7: Athletes are born, not made.

People blame their kid's athletic failures on a variety of reasons, usually coaches. When parents ask me why their child is doing things poorly I am always tempted to say "bad genes."

The genetics a child inherits actually are important, but not the only factor. Obviously a child who is tall or large or exceptionally fast has inherited gifts that give them an edge. But sports history is full of disappointing stories of athletes with great gifts who fail to succeed. In the last ten years, I have seen countless child phonemes fade without proper training, nutrition and counseling.

Victory has 100 fathers and defeat is an orphan. Parents blame each other's family, the lack of proper equipment, the coaches, and sometimes even the kid. Success in sports requires hard work on the proper things. If you are serious, hire a professional trainer. Listen to licensed coaches. Work with your child yourself. I have hit thousands of baseballs, fielded thousands of soccer shots, intentionally lost thousands of basketball games and spent 10 years on the fields of my childrens' youth.

As a parent, I have given up vacations, weekends, movies, parties and a great deal of sweat and money so that my children can compete in sports they enjoy. An average soccer parent will spend \$ 2,000-5,000 per year for their child to play classic soccer to prepare them for college. That is 7 years of training and sacrifice and a total cost of \$14,000 - \$35,000. If they strike it rich at college, they will get a scholarship worth between \$ 40,000 and \$ 100,000 for 4 years. So, are athletes born? Yes and No, one thing is clear. It takes a great deal of time and money to develop a child's natural talents.

MYTH 8: Coaching girls is just like coaching boys

Girls are different from boys. There, someone with an advanced degree has actually said it. Despite efforts of women's groups and activists to conceal these differences, they still exist. I once wrote a thesis on gender and can assure you the research findings have always existed to support the idea of differences.

The coach of one of the country's top women's college soccer teams has noted some very interesting differences. Many girls do not respond well to being chewed out by coaches. They are more likely to do things for someone else than are boys. For example, girls will rally to win one for the seniors, while boys are as likely to see seniors leaving as a chance for themselves to advance.

I have coached some great girl players. I loved to have them on my boys teams because it seemed to bring out the macho in the boys and the girls were such good players. I must agree, though, that they got their feelings hurt much more easily than the boys. I have never chewed out my players; I give them advice in a direct, calm matter-of-fact way. Yet, I have had girls get their feelings hurt because it is seen as openly critical. My own daughter, with whom I have a warm and loving relationship, would get upset in almost every one of my practices and finally played for another coach's all girls' team. She returned to an all girls team I coached years later and we got along great, but I had learned to approach her much differently in training.

I have used the California Psychological Femininity scale in classes to identify males and females in the class as an example of the test's power. The only time it missed was with certain female athletes. I mention this because it may be that girls are changed by the sports experience. It could also mean that more masculine girls rise to the top in sports at the collegiate level. Another thesis is that sport is a masculine institution and that some girls drop out because of that, not their lack of ability. One solution

to this might be involving more women as coaches at all levels. Another solution would be to teach male coaches how to coach girls.

Two of the girls who have played on my boys teams went on to win a state girls championship on a girls team. They had a love-hate relationship with me, but always played hard. One of them gave me the first keepsake a player or parent has ever given me for coaching them. The other punches me every time she sees me, a kid's sure sign of affection.

Will Rogers once said, "I never expected to see the day when girls would get sunburned in the places they do now." Girl's athletics deserve more support and respect, but it will probably come slowly unless the most talented girls play in the male leagues. I welcome the arrival of that day, but it is not coming soon.

How Bad Is The State of Youth Sports?

This book deals with the problems in sports, as well as the sports experience. How bad is the state of youth sports today? Let us examine some of the problems.

Some Bad Examples

In Oklahoma a mother shot another during an argument at a little league baseball game. One Texas mother hired a hitman to kill to make room for her daughter on the Pom Pom squad. I have seen mothers hurl insults at one another and engage in pushing matches or throw Cokes on each other.

Fathers are generally more direct and threaten to “kick each other’s butts.” Coaches take abuse, too. I have had dead things thrown into my pool, my car has been vandalized and my own health and safety threatened directly or indirectly many times. I was even told by a group of angry parents I could never again come to a small Oklahoma town because my team beat the hometown team. Losing coaches have slandered me and their children have harassed and insulted my children at school. It seems so unbelievable unless you have to deal with it.

Get a life

Many people have no other interests or hobbies of their own, and sporting events seem larger than their own lives. The under-8 basketball game takes on Olympic proportions. These parents live through their children’s sports. Low personal control over their own lives seems to translate into attempts to alter the outcome of little league games. Poor modeling by their own parents and others make this an intergenerational problem.

If you are one of these people, try to calm down. Even the most exciting professional contests are forgotten by most with time. Kids may be adversely affected by your over-reacting to the stress you feel at the game. Remember, your child takes cues from you concerning feelings. If you are not handling things, they won’t either.

Big Fish-Small Pond

The social pressures in small communities are too much for some people to bear. We no longer have town squares for people to be seen and to establish their status. Sociologists once believed that the shopping malls would serve that purpose in the future. But not every community has a mall, and those without economic advantages do not get to fully participate there on a regular basis.

The playing field has become a center of society where even low level individuals can occasionally participate. The playing fields of the local communities are the true villages and meeting points in America. It is on those fields that common men and women vie for status within the community. Some do it through their own involvement with the management of the athletic associations, most do it through their children’s performance.

To fail in this arena is to fail forever for many of these individuals. It is their only chance to step forward into the community spotlight. Is it any wonder that people place too much emphasis on the outcome of what should be developmental experiences? Parents on the board in youth leagues rig teams to create dynasties, even when their own child is lost in the shuffle. Parents agree to referee matches, then use the power to advantage one person or another.

Many parents play to the crowd from the moment they leave their cars. They believe that they must not appear to be weak or inadequate, no matter what the cost. If their child performs badly, they will berate them, too, in an attempt to assure their neighbors that they, the parent, do not condone losing. If their child wins, they will rejoice as if they had won the lottery and stay at the fields for hours to bathe in the glory. What messages does this send our kids? I have closed my eyes during games and the sound

coming from the adults is the same sound you hear from people riding a roller coaster. That would be alright, if the ride wasn't made up of kids.

On the world stage, we continually see players who have exceptional skill, but have not developed emotionally. One Olympic skater was struck with a pipe on the knee by a rival's employees to keep her from competing. This is a doubly sad example. A great skater reached the top of the ice skating world, only to be stripped of her USA title and banned from competition for life. You might ask why were she and her followers not satisfied to be amongst the best? Did they really feel the need to cripple the competition to be the best?

When athletes fail it is seen as life and death. Pablo Escobar, a Colombian soccer player, was killed gangland style for kicking a ball into his own goal to eliminate his country's team from the World Cup. This act of athletic terrorism follows years of riots in countries around the world following soccer matches. This has made many people afraid to attend international matches and resulted in some countries being banned from International Play for years.

A player in Major League baseball spit in an umpire's face and still played in the World Series. A basketball star hit fans and returned to the field, hockey is one brawl after another and football players complain that the illegal drug policy of the NFL is too strict, even though an occasional player comes forth and claims substance abuse or steroid abuse is widespread. I know a youth coach who was spit on by a father and a number of coaches who have been struck or threatened.

It is fair to say that when sport is bad, it is very bad. After all, when we take away the notions of intelligence and spirit from the Greek ideal of Body Mind and Spirit, all that is left is the athletes body and he is valued as long as he can perform, no matter how bad spirited or lacking in thought he may be .

Survival of the Fittest

Historians describe forms of sport being played in ancient times with the heads of enemies, instead of balls. The passions that were released in primitive sport may be evidence of man's true intent when playing all sports. The weak fail, the strong survive. Strength is measured in terms of speed, skill, intelligence and, of course, muscle and each sport advantages players who possess the needed qualities.

Consider the sport of soccer. Aside from the obvious issues of nationalism, there is a passion to this game that strikes people's souls. Perhaps it is because it is closer to a natural sport than most. It requires little man-made equipment. It is played in the elements. It also requires great agility and involves hard physical contact.

It may be that some sports are primal. It should not surprise us, therefore, they have been banned in many kingdoms because of the potential for group violence. If sports awaken primitive violence, we must take steps to manage this passion.

Sports are often treated as the remnants of survival of the fittest. My secretary's son was not played in championship games even though they were well ahead, with a few minutes left. Her family invested three days, hotel fees, etc. in one tournament, only to see their son not play for even a few minutes. He had been selected out in the struggle to survive. He no longer plays competitively, at this writing. The question we must consider is, do we tamper with evolution or do we encourage everyone to survive? Sports, remember, is not real life but do we encourage people to have false hopes?

Sports should probably not be bigger than life and death. One of the most unusual stories I have heard concerned a tragedy. An assistant coach of a youth team died. His fellow coaches decided to play the scheduled game even though it was the day of the funeral. They told the boys to score as many goals as possible in honor of the dead coach.

The team responded and beat the worst team in the league 27-0. Wouldn't it have been better to cancel the game or postpone it in the coach's honor? The opposing team did not have anything to do with the coach's death, so why use them as a whipping boy? It says something about the importance placed upon the game. John Ruskin once said "nothing is ever done beautifully which is done in rivalry: or nobly, which is done in pride." Did the winning coach feel that team deserved to be beaten because they were weak?

For too many people, the game is larger than life and death, it is life and death. Real life is suspended for the game and cannot be allowed to inconvenience it. When a half-time performer was killed practicing for the Super Bowl half-time show, the game went on. The NFL issued a statement that basically reminded us that death is a part of life and the show must go on.

Let me relate a local personal experience. I hit what looked to be a sure home run in a charity softball game. The center fielder made an incredible run and a superhuman leap to snag the ball as it was clearing the fence. Reality set in for the fortyish center fielder when he hit the outfield wall, going somewhere between 30 and 40 miles per hour. I stopped running at third and, around 5 minutes later, the center fielder was helped off the field. As he passed me at third he mumbled something about stepping in a hole and grinned.

Moments later, we heard a wail in the dugout from the man's wife because he had stopped breathing. This was a pre-season tournament, so we had to break into the concession stand to get a phone. The paramedics arrived and the man was placed upon life-support. As the ambulance left the parking lot the ump bellowed out, "Play Ball."

The fallen player's teammates dusted off their gloves and trotted out to their positions. I turned to my teammates and asked. "If I have to leave in an ambulance, would they at least send someone with me?" The reply "just be sure to leave your glove." The injured player lived, but he was in the hospital for months and required leg surgery for a blood clot. Oh yes, his team stayed and won the game in extra innings. The ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy is a good ability to teach your children.

Lose well

Losing is a part of life. To lose well is to learn from the loss and vow to be better in the future. A coach I will call Wrong-way Richard was losing a game badly. The rules stated that it was unsportsman-like conduct for a team to beat another by more than 7 goals. Richard decided that if his team scored on itself the opposing team would be accused of unsportsman-like conduct and penalized in the league standings.

The game was turned into a sham with one team scoring on itself while the other team, refusing to be a part of the embarrassment, stood on their own side of the field watching in disbelief. One player on the losing team vainly tried to stop his teammates from committing soccer suicide. Parents and coaches all stood to applaud his efforts. The game ended in loud arguments and a fight between two of the players. The referees admonished Richard and the winning team went on to win the club title.

Remember that when your kids lose a game that the coaches lost too. They probably feel pretty low and that is when they need your thanks and your support. In sport, when you are on top everyone thinks your great . We won the state basketball championship in 1996 but lost in the final four in 1997 by one point. It was a crushing blow but considering the injuries we had I was proud the boys had gotten as far as they did. When the final buzzer sounded our team parents walked off in silence. The attitude the boys were left with was that they had failed, even though they had played with great heart. Win well and lose well and your children will grow up with confidence and the strength to face life's disappointments.

Winning badly is as bad as losing badly. We have all heard stories of children held back in school or allowed to fail so they can better compete in athletics. Let me relate another tale. My son runs in a mile run every year. He began when he was 6 at his own insistence. I have never run competitively, but I have tried to support his interests even though he does not train for this race.

The first year he ran he finished 40th out of 170 in the district. I was ecstatic since I expected much less, due to his total lack of preparation. The following year he took 27th out of 170 and, although I was happy, he was frustrated he had not won.

The third year he ran he finished 6th and again might have done better, had he trained and run a smarter race. His disappointment was obvious to me. I then discovered something. The first five runners received medals and rode on a float at the town's western days celebration. Having missed the float by one place and a few seconds was something I said he would have to live with.

He then related something interesting. "The winner of this year's race should be in a higher grade." The boy who won first place and rode on the float of honor had failed a couple of grades. His parents were bursting with pride as we left the stadium, my son was crestfallen.

To make matters worse, the event was sponsored by the school district and the rules said only that students run with their grades, not their age groups. So my son had lost because of another boy's failure. The school race officials did not change their policy. As fate would have it, I made a wrong turn and ended up at the front of the parade by a few minutes. I told my son to wave to the crowd because they all knew he was a winner.

He returned to the race the next year, won fourth in the district, rode on the float and later set a school record for his grade in the mile run. He used his loss as a learning experience, ran smarter and tried a

little harder. He survived because he was fit, not because the race was fair. Nature is seldom fair and gives some athletes longer arms and faster feet and some more devious parents.

I know of too many cases where young children are allowed to fail by parental neglect, while their training for sports is advancing at a rapid pace. Some soccer leagues limit the hours you can practice a team, but coaches and parents circumvent the rules by playing on more than one team in different organizations or by attending association fund-raisers called tournaments.

One fall season, a team I coached had finished their 5th regular season game when I spoke with an opposing coach. His team had already played 25 games, including three tournaments. That was an average of 5 games per week, not including practices.

A need for child labor laws in sports

If I told you my kid was 8 years old and he received 12 hours of job-related training per week, you would report me to the child welfare division. Parents see nothing wrong with 10-20 hours of athletic training per week. They hope they are improving their childrens' survival chances when they may be contributing to their demise in the classroom.

Ask yourself a few questions:

1. If you spent that 20 hours per week tutoring your child on academics what kind of future would they have?
2. Can growing bodies really take that much pounding without rest? Ask your physician about the impact of early childhood injuries. Ask them what Osgoode Slaughter Disease is, find out what a growth plate is. Learn about developmental stages in body growth.
3. Will your kid burnout or stress-out? When you see that they are no longer smiling, the sports training is probably becoming too repetitive. When you hear them say they don't want to practice or they have stomach cramps before practice, they are in danger. If they don't seem to try, they need a break. Remember, a lot of professional athletes did not start playing their sport until they were well into their teens.

Types of Kids

All kids are different. What kind of kid do you have?

The greatest talent a coach can have is the ability to understand the differences in children and play them in complimentary combinations. I match up players with positions based upon their personalities and compensate for their abilities by placement of complementary personalities.

If a position's responsibilities require or will tolerate an unruly, reckless player, he will be played there as long as another more disciplined player can be positioned in a way to compensate for each player's shortcomings.

I believe that it is a mistake to force children to play positions that they are not emotionally prepared to play. When brought along slowly, I have helped players adjust to the demands of any position. But keep in mind that most children just want to be a part of a team. Teams are like dog packs. I don't mean that children are dogs, but when you get a large group of them together they begin vying for positions like dogs in the pack. Alpha dogs will clash for dominance and others will assume positions subordinate to the others. The top dog is not always who the coach wants, but the coach better know who he is.

Other types of Kids

I have found stereotypical kids over the years re-appear on my team. The following section contains a partial list. Some of these categories may overlap.

Hyper-active Cartoon kid

They're like Bugs Bunny, now you see them, now you don't. I swear that one evening in practice I actually saw one split into two people and his parents left with two separate children. Give them added responsibilities and keep them busy. If they are medicated, be sure the coaches are given whatever special instructions that may be required.

Explosive

Some children get reinforced for acting out in bad ways. They are their own worst enemy and can blow up at any minute. Watch them, many have a strong sense of right and wrong. Learn to anticipate situations that cause them to blow and remove the pressure. Blowing up at them seldom works, use time-outs. Some of these kids are probably from families that use extreme physical punishment and or resolve problems at home with loud arguments and emotional outbursts. I try to teach these kids how to resolve their differences in peaceful and constructive ways.

Fearful

A child who is in fear must be encouraged and slowly and safely put under pressure. Don't throw him in the lake to get over his fear of drowning - he may drown. I have had parents of fearful children get very angry at me for not playing their children in situations that I believed would do them harm. In most cases they never will know that I asked their child if they wanted to play and the child replied NO!

Therapist kids

Some kids make the rest of the kids feel better. If you have one of these, hang on to him. He's the kid with the grin when you're down by a large margin. He is also the kid who keeps the whole thing in perspective. Whatever, don't crush this one's spirit. He is the heart of your team. Crush him and your team will quit in the big ones. Don't yell "Wipe that grin off your face," he is the only one who has things under control. Anyone still grinning after running three miles must have something the rest of us need, I think it is called spirit. Anyone who is concerned about his fellow teammates, after a three-mile run, gets my vote as therapist.

Brains

You may coach some exceptionally smart kids. They bore easily and may not appear to pay attention, but they understand everything you say. They also remember everything you say and will point out your contradictions. Some will appear to be talking back. Let them, you might learn something.

The temptation exists to drill your team endlessly on a pattern or series of plays. The bright ones figure it out quickly and the rest of practice is dull and boring. Besides, ask yourself if the pattern you or the coach is teaching is permanent. That is, will they always use it for their entire sports life or is it a pattern or play that the coach has committed to. Skills are forever, tactics are forever, conditioning is forever, everything else changes. Smart kids seem to understand this more than their coaches.

Funny Guys

Some kids are jokers. It is how they handle stress. Use their sense of humor to keep things loose. Let them smile, let them joke. Require much of them and they will respond. A sense of humor is the greatest gift an athlete can receive (next to 4.2 speed in the 40). If you or the coach make the game too serious, the joy will be replaced by fear of failure and stress. I have been asked by countless parents, "What have you done in training your teams that make them play so spirited?" In a word, "JOY." I let them enjoy playing.

Frozen Deer

For a variety of reasons some kids can't play because of the trauma they experience. It is as if they are being overwhelmed by the surroundings. I don't think they are afraid, they just freeze. I once told a boy rounding third base to go home. He walked off the field and began collecting his things. I shouted at a boy to push forward on offense for an entire season with no result. He finally asked me "Coach, what's offense?" Some kids are so overwhelmed by the sports experience they cannot or will not perform or ask for help. This may be a sign they are not ready to compete. Try to desensitize them to the experience by having them come to the field long before game time so they can relax.

Game Players

When you listen to enough stories about athletes, you hear time and again about incredible scams and pranks played by certain athletes. These are the gamblers, the tricksters, and the guys who do incredible things in amazing circumstances. Management of these people is in itself a trick. I give them responsibilities, even if I don't expect them to produce anything. Make them your captain and always give them plenty of freedom and they'll take you to the championship.

Parents to Avoid

My cousin Jimmy coached girls softball for 10 years. He summed up parents like this, “In every walk of life you have a small percentage of jerks. It doesn’t matter if it’s business, the school system, or the clergy. The rule applies and the quota of jerks is a constant 10%. In sports, though, you have to double the figure to at least 20%. If the team is a championship caliber team, the figure will jump to 30%.”

It is certainly true that parents of athletes are competitive people. They are generally more competitive than the average and if their children are talented, they are even more so. This is not meant to suggest that all parents of athletes are jerks. But some are, and you may be one or know one.

Parents of a Star

A parent once informed me his child was destined for stardom, if I would coach him right. I asked if the boy had ever played the game and the parent replied “No, but he’s a natural.” I put the child into a scrimmage and he was lucky to emerge with all of his body parts intact. If the child is talented, you may be in for a rocky ride if you coach him. If your child is on a team with one be sure to take the “star’s” picture and give one to the parents. It won’t change them, but they’ll think you’re great because you have recognized their children’s greatness.

Parent on a mission

If a child has his catcher’s gear or his goalie’s uniform already, and he’s only six, there is a problem. Don’t allow your child or force your child to pick a position or a sport before high school. If parents force an expectation on a child when he is young he may always feel like he is a failure, even when he is not. I was an average football player but a very good basketball player. Unfortunately, my father hated basketball and loved football. Consequently, I got no attention for what I was good at and felt I failed to meet his expectations.

Parents who abuse officials

A parent of one of my players was penalized when she shot the finger at the ref. She later quit the team because a boy used profanity in practice. Ref-abusing parents are amazed that their children don’t respect authority. The referee for a youth game is probably a retired man who doesn’t see well, a parent who has a child on one of the teams, or worse, still, an older child with very little experience. That is the state of youth sport.

The referees are generally not well paid nor well trained. Keep saying to yourself “this is all kid’s stuff.” There are no instant replays or reverse angle views. A ref must make a split second decision from whatever angle he has under less than favorable conditions. On the other hand, those are your children out there and you should not be afraid to protest unsafe play or conditions.

One of my own 6-year-old children was badly injured in a close game and the ref did not see it. I walked onto the field in the middle of the game to attend to the fallen child amidst protests from parents, coaches and eventually the ref. If one of my children makes it to major leagues, don’t be surprised to see me out on the field in a similar situation.

Sport is not life, it is sport, and should never be mistaken for reality. If your ref is not controlling violent play, then complain to him and the management and, if all else fails, take your team or your kid and leave. If you need a precedent, use me I have done this a least four times. I have never regretted it.

Parent who is holier than thou.

Some parents have the attitude that only they know how to coach their kid. They also believe that coaches are stupid. Please parents, remember, the coach has spent months training your child, usually for free. He may be more objective about your kid than you will ever be. If you don’t like him, leave. If you are so

sure you know how to coach, do it yourself, on your own team. If you undermine the coach's authority, one more authority figure bites the dust in the eyes of your child.

Athletic Associations and Sports

The truth is, athletic associations are made up of people and people can make them great or a nightmare, depending upon who they are. The typical association is sponsored by some charitable or community group. My children have played sports at bad ones and good ones. Most people do not know that the founder of Little League wanted it to stay small and fun. He was appalled at how it became a high-pressure global business.

Parents who are involved only for their own children or their own ego run the bad associations. This translates into stacking teams with their own child and all the best players. It can result in money being misappropriated to send their teams to out-of-town tournaments. It may mean reserving the best equipment, practice fields, etc. for their own children. If you are impartial and care about all kids, you should volunteer, if not, stay home. If the Association is bad, leave. I have and would do it again if circumstances warrant.

Take the Association over if you can and make the changes needed but remember, those people running things are doing a lot of other work you may not care to do Field maintenance and fundraisers are very time consuming . So most people defer to those who will rather than get involved.

Coaches

Know who is coaching your kid (coaches are not cheerleaders)

Like many parents, I became a coach by default. My son wanted to play and the local soccer association had kids, but no coach. I told them I had coached other sports, but knew nothing about soccer. That was OK, they said, they would teach me. They never did. Instead they (the other coaches) used my kids for cannon fodder in our first two games. I was lucky, I worked with a former youth coach and also got some tips from the soccer coach at the college where I teach.

My point here is that coaches are too often recruited in the same manner as I was. Few of them have the backup system I did. Oh yes, we turned the season around and, the longer I coached, the less those other coaches seemed to know. I went to numerous coaching schools provided by our state and national associations and completed the requirements to become a licensed coach. My coaching development finally led me to the National Coaches School where I received instruction from top college coaches and a former World Cup Coach. My teams improved as I learned more and won many championships and became the coach everyone wanted to play for. I must give credit to the fine instruction I received in coaching schools because they told me what to teach. I take full credit for developing the teaching techniques that worked.

For the most part, coaches are Moms and Dads who have played little and know even less about coaching. But that's not all bad. In the sport's world, it seems to be generally accepted that great players often make bad coaches. Coaching is after all teaching and not everyone is a good teacher no matter how smart or well meaning they are. Find teachers for your kids.

Parents must be very careful that they are getting good teaching, not just winning seasons from their coach. If your child is an athlete, he will make an impact on the field, even if he is illiterate in a sport's sense. Coaches with weak backgrounds or poor teaching techniques will use your child's efforts without giving your child the skills needed for the next level. Beware of the fast-talking coach trying to build a super team. He is probably too good to be true.

Be wary of the cheerleader coach. He is the one who says, "Way to go and great play," but does not know how to help the child solve the problems he faces on the field of play. A coach once asked me what he could have done differently to win a game he had lost. I asked him what offense the opposing coach was running. He did not know. I asked what player on the opposing team hurt his team the most, he picked the wrong one. The more we talked the more I thought he had not been at the game. He was a great cheerleader though. Cheerleaders belong in the stands.

Ask for the coaches' Season Coaching Schedule, or offer to help develop one with them. No matter what the team sport, it should include the following:

1. Physical fitness, warm-up, stretching, slow build ups, rest, interval training, agility, flexibility, endurance, strength, speed.
2. Technical Correctness.
3. Tactical Awareness Defense-Offense
Individual, Group, Team
4. Game Conditions, Psychology

Coaches playing children ahead of your child's age group

Do not move your child to a higher age division than he can play in. When I was a boy, I had a dog who loved to catch a rubber ball. I loved baseball and got the bright idea that the dog would, too. I threw him a

baseball one-day for an hour or two and he never wanted to play catch again because the ball was too hard.

The point is simple: if you love your child, let him shine, even if he does so with ease. Carl Lewis was once the fastest man on earth, we did not insist he carry extra weight so that his challenge would be greater. Why cheat your child out of the satisfaction of being the best at something.

I am convinced that some parents move children along too soon because they fear failure or cannot accept winning. By moving the child into a harder or unwinnable situation you can always use the difficulty of the task at hand to excuse failure. Coaches who cannot accept winning have a low self-esteem and take the Rodney Dangerfield approach "If we beat them they must be bad." Size is generally related to age and, even if your child is skillful enough, ask yourself if you would want someone thirty to forty pounds heavier falling on you.

I once sent a player back to a younger age division because he was under-aged and under-sized. His father actually got upset and appeared to cry. He said I would have to tell the boy. When I asked the boy if he would like to play on a team with boys his own size where he could be a star he said "Yes" with a big grin. Ralph Waldo Emerson knew the child's wisdom exceeded the father's. "Listen to your child's heart not your own ego. The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil." I see that boy from time to time and he appears to be doing fine within his own age group.

The Day of the Competition

Competition

Let me talk about the issue of competition. I have heard people express some dissatisfaction with competitiveness. Some have even suggested that sports should just be for fun. I believe that sport should be fun, but please don't fool yourselves. When you have signed your child up to play competitive sports, it is supposed to be competitive. The leagues keep standings, they record the scores of the games and they award bigger trophies to the winners and small medals or nothing to the losers.

Coaches did not invent the system. I do not particularly like some parts of the system. But when I sign my child up to play competitive sports, I expect it to be competitive. In all honesty, if you want your kids to play sports just for fun, you should have pick-up games on your lawn or in the park. I can assure you that most of the teams that you play against will take things very seriously, even if you don't.

Other youth coaches have openly recruited and conspired to take my players, to create dissension among our parents and to disadvantage us through scheduling. Some use illegal balls and equipment and one circulated a false petition in a failed attempt to have a perfect season declared illegal. Some are competitive in the worst way. But in all honesty, I still love to compete. That is because I know that hard work, intelligence, practice and perseverance will eventually triumph.

Game day Behavior

Coaches should insist on good game day behavior. Here are some examples of what I mean.

1. Your child should sit on the bench if not in the game.

If a child refuses to behave on the sidelines (fools around in a disruptive manner, continuously pokes the coaches and asks or demands to play when they feel like it), it is necessary to discipline that child .

Some kids begin these patterns at the beginning of a game and continue throughout a game. It is a distraction and they should wait an additional five minutes for every time they make such requests. Coaches are preparing your kids to play sports later on and I assure you that no coach will tolerate a player who behaves in such a manner in the older divisions. Horace Mann said that "Manners easily and rapidly mature into morals."

2. Parents must always leave the refs alone on game day.

I was approached by a young referee at a match once and given a penalty. I protested the call, explaining that I had behaved in accordance with the rules all game. He told me the foul was on one of my team parents for making an obscene gesture. To my shock, it was a mother who freely admitted the transgression.

I will say it again, parents should leave the referees alone. It may help you to vent your emotions on a referee, but it kills the team. Referees just get mad and the team gets even worse calls. Many coaches are experts at working refs. Let them do it.

I was pressed into service once to referee a soccer game between 12-year-old girls. As the game progressed, I began to realize that between running the field, watching for fouls, keeping track of offsides and out of bounds, I could not see the whole field, nor could I call infractions quickly or completely.

A referee must make split second choices. This is often done with poor or incomplete information. Give them the benefit of the doubt and they will generally respond. As I have

already said, if the ref does not keep the game safe, do not hesitate to be vocal. Write letters of complaint if he is simply incompetent. I have pulled teams of children off the field, even though they were winning, when the refs let the game become unsafe.

Coaches on Game Day

I have always tried to conduct myself in a gentlemanly manner while in the presence of my team. I think it is critical that we provide good role models for our children especially in stressful situations. Try to stay calm. If you have a complaint about a game, take a deep breath, think for a minute how you want to be talked to, and then call the coach the next day so that you can talk rationally. When I am thinking rationally, I realize I would rather abandon a contest than have my children see me become enraged over a childrens' game. Coaches must be above losing their grip.

Bad Weather

Negotiate this with your coaches. One friend of mine suggested that if the weather is below 50 degrees, it is a safe bet you should not practice young children. Don't practice or allow your kids to play games in heavy rain, snow, lightning or other inclement weather. I once coached a championship game in weather so cold that the parents sat in their cars and honked when a good play was made. I tried to have the game rescheduled, but the association would not and the parents and kids voted to play. We won, but I vowed I would forfeit rather than do such a thing again. Every year kids are killed by lightning and other bad weather for the sake of finishing a sporting event. Heat kills too so watch that heat index. The days of restricted water in hot conditions are long passed. Coaches who don't know this are bad coaches.

Win Games at Practice

Most coaching is done in practice, not at the games. So if you want your child coached, take him to practice. You can help your child a great deal with fundamentals if you will practice with your child at home. Get books at the local bookstore on proper technique. Videotape your child and go over his form. The public library has books and tapes too. Practice the right stuff.

Insist Upon Fair Coaching Practices

Each child should play, unless they have missed excessive practices during the week or for disciplinary reasons. If your child must miss because of your schedule he should still play, but in fairness to the others the coach should reserve the right to play him as needed. Coaches should recognize that kids do not drive themselves to practice and not be too hard on the child. On the other hand, if your child sits on the bench and the team wins, remember he will not be able to trade the medals he wins for a place on the varsity, if he has no game experience. Kids must play to get better and they may play more on a less competitive team.

If you have a coach who restricts playtime due to poor grades, poor work habits at practice or disrespectful behavior, support the coach. He is being a good teacher and deserves your respect and assistance.

It is very hard to remember who has played the most minutes, so if you feel your child is not playing much bring it to the coaches' attention privately, please, not right after they play or lose a close match.

Generally, coaches should take players out of the game if they are standing around or not paying attention. These are signs that they are tired or not really interested in playing. All players have those days at younger levels. Try to reduce their field time on those days when possible. When a child does not play much in a game, coaches should try to make it up in a subsequent game.

Positions

Coaches determine the positions of the players (the head coach should have the final say here) and substitutions. Not every child will, can, or wants to play every position every game. If your child has more success at one position than another, coaches should play him most often where he will have the most success and contribute to the team's success. His self-esteem will grow if you do.

Substitution

Once a child is in a game, he is out there until the coach can bring him out within the flow of the game. I have coached many a game where I wanted to make changes, but could not for almost an entire half. In general, it makes good sense to put the kids in positions they can sustain until they can be reasonably subbed. If your child is hurt or cannot play further, have him kneel or lay down on the field and the officials will stop the game. It is foolish for young children to play when they are hurt.

Personalities and Positions

Coaches talk about personalities and positions in sport. Let me discuss soccer. It is suggested that active players play the middle field, that disciplined, but less active players, hold down the defensive end and that your goalie is always your most intimidating fellow, the enforcer.

Of course, the age of the child is a factor here as well. Over the years, others have attempted to identify the personalities required for different positions in different sports. In the professional ranks people rise to play all positions in spite of physical limitations. Their personalities most certainly fit those positions. Two questions arise, "do kids develop a personality by playing a position or do they have a personality for a position?" In the early years, every child should have the chance to fit their personality into the various positions on the team. But over time they will find a spot or style of play that suits them.

The least experienced and/or youngest need more rest regardless of their personalities or talents. It is also fair to say that the same youngster does not come to every game. Kids are humans and some days they are more excited than others, so we should try to consider that as well. Consistency in sport comes much later in life for athletes. Youngsters with talent will not always produce on cue for us.

Uniforms

A team does not need fancy uniforms. The team's success will be associated with the team uniform. I played on a terrible team that had great looking uniforms and a great team that had plain ones. When I wore the shirt from the great team people were very impressed. I hid the bad team's jersey in the dirty clothes hamper. Kids do like uniforms though, and they seem to like the coach to wear a shirt or hat with the team logo. Older kids think that's stupid.

Conclusion

A Philosophy Of Sport

I have been involved with sports on some level most of my life. Like many of you, I have been through youth programs, adult leagues, industrial leagues, and church leagues and office teams. Even when I was advised by doctors not to play competitive sports anymore, I participated in self-improvement athletics such as weight lifting and distance running.

When I became a coach, I spent a good deal of time trying to become a good coach. I read books, watched coaching tapes, talked to experts and professional and college level coaches looking for the right techniques and the wisdom of these coaches. There are two things on which everyone seems to agree:

1. Playing should be fun
2. Play every chance you get

Through the years I have developed many ideas about youth sports. You have read some of them. The two ideas above are among the most important. Though most of us would like our children to play out our fantasy by hitting home runs or making great plays, the truth is that most kids won't.

Although it's a fine thing to hope, like us, practically none of our kids will ever play in the Super Bowl or pitch in the World Series. So, what's the point in playing? The point is that it's fun. It can also help a child to gain self-confidence, make new friends and develop a healthy body and a positive attitude towards physical exercise.

All this happens naturally if we, the parents, will let it. It takes time and a good deal of patience, but we can do it if we all work together. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Yelling

Don't yell at your child if he makes a mistake. He already feels bad enough. Try to give calm constructive help to correct the problem. Besides, it brings more attention to his failings. Do cheer like crazy when he does something good, no matter how minor it may seem. Reward the effort and he will keep trying.

2. Picking

Don't pick at small things he has done and treat them as if they were major problems. If players are focusing on small things it interferes with their performance. Do look for little things he does well and praise him for doing them.

3. Do not press

Don't get depressed or angry if your child doesn't seem to be picking the game up as quickly as you would like. Let kids move along at their own pace. Do practice with your child at home on areas where he needs to improve (get tapes, books, etc.).

4. Don't review the games

Don't constantly review the game unless the child asks to. Sometimes the kids need to leave the game on the field. Do talk about things that may have happened in a game that he is troubled by if he initiates the conversation.

5. Respect coaches

Don't tell your child that you would do things differently than the coaches. This only confuses the child and puts doubts in their minds about the coaches. Often this leads to kids becoming discipline problems. (At season's end, find a different team if you are truly dissatisfied). Do come to practices and talk calmly to the coaches about your ideas and concerns. You could volunteer to be an assistant if you're willing to

put in the time. Some leagues limit the number of assistants a team can have, but they may need to call on you so let them know if you can sub.

Remember

No one goes into a game wanting to fail. All of the kids want to be stars and to please us. But if parents yell at them or put them down they lose both on the field and at home. Children who do so will quickly lose interest and drop out. This experience should bring you and your child closer together and make you a stronger community of parents.

Conversely, if the kids have fun on the field and get positive attention from the parents they will enjoy the experience and want to continue. We can't know which of these youngsters will emerge as stars someday but we can do our part to let them shine.

The Real Purpose of Sport

There are four ideas that constantly appear in the world of youth sports; I think they are more important than the game. Everyone, parents and coaches should teach these while they are coaching.

1. Effort. The notion that we win by trying our best to do our best. We grow and get better by trying. If the child believes he must win to be successful, he always loses if his team fails. This is true, even if they have played a great game. Every time one of my teams wins a championship and we start up to the stage to get the first place trophies, I pause. I look at the boys who we played against that gave us fits all season long. They sit convinced that they are second or even third best. I then look at the players on my team who have made minor contributions and see their smiles as they raise their trophies in victory. I am always saddened by this. The best players on the worst team deserve so much more. Reward their efforts win, lose, or draw.
2. Sportsmanship. Play should be fair and clean. We should play hard and we should play tough, but we should never intentionally hurt another player. Injuries occur in sports, even when everyone is trying to play fair. There is no reason for a coach or a player to intentionally injure another. I have seen this actually backfire on a number of occasions resulting in serious injury to the bully. We always shake hands when the game is over and we should be able to look our opponents in the eyes and smile.
3. Teamwork. The players must learn that everyone is a member of a team and that we must all win, or none of us wins. Players who hog the ball or bump teammates off the ball should visit the bench. Players who insist on being one-person teams should be sent off to be just that. Selfishness will destroy your team.
4. Coping with victory and defeat. We must teach children to lose well and to win well. Kids should never taunt or ridicule opponents. Take the attitude, "You win some, you lose some and some get rained out." (Of course, indoor arenas do not have rainouts but they might have a power outage.) Lenk says competition is only bad when only the winner wins.

If the environment is corrupt, we will become corrupted. If we create the corrupt environment, we will lose our souls. If we tolerate the corrupt environment, we lose our courage and ourselves. Stand up for teaching in sports. The pursuit of a scarce prize is worthy, if done in a worthy manner. The world is in a constant conspiracy against the brave. It's the age-old struggleCthe roar of the crowd on one side and the voice of your conscience on the other.

-- Douglas MacArthur

Criminals and Youth Sports

The most horrible event anyone can imagine is one where a child is injured or worse. In most cases, children are safe on the athletic fields of America, but let me issue a few words of caution and a few suggestions. The vast majority of people involved with youth sports are totally unaware of the dangers around them. They fail to realize that individuals who would harm children gravitate to positions that put them in touch with them.

In the state I currently reside, there have been three well-publicized cases of sports related sexual abuse of children in recent years. That does not sound like much but two of those cases involved multiple victims and well-known, respected coaches. One involved the owner of a local sports arena. If you met the perpetrators of these crimes you would find them to be charming and non-threatening individuals. In fact, large numbers of people in the sports community rose to their defense and the victims were placed on the defensive. They were convicted and one was discovered to be a repeat offender.

A soccer tournament in Texas was tarnished by the abduction and murder of a young girl. When the FBI and law enforcement individuals asked for the videotapes of the parents so they could examine the crowds, a startling fact was discovered. A large number of known pedophiles were observed in the crowds at the games.

Some sports, like soccer, are more vulnerable to this problem for the following reasons: If the sport is played outdoors, in parks with no fences, with no admission gates to pass through, the child molester can gain easy access and escape. If a sport is foreign to us and we have few parent coaches involved, we must rely upon strangers to coach our kids.

I would like to encourage all sports clubs to consider:

- 1.Fences.** Fence fields with permanent or temporary fencing especially for tournaments when out of state or visiting fans attend.
- 2.Limited Entrances.** Clubs should have only a few entrances that are monitored or video taped.
- 3.Be Alert.** Investigate unusual behavior on the part of coaches and believe your child. Be wary of over-night parties at a coaches home especially if the coach is not a parent. Pedophiles are notorious for putting themselves in positions to be alone with children. Even in public they are always on the prowl. At one local water park a check of season pass data revealed over 150 known convicted sex offenders who were members even though it constituted a violation of their probation and parole orders.
- 4.Tape.** Finally, I would like every parent who videotapes a kids game to take a few seconds before every taping and simply tape the crowd around your part of the field. This tape may solve a crime. Be aware that strangers at water parks and ball fields may be making tapes of your kids for their own use.

Conclusion

Sandlot sports

If your child is a talented athlete, stay away from street ball, sandlot games and unorganized sports. This does not extend to playing with the neighbors, but be warned that everyone wants to measure themselves against a real athlete and your star could be hurt. Two of my AAU basketball players entered a street ball tournament one summer and conned me into coaching them. We won the city title, but not before they experienced a black eye, bruised ribs, heat stroke and an assault by an out of control parent. The tournament officials, security guards and the police were necessary at the final game. I'll pass and recommend you do, too.

Don't punch that coach

I am adding this plea in honor of a fellow I have coached with for two years. His name is Brad and he draws fire like a tree in a lightning storm. We were coaching teams on two separate courts at a tournament when I received word he was in trouble. I cut the trophy presentations short and rushed to the other court where he stood bloodied and angry. While he was attempting to break up a pushing match between two fans he was struck from behind and beaten to the floor by a group of people. When the police arrived, the culprits had fled and no one would say who they were or cooperate with the investigation. Brad had a black eye, broken glasses and various cuts and abrasions. Here is the point we all know: people get emotional at games and that they need to be controlled. In my state it is a felony to push or strike a referee. I believe it should be a felony to strike or push a player or a coach. Arenas and associations should ban people who take part in such debacles. In the distant future perhaps we will stress test people and bar some for their own good.

Everyone has opinions and you have heard mine. Before some of you discount them because they do not agree with your own or because they are not politically correct, consider this. I have been trained in psychology, sociology criminal justice and education, so I do know a fair amount about the effects of society on young people.

I have coached for many years and have had success at producing and fine tuning quality young athletes. A recent Olympic development pool in the age group I coach included 20 of my former players. I have coached my own children and they have set records and won city, regional and state championships. I am also a university professor who has taught for 20 years and has worked closely with our athletic department. I also teach, read and do research in this area on a daily basis. I mention these facts in order to gain your confidence that the recommendations I make have been constructed after great thought.

The Greek Ideal and the Athlete

In the February, 1997 Issue of Sports Illustrated, my own university was lambasted for refusing to allow a student athlete to continue to play basketball because his grades were not up to the conference required standards. The player claimed the university was at fault even though teachers and counselors claimed the student had missed most of his classes and counseling sessions, but made it to every basketball game and practice. In all honesty, if the student was not an athlete the case would have never made it to print. The fact that he was a good athlete drove the case into Sports Illustrated. The case raised some important issues that should be debated on both sides of the ivory covered walls. At issue, who is ultimately responsible for an athletes failure to pass university courses?

Universities were founded to educate bright, self-motivated, responsible individuals. Providing a quiet place to study, under the direction of an academy of learned scholars, is all the vast majority of people need to accomplish great things on their own. In the coming century, our goals must continue to include preparing students for the 50 working years that lay ahead of them after they graduate. Along the way, we try to instill in them some sense of character and dignity, if the outside world will let us.

When academic problems on our campuses arise, it is all too easy to blame the coaches, administrators, alumni and the athletes themselves. The demise of the traditional family and the abdication of all too many

fathers has left us with an unfilled void. The problem, I believe, is compounded by a much larger cultural shift away from the Greek tradition of the Three Principles: That western education was based upon the integration and the perfection of BODY, MIND & SPIRIT.

Universities today operate in a no-win climate. If a university refuses to admit a student with past legal problems or NCAA baggage, they are accused of discriminatory practices. If they give such a student a second chance, they are accused of exploitation. When you consider how little money raised by athletics actually goes to anything academic and how most schools actually lose money on sports, it is a wonder more schools don't just close down their athletic departments and turn the facilities over to intramural sports. I would hate to see that happen.

As an ideal in our society, it is supposed to mean something to be a college athlete. This meaning should imbue the college athlete with an aura of greatness. It should mean you spend 3 hours per day in practice 3 hours in class and another three or four in the study hall. Why, that comes out to the same number of hours most of us work per day to retain our spot in the work force!

Our ideals of body, mind and spirit have been fractured and we have come to believe it is enough to have only one of these qualities to earn respect and applause. If a person is of bad spirit, we will still admire the great athletic talent he possesses. The athletes themselves constantly attempt to deny their responsibility as role models because they do not possess or understand the three principles.

The Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue greatly admired by my young son and his classmates is a good example of what I mean. Readers, or I guess they should be called lookers, did not care about the girls' I.Q. or their time in the 40-yard dash. They cared about one part of the Ideal, the body. Since it was the intention to do nothing more than sell swimsuits, the mission was a success. We expect much more of our academic institutions.

If I stated my son was voted Top Male Student in his class during the same spring when he started at guard on the State Championship Basketball Team, you would yawn. Surely that's been done before. But, if I told you he made five goals in five minutes of a classic soccer game so that he could leave the game early and go skating with his girlfriend, he becomes a mythic figure. It is the amazing shot from half court, the player with the multi colored hair, and not the honorable athlete of old that gets the headlines.

Before I continue, both stories are true about my son. If Nike is listening, please remember, he is also handsome, articulate, and humble and is designing his own line of shoes. Since his store-bought Nike's now cost in the hundreds, I will accept all the help I can get.

Sports Illustrated, the major networks and ESPN are in the myth business. They can make something important or relegate it to the back pages. Make scholarship important and it will be a required part of every athlete's legacy. In the long run, athletes like former NBA star Senator Bill Bradley will effect our lives more than Air Jordan. Wouldn't it be an even greater success for Mike to return to school and study law or medicine now that his NBA career has come to an end? I am concerned about my children's futures and the sons and daughters of Mike and all the athletes and non-athletes in this country when I write this. The confusion over the three principles starts young for athletes.

At the AAU National Basketball Championships a few summers ago, AAU representative Bobby Dodd conducted a mandatory seminar for all coaches and athletes. He constructed a pyramid of cups on the stage. Each cup represented a building block in the young athletes life. If one came down, the whole pyramid crumbled. At the top of the pyramid he placed a wad of cash. The message to the kids was clear, money makes the world go round. I spoke with several educators amongst the coaches and they were all very disappointed with the message, as unintentional as it may have been.

Nike provided each player with a free academic planner and Bobby told them how to use it. Every evening during the tournament my son wrote about the day's events in his planner. He still has it in his school bag somewhere. The last day of the tournament I was packing some basketball equipment in the van and there, on the floor amongst the soda cans and hamburger wrappers, were the other 11 discarded planners. A few lectures about academics are better than nothing, but clearly AAU could do more.

When I returned to Oklahoma, I wrote to Bobby Dodd offering the university services in setting up an AAU Academic All-American program. I have volunteered free labor and office support to get such a program going. Unfortunately, like some of our students, Bobby has not taken me up on my offer to help. I am still hopeful the AAU will honor the outstanding student athletes at their tournament. Lets admit that good intentions are not enough when you are dealing with kids with special talents and needs. Young athletes face so many distractions, we must get their attention early and hang on to it for dear life. Honoring their peers for classroom success will give them role models amongst their peers. In an age where more and more athletes refuse to be our kids' role models, our only hope may be to grow our own.

At the opening ceremony of the AAU National tournament, a former athlete from a local TV station valiantly attempted to make the point that graduation should be the athlete's goal. He showed the boys a Chicago Bulls uniform and then a USA Olympic uniform and asked them, "What is the most important uniform you will ever wear?" Finally, he flashed a black graduation cap and gown, proclaiming this is the most important uniform you will ever wear. As the parental applause died down, I overheard one of my players ask another one, "What was that?" The second player countered, "A cap and gown. Dr. Kurtz has one in his office." To which the first player replied in astonishment, "Dr. Kurtz is Batman?"

Planners and guest speakers aside, we must all work to bring the importance of education into their lives. I have coached outstanding young people for close to 10 years and the parents are too often intoxicated by their children's talents. Tell parents you won't play kids who are disrespectful, lazy or poor students and they remove their children from your team, file complaints with local boards and tell everyone you are a rotten coach. The time on the field is treated as if it were an inalienable right, not a privilege to be earned. The consumer mentality has taken over sports at all levels. At McDonald's, if you don't like your Big Mac, they give you another one, but coaches and teachers should not be treated like workers in a fast food restaurant. When you pay your money, we have always reserved the right to tell you what you get on your order and whether you have qualified for dessert. Change that and you can give degrees and scholarships in boxes of Crackers Jacks.

Restrict playing time to coincide with grades and, in this way, every game is affected by the academic progress of the student athletes. If a player has a 1-point average on a 4 point system, then restrict his playing time to one quarter. Of course, a few coaches will be tempted to recruit all one-quarter players. But with limits of 15 varsity players they will run out of eligibility before every game ends. The fans will know why players are leaving the games and the social pressure will be strong to raise your grades and stay on the court.

Can't you envision the NCAA or NAIA finals. Ten seconds left in a seesaw battle between two academically superior teams. The starters for both teams have maxed out their time cards. Dick Vitale is questioning the fairness of the Kurtz Plan for schools with tough academic standards. It comes down to a future politician, a social worker, a minister, a doctor and an attorney against two physicists, a historian and a couple of future FBI agents. The crowd chants go smart guys or something like that.

As one of the physicists drives to the lane, he calculates the exact rotation and arc needed to propel the sphere through the cylinder to tie the game. Up steps our future president of the United States, a poly-sci minority student with an amazing vertical leap and a straight A average. He swats the ball away and his team erupts in celebration.

When the game is over, the players do not taunt because that is not in the spirit of the game. The announcers interview educated, articulate players who give insights into the game just played. When asked if they will

turn pro next year or come out early, the student athletes reply their plans include graduate school, medical school or working with troubled kids. The pros may lose some great prospects, but society has gained another generation of top professionals.

Meanwhile somewhere in small cities and towns, minor league teams of 18 - 21 year olds suit up for professional games. No one asks if they can read or write, no one cares. They play even if they can not solve algebraic problems and they don't have to go to class. If they kick fans or fight like hockey players, so much the better for attendance. Some will play in the big leagues someday and others will make a few dollars and give up the dream. On the college and university campuses, the words on the ivy covered walls will once more read Body , Mind and Spirit.

Help us Sports Illustrated, Help us Nike, Help us AAU, Help us moms and dads . Help us put our ideals back together again. And the crowd roars their approval.

Recommendations

1. States should monitor and regulate the number of hours children of various ages can participate in organized sports.
2. Sports Associations and community groups should work to reduce the overall financial costs of competitive sports to parent
3. Competitive sports should be part of the school curriculum so they fall under the school board and can (in principle) be regulated.
4. Games and practice should be directly after school and games should be during or after school . This would reduce parental involvement in coaching decisions etc.
5. Parents who threaten or abuse kids, coaches or referees should be referred to counseling or banned from coming to game. Even those who are merely verbally abusive should be sanctioned.
6. Elimination of won-loss records or league championships. In school sports, the schools should win league championships based on combined scores of games won and academic achievement of the school. So, for example, a team playing for state might win the athletic part of the championship but lose because of poor school performance.
7. The KURTZ Participation Plan: Let student athletes participate only as much as their grade average. If a student is an A student, he would be eligible for the entire game. A student who makes Bs would be eligible for three-quarters, a C student would be entitled to play one half and a student below C would only get to play one quarter. This would allow all but failing student to stay involved but teach them that school grades count. Schools are built to educate young people, not to develop a sports talent pool for the colleges.
8. Allow free participation in a levels system. Do not try to regulate skill difference by restricting advanced players and their development. Let kids be on teams with their friends or their favorite youth coach. If dominant teams emerge, and they will, put them in an upper division. Besides, if all the good players end up on one team, they won't have anyone to play and they will either leave your club or seek outside competition.
9. Monitor those coaching and watching our children. Run police checks on coaches and board members and owners of youth centers to eliminate those with felony convictions. Be particularly sensitive to child molesters and abuse cases. At tournaments and during league games, try to video tape the crowd or some point of entry. Encourage each parent who videotapes games to pan the crowd and the complex for a few seconds every time they tape a game . This may prove valuable to police investigations.
10. Make it mandatory that coaches attend coaching schools and clinics. Teaching badly or teaching the wrong things is worse than no instruction at all. US Soccer is light years ahead here with their coaches training program.

Those are my recommendations. I hope you have enjoyed this book and will consider my advice. I retired from youth sports as my older children moved on to state select teams and college I promised my new wife that I would not subject her and our family to the stress that results from participating as a coach or administrator in youth sports.

I wish I could tell you I have survived youth sports, but I am not sure I have. I have bad knees, sun hardened skin from hundreds of hours on the practice field, and worn hearing from spending too much time on the phone. People who I barely know have an emotional response when I walk in a store or attend a public function due to their happiness or dissatisfaction with my coaching. The players I have coached are growing up so fast I don't even recognize some of them. There have been rewards though even if they are sometimes difficult to measure.

I have always told my children that they will remember only a few events from their early sports experience. Memories will fade and events run together. The feeling you have about it will stay with you and it should be a good one. So far so good. I hope sports brings you and your children as close together as it has brought me to mine.

As I finished the first draft of this book, my close friend and assistant coach, Tim, has died of a sudden and massive heart attack. He was on the sidelines with me for years, holding my clipboard and filling in my gaps. I am convinced that his participation as a coach shortened his life. The stress was greater than we realized and, now that I have retired from youth coaching, I feel like a person who has reclaimed his life

Epilogue

My wife and I agreed that as our twins mature and if they decided to enter the world of youth sports, we would be cheering and supportive parents. We would work hard to teach our children to keep their involvement in sports in perspective with the real world. Therefore, I was not sure if I would be back this way to write more on sports and I was convinced that my coaching days were over. Recently my young daughters turned three and we enrolled them in a gymnastics class. They have been a bit unruly to start and one even led everyone including Olympic Coach Steve Nunno on a wild and merry chase through the Dynamo Gymnastic Center. So, it looks like they too are embarking on the unreal journey into sports. My wife has read my book and has taken the section on coaches and child abuse very seriously. I may once more be pressed into service to coach soccer and whatever else my girls decide to pursue. In closing should we meet across a crowded field know that we all want to win but I am just trying to survive youth sports.