

What's Wrong With Youth Programs? The Adults!

by

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The justifications for organized sport are well known, having been drilled into the consciousness of our public psyche by coaches, sports writers, parents, and athletes.. Athletics participation, it is said, develops important characteristics such as communication skills, discipline, cooperation and leadership abilities, perseverance, sportsmanship, integrity, and a positive work ethic. Being a member of a team teaches concepts in cooperation and loyalty and enhances one's self-image. The promotion of these assertions has been so thorough that they have become part of our cultural consensus regarding athletics. We rarely question them. But whenever I hear or read about sports' character building virtues, my mind invariably returns to the sight of my sobbing, and terrified ten-year-old teammate separated from his bat-wielding father by the chain links of a batting cage.

It is no secret that there are significant problems with organized youth sports programs. The recent fatal fight between fathers at a hockey rink in Massachusetts is simply an extreme example of a system that is badly out of step with the needs of the children it is meant to serve. Incidences of parents screaming at nine-year-old-children over a missed basket or misplayed fly ball are commonplace. Youth league umpires are being verbally and physically abused with increasing frequency. Most sad however, are the results from a 1991 study by Michigan State University's Institute for the Study of Youth Sports of nearly 25,000 children ages 10-17, indicating that, after "no longer interested", the second most frequent reason children quit playing sports is because they were "not having fun". (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1991. 61) Obviously something is wrong.

What is wrong with youth sports is the adults. Youth sports programs are no longer about meeting the educational, developmental, and recreational needs of children but rather, about satisfying the egos of adults. Adults have imposed their values and priorities about sports upon their children's games -- from the conducting of player drafts, to the imposition of structure, organization, and rules to a disproportionate emphasis placed on winning. This, despite the fact that children, more than anything else, want to play sports simply to have fun.

While I have participated in organized sport from the pee wee to the professional level, it wasn't until I served as youth sports director at a YMCA in Charlotte, NC., that I fully appreciated the deleterious affect of parents on children's games. The YMCA was unique in that it offered programming not only for the children of the surrounding low-income neighborhood of North Charlotte, but also ran youth sports leagues for children of an upper middle income neighborhood across town. While the income level and race of the children in these programs were different, I fully expected, that with sports as the common denominator, there would be little difference in the tone and conduct of the programs in each of these neighborhoods. My own competitive athletic experience had taught me that once the game begins, income level and race lose all of their significance.

But as my involvement in these programs deepened, I was struck by how different they were. In particular, there was a stark difference in the way in which the children from these two neighborhoods played and related to the game. At first, the difference puzzled me, but soon the influencing factor became apparent – parental involvement. Parental involvement in the low-income group was almost non-existent, while across town, it was significant, often excessively so. Because our YMCA was understaffed, I wore many administrative and operational hats. Thus, during practice with the children from North Charlotte, I was often called away to attend to other matters, they were forced to organize and run their practices by themselves. But despite my absence, practices went on. While arguments broke out on occasion, differences were, by and

large, worked out among the children themselves. Much of their practice time simply involved choosing up sides and playing the game. This was in stark contrast to the league across town where parents demanded that practices be structured and instruction-based (teaching the children to do it the “right” way). While the difference in practice organization was obvious, I began to notice a difference in something far more important. While one group clearly had the better uniforms and equipment and more parental involvement, it was plain to me that the north Charlotte children had much more fun. My rag-tag bunch from North Charlotte seemed to play the game much more freely because there wasn’t the added burden of having to please a parent; they spent less time looking over their shoulders worrying what their parents were thinking of their last at-bat and more time simply playing and enjoying the game.

The more I thought about this dynamic, the more sense it made. My fondest memories of sports participation as a youngster have little to do with organized sports. I remember the pick-up basketball, sandlot football and playground baseball games; activities where there wasn’t an adult within miles. And while adults might refer to those activities as not being “organized”, the fact is, they were highly organized. We organized the games, picked teams, set ground rules and mediated any disputes that arose. We tailored the games to meet our needs and, consequently, not only had more fun, but learned more from participating. While I was certain, based upon my own experience and observations, that for children to derive the maximum personal development and enjoyment out of youth sports, they should be far less “organized”, it wasn’t until years later that I came to find that there is a large and growing body of research that supports my experience and observations.

Studies contrasting spontaneous youth play versus youth sport organized by adults indicate that children, if left to their own devices, will successfully organize, administer, and manage their own games. They will choose sides and mediate disputes. They will set their own rules. In some cases, those rules may change from game to game. But they will be rules that

work for the children. Children will handicap the game to make sure it is evenly matched, interesting, and fun. Such organizational, mediating, and interpersonal skills are valuable characteristics that children are not permitted to develop because they are forced to play by the adult, supposedly, *right* way.

A perfect example is the typical situation where there is one very superior athlete in a baseball game. In the "organized" game, the adult coach will have that child pitch. The child proceeds to dominate the game, striking out most of the batters he or she faces, while the children in the field stand like statues. By the end of the game, many players have never touched the ball. If left to their own devices, the children in the "unorganized" game will agree amongst themselves that the dominant player either not pitch or pitch with his or her opposite arm. In basketball, the dominant player may be allowed only a limited number of shots or may be required to shoot with his or her "off" hand.

Children make adjustments in their games to ensure that it is fun for everyone and that everyone participates. Their purpose in participating is, after all, to have fun. If the game is not fun, children will quit playing and, if enough quit, the game will end. The primary goal of games organized by children is to play the game. That being the case, they must work to make the game interesting and fun enough so that everyone will want to continue to play. Without adult enforced structure, rules, and expectations, there is nothing besides the children actually wanting to play the game because it is fun holding the game together. In youth leagues organized by adults, the adult imposed goal of winning replaces the goal of maximizing fun and participation.

Not only do adults deny children the opportunity to develop important interpersonal, mediation, organizational, and management skills from their participation in athletics, they also take the fun out of the game. In adult organized games, the result of the contest is recorded as a win or a loss, regardless of the closeness of the game or the performances of the individuals involved. In the informal game, while the result may be discussed on the walk home, it is usually

considered insignificant and quickly forgotten as the children focus more on the actions of the individuals and the fun that was had by all. Clearly, the children have their priorities straight regarding sports as it is the process (participation and having fun) rather than the end result that is most important.

Thus, the question becomes, “How do we restructure youth sports programs to give the games back to the children?” The answer? “De-organize” youth sports. Children should not be permitted to participate in structured youth sport programs, as we currently know them, until they reach the age of thirteen. Until then, they should participate only in "deorganized" youth sports leagues. In such leagues, no more than 25% of practice and game time should be allotted to fundamental skill instruction. During the remaining time, other than a safety official, adults should not be permitted to coach, instruct, or even watch. Leave the kids alone! Let them pick their own teams, make their own rules, and mediate their own disputes. The only rule that they must abide by is that everyone plays.

In other words, to make youth sports “about the kids”, athletic activities should resemble “pick-up” games. In my childhood, we organized, scheduled, administered, and refereed our own games. We would meet at a designated time or simply go door to door to see who was interested in playing a game. Today, parents are hesitant to allow their young children to roam the neighborhood unsupervised, searching for a basketball game, for safety reasons. As a result, organized youth sports activities have grown in number. An organized league structure offers a safe playing environment. Under this proposal, children would be provided a safe playing environment, but would allow them to manage their own games, and as a result begin to develop those personal skills – organization, conflict resolution, leadership, management, and mediation – that make participation in athletics valuable. Children learn very little from adult organized athletics other than perhaps specific playing skills and techniques. While adults may cringe at denying children their "expert" coaching advice, the fact is, children’s interpersonal skills will

develop more if they are left to manage their own games. Without adult supervision, the games will be closer, more interesting, and most important, more fun. It is time to get adults out of youth sports. It is time to let the kids have their games back.

References

Ewing, M.E., & Seefeldt, V. (1991). *Participation and attrition patterns in American agency-sponsored and interscholastic sports*. East Lansing: Michigan State University, Institute for the Study of Youth

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