



The Urgent Need for Reform in Youth Sports

By

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I. Executive Summary

This paper will convey a strong and urgent message that organized youth sports must be reshaped and reorganized because they have failed miserably in responding to the needs of children. There is a crisis in youth sports that borders on abuse and exploitation of children and their families.

More than 40 million young athletes participate in youth sports.¹ Four million unpaid and untrained volunteers coach them.² The prevailing youth sports system in the U.S. has been organized and run by well-meaning parents using a business model which focuses on “products, results, and the bottom line,” instead of one that places the needs and wants of children first.

It is a system that is rife with ugly political agendas that harm kids and polarize adults. John Gerdy, in his recent book, *Sports: The All-American Addiction* says: “Our expectations regarding sportsmanship have become so low as to be virtually nonexistent.” The belief that organized sports build character, contribute in positive ways toward education, and improve the health of the general population is completely unfounded.³ Hardly anyone believes that sports teach integrity, respect, ethics, and fair play. In fact, everywhere we look, we see just the opposite.

Problems on the collegiate and professional levels find their roots in a system that selects the best and forgets the rest. The time is ripe for systemic change that deals with the causes and not just the symptoms of these problems.

The most appropriate way to address the issue is through the formation of a not-for-profit organization with broad community support that can collaborate with other similar organizations throughout the country and one that can lead a grass roots revolution in youth sports in Arizona.

II. The Crisis in Youth Sports

It has been widely documented and reported that parental rage and misconduct in youth sports has become commonplace. The recently concluded trial of Thomas Junta, the hockey parent who was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter in the beating death of another hockey parent inside a hockey rink in Massachusetts, has emerged as a symbol of youth sports gone awry.⁴ This, and other cases of parental brawls and fights are now frequent occurrences in youth sports. Last February, all the amateur hockey referees in Canada went on strike for a day to protest the constant abuse they receive from players and parents.

The same kind of explosive events are happening here in Arizona on a daily basis. For example:

- Parents and players hurled profanities and threats at each other in the parking lot after a recent high school hockey game. During the game, several fights broke out on the ice and many fans were observed making obscene gestures and screaming profanities at each other, the officials, and even the players.
- One Little Leaguer was ejected from a game for cursing at the umpire after several fans had been doing the same thing. The umpire asked that the offending spectators be removed before the game could continue.
- A 14 year old hockey player was ejected and suspended for screaming a racial slur at an opponent.
- Two youth hockey coaches on the same team started fighting with each other during a game of ten and eleven year olds. The fight was broken up by the coach of the opposing team.
- The coach of a girl's soccer team had to ask the parent of one of his players to leave the field because he refused to stop running up and down the sidelines coaching his daughter.

But, the real dangers in youth sports do not grab the headlines. Consider the following grim facts from a study conducted by the Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission:

- 45.3 percent of kids surveyed said they had been called names, yelled at, or insulted by coaches.
- 21 percent said they had been pressured to play with an injury.
- 17.5 percent said they had been hit, kicked, or slapped.
- 8 percent said they had been called names with sexual connotations.
- 3.4 percent said they had been sexually abused. This final number is very conservative because not many will admit it.⁵

Another study conducted and presented in a paper to the American Alliance for Health surveyed 1,183 athletes ages 11-14. 35% said they planned to stop playing the next year. The same researchers surveyed the parents of 418 athletes aged 6-10, and 50% of those parents said their child was not interested in the sport any more and would stop playing.⁶ Other studies conclude that as many as 70% of the kids who begin playing a sport at an early age have dropped out by age 15!⁷

III. Youth Sports Have Failed Our Children

Children play sports to have fun, be with friends and develop their skills. Studies show that they drop out when these needs are not being met. Children burning out on *play* doesn't make sense and should not be allowed to happen. When 70% of them quit playing before puberty, how can anyone deny that youth sports are in serious trouble?

A study sponsored by The Youth Sports Institute at Michigan State listed the top ten reasons why kids quit:

1. They lost interest
2. They were not having fun
3. It required too much time
4. The coach played favorites
5. The coach was a poor teacher
6. They got tired of playing
7. Too much emphasis on winning
8. They wanted to participate in other non-sport activities
9. They needed more time to study
10. There was too much pressure⁸

The reasons kids quit are proof that youth sports organized by adults have clearly failed our children. Adults have assumed control of every aspect of youth sports, and in the process have taken the games and the fun away from the children. If we respect our children, why shouldn't they have a say in how sports and play are organized for them?

As adults, we have also failed to provide for the emotional training of our children. Not much is being done to help young athletes deal with the many emotional problems they face at the hands of "well-meaning" parents and coaches. Not many parents and coaches are even aware of their own patterns of emotional behavior that are the causes of emotional problems in their children.

Sports psychologists are very much aware of the effects of fear, not only on child development, but on athletic performance. Most athletes, and especially young ones, experience fear as a result of their participation in youth sports. Many are fearful of disappointing their parents and coaches. They are fearful of the emotional outbursts, put downs and abusive treatment of parents and coaches. Young athletes are fearful of failure and public humiliation. Many who have experienced success are even afraid of success because they fear they might not be able to sustain it.

The emotional side of sports – the way athletes feel about themselves and how those feelings help or hinder athletic performance – is the single, most critical issue affecting children who participate in youth sports.

Youth sports can provide the young athlete and their parents with many benefits, but overbearing coaches, over involved parents and the fear of failure can negate these benefits for most kids.

IV. Youth Sports Have Failed Collegiate And Professional Sports

This crisis in youth sports has also failed our collegiate sports system, and the business of professional sports. Here's how. One of the reasons youth sports exist is to promote talent. The massive system of youth sports is how talented athletes are identified, developed, and delivered to colleges, the Olympics, and the professional ranks.

Two of the problems this system presents for collegiate and professional sports are:

1. Many elite athletes lack the maturity and life skills to succeed in the high pressure, high dollar world of big time collegiate and professional sports. Most of the problems we read about can be traced directly back to their earlier years in youth sports. Young athletes are being pampered and allowed to commit all kinds of unsportsmanlike acts without being held accountable. The lessons they learn from adults are not about building character, respect, and developing a sound moral foundation. In fact, just the opposite is true. Had these athletes received proper guidance in the most overlooked aspect of youth sports – emotional training – they would be much more balanced in their lives and capable of dealing with the enormous pressure they face.
2. Professional sports are being deprived of talent. If 70% of the kids who start out playing sports quit before puberty and before reaching their potential physical growth, millions of kids leave sports before they or anyone else recognizes their true potential. The emphasis on winning and the consequences of selecting and playing “the best” during these early years neglects thousands of kids who would otherwise continue playing and developing into elite level athletes. This, in turn, has an adverse affect on the talent pool of American kids who might have been available to the collegiate and professional ranks.

Michael Jordan is a perfect example of the “late bloomer.” The scrawny, 5’-9” sophomore didn’t make the varsity team at Laney High School in Wilmington, North Carolina. Michael Jordan wasn’t good enough and got cut. Had he given up before reaching 6’-3” in his junior year, the world would have never known such greatness.

V. Myths Perpetuated by Youth Sports

Youth sports have failed us all! Over 40 years of research confirms that sport has failed miserably in building character and teaching valuable life lessons in moral decision making and personal responsibility. The belief that sport promotes a spirit of fair play, respect for one’s opponents, honesty and fairness has also been debunked as purely myth.⁹

Research by Sharon Stoll and Jennifer Bell proves that the way we conduct youth sports in America does little to promote educational ideals, character development or healthy personal development. Stoll and Bell have found that the longer an athlete remains in a competitive sport, the more “masked” their moral decision making becomes. The older an athlete gets, the easier it is to “justify” their behavior, believing that “you do whatever you have to, to win,” or “if you don’t get caught, its ok.”¹⁰

Proof of this can be found in the widespread cheating that takes place at all levels; a win-at-all-costs mentality; steroid use by high school students; deliberate attempts to injure an opponent; and even lying about one’s age. (Danny Almonte, 2001 Little League World Series)¹¹

Furthermore, our educational values have also been undermined by allowing athletes to play who do not pass in school; illegal recruiting; red-shirting high school athletes; pressuring teachers to give athletes “special consideration;” and graduating functionally illiterate people. This is all at the high school level and below!

Things are even worse at the collegiate level where the pressure to win is enormous because of the millions of dollars involved, national rankings, and television.

Adults have transformed “play” with a professional sports model and everything that goes with it. Uniforms are expensive licensed replicas of the real thing. Practices are structured and schedules are created to win and compete against the best from around the country. It isn’t uncommon for ten year old kids to play 80 games in one season. The cost of participating for one year can be as much as several thousand dollars, and the pressure placed upon family time is enormous and often times, destructive and harmful.

VI. Abuse And Exploitation Of Children

But the problem is much deeper than this. Although participation in youth sports today is booming, the problems they cause for children and families are also increasing. Some of the problems include:

- Emotional abuse of children
- Injuries due to overuse and intense training
- An increase in eating disorders among young athletes
- Burnout
- Family conflict
- Violence among parents, coaches, and officials
- Mistrust and miscommunication in families, schools, and communities
- Much unhappiness for many young athletes

Child abuse in youth sports is any action taken by an adult resulting in the direct and indirect physical and/or emotional harm of children. Abusive behavior can be verbal, physical, emotional, and/or sexual. Neglecting the needs of children is also a form of abuse. All of these forms of abuse are destructive and detrimental to a child’s growth and development. Youth sports can benefit children immensely. When any type of abuse occurs, however, serious harm negates the benefits.

Because youth sports has become an enormous business, children and their parents are often exploited by their own leagues and the many ruthless people who are profiting from the dreams of kids to “be like Mike,” and the craving of parents to see their kids excel. Young athletes and their parents find it impossible to resist the temptation of “specializing” and playing year round on travel teams and attending camps and clinics where they can train and play with other “elite level” players in order to be discovered by scouts and secure scholarships.

There are several causes of this situation:

- The “system” of organized youth sports in America is broken and dysfunctional. Grass roots youth sports organizations are staffed by volunteers unprepared to lead a

complex volunteer organization in which the developmental needs of all children must come first.

- A win-at-all-costs-mentality. When coaches and parents are guided by this singular principle, they will do anything to win. Developing character, providing a good role model, making sure everyone is having fun and that everyone returns the next year are aspects that are often overlooked.
- Coaches are almost always volunteers who have received little or no training in how to coach children. While a number of training programs have been developed, they almost always focus on organizing practices, X's and O's, and rarely spend much time on the psychological aspects of coaching children.

Coaches have an enormous impact on children's lives, their values, attitudes, ethics, and behavior. Unfortunately, most youth coaches are untrained in and unfamiliar with the principles of effective motivation and age-appropriate teaching strategies. Left to themselves, most will do whatever it takes to return to coaching the following year.

- There is an absolute lack of education for parents about all aspects of youth sports such as: child development, age-appropriate skills and tactics, motivation, the role of youth sports in society, what is appropriate behavior, and the rules of the game.
- There are rarely opportunities for parents to question what is going on and to voice their concerns. It is rare that leagues provide opportunities where parents can learn about the participation of children in sports and their own, important roles in the process.

VII. National Health Concerns

Youth sports, inter-scholastic sports, and school Physical Education programs have contributed to a troubling trend in the health of Americans. In a very real sense, because youth sports have failed to prevent a 70-80% attrition rate by the age of 15, it is fair to say that youth sports have failed to provide for life-long physical fitness and good health.

The National Center for Health Statistics reports that seven in ten adults do not exercise regularly, and nearly four in ten are not physically active at all. Nearly half of American youth aged 12-21 are not vigorously active; about 14% of young people report no physical activity; participation in all types of physical activity declines strikingly as age or grade in school increases; 61% of U.S. adults are overweight or obese; and 12% of children between 6-11 are overweight.¹²

All of these findings and statistics are an indictment of how youth sports have failed. The research is clear. There is more at stake than just the reform of organized youth sports. It is also about our culture and Quality of Life issues that affect every American.

VIII. Systemic Change

The time is ripe for systemic change that deals with the causes and not just the symptoms of these problems. Organized, youth sports have clearly failed. The causes of the problems will not go away by paying coaches, requiring them to be certified, forcing people to sign Codes of Conduct, and developing standards for youth sports organizations. We've all got to admit what everyone already knows: youth sports have become more negative than positive. What is required is a change in the culture, visions, values, and expectations of the entire institution of youth sports.

Systemic change of this magnitude requires research, education, and a grass roots, local movement of parents, coaches, league administrators, sports professionals, as well as members of the health community.

IX. Comprehensive Plan

Changing the status quo is possible, but not without a comprehensive plan that is well-grounded in reality and founded upon a few basic principles:

1. A not-for-profit Institute that is free from any hint of exploitation of children and their families is required in a leadership role for the integrity of the movement. The Institute must have the backing of credible people and organizations within the local community, and work in partnership with the handful of other organizations around the country working toward the same goals.
2. Fair play, equal opportunity, athlete centered philosophy, and age appropriate skill development in the context of a system which focuses on the development of all children rather than the results of winning, scholarships, and individual fame.
3. Efforts must be made to work with high schools to provide opportunities for students who do not make varsity and junior varsity teams. This is a critical time when tens of thousands of “late bloomers” quit playing sports altogether, and when millions of young American need to stay physically active.
4. Because youth sports are mostly staffed by untrained parent volunteers and run on “shoe-string” budgets, educational materials, training workshops and related services must be free of charge or few will use them regardless of how good they are.
5. The organization must have the backing of credible people and organizations within the local community, and work in partnership with the handful of other organizations around the country working toward the same goals.

Critical Elements Of The Plan

1. Educational materials, tool-kits, and training workshops must be developed and disseminated. An up-to-date website with age-appropriate content must be available for coaches, parents, and young athletes.
2. On-going research in all areas of youth sports, child development, training, fitness, etc.
3. Community dialogue and alliances must be created to create awareness, ensure input from interested stakeholders, and garner support.
4. Collaboration with the handful of national and regional organizations involved in the same pursuit.
5. Workshops for young athletes on the development of their entire person: physical, inner strengths, talents, intellect, emotions, spirit and wonder. These workshops will help young athletes understand their emotions and feelings, especially fear.
6. Coaching Development and Certification programs to ensure that volunteer coaches are prepared and involve themselves in on-going learning and professional development.
7. Parent Education programs and forums that educate, inform and provide a voice for the parents and families of young athletes.
8. Consulting services to leagues and youth sports administrators. Change is not possible without the professional guidance and skills of change agents. These services include facilitated discussions about the values, goals and expectations of parents and youth sports organizations. They typically involve Mission development, the creation of policy manuals and guidelines that place the interests and needs of children first. Many

organizations will require assistance in creating new structures and roles that involve volunteer parents with professional skills and expertise.

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- ¹ Gould, D., and Weiss, M. (eds) *Advances in Pediatric Sport Sciences*, Vol.2: Behavioral Issues (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 1987) pp. 55 ff. cfr also Weinberg, R.S., and Gould, D., “*Children’s Psychological Development Through Sport*,” in J. Silva and R. Weinberg (eds) *Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology*. (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 1987) pp 449-466. Also, Gerdy, John. Editor. (2000) *Sports in School: The Future of an Institution*. NY: Teacher’s College Press, Columbia University. P. 55.
- ² Gerdy, John. Editor. (2000) *Sports in School: The Future of an Institution*. NY: Teacher’s College Press, Columbia University. P. 55.
- ³ Gerdy, John. *Sports: The All-American Addiction*. (2002) Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press. This is a hard hitting book that exposes all that is wrong with sports in America. A must read. I give it 5 Stars! The most significant book on the topic.
- ⁴ *Junta Guilty in Rink Death*, The Boston Globe. January 12, 2002. Thomas Junta was found guilty and sentenced to 6-10 years for involuntary manslaughter in the July 2000 beating death of another hockey parent.
- ⁵ A study by The Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission. www.masc.state.mn.us/resources/kyss&f/brochure3.html. (1993)
- ⁶ Sapp, M., and Haubenstricker, J., “Motivation For Joining and Reasons for Not Continuing in Youth Sports Programs in Michigan,” paper presented at the meeting of the American Alliance for Health, Recreation, Physical Education, and Dance, Kansas City, Missouri, 1978.
- ⁷ Engh, Fred. (1999) *Why Johnny Hates Sports*. NY: Avery. P. 3.
- ⁸ 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 Sports. Cfr also A survey of 10,000 kids nation-wide. also “American Youth Sports Participation.” (North Palm Beach, FL.: Athletic Footwear Association, 1990) A study of 2,700 boys, and 3100 girls in grades 7-12.
- ⁹ Gerdy, John. Editor. *Sports in School*. Chapter 2, “Do Sports Build Character?” Sharon K. Stoll, and Jennifer M. Beller, p. 24.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p. 20.
- ¹¹ CNN Sports Illustrated. “One for the Ages.” August 27, 2001. www.cnn.com Article on Danny Almonte, the star of the 2001 Little League World Series. Records proved he was 2 years older than the maximum age for Little League eligibility.
- ¹² National Center For Health Statistics, The Center For Disease Control and Prevention. On the WWW at: www.cdc.gov/nchs/faststats; www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/overwght99.htm; and www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/hestats/obese/obese99.htm.