

Let's Give Youth Sports Back to the Kids

By
John Gerdy

It is hard to imagine how a coach, chasing his son around the batting cage with a bat, screaming something about discipline at the plate, could possibly be a good thing. But there we were, watching silently, none of us all that surprised or terribly upset at what we were seeing. We had witnessed enough incidents where coaches screamed and yelled at their players. Although the bat was a bit of a new twist for us, it was, in our minds, certainly within an acceptable standard deviation of coaches' behavior. We were playing competitive sports and in competitive sports, coaches yelled, screamed and threatened. We were ten.

It is no secret that there are significant problems with organized youth sports programs. While the above incident or the well chronicled fatal fight between fathers at a hockey rink in Massachusetts are simply extreme examples 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 they quit playing sports is because they were "not having fun". Obviously something is wrong.

The problem with youth sports is that they are no longer about meeting the educational, developmental, and recreational needs of children but rather, about

satisfying the egos of adults. Adults have imposed the values and priorities they see as being part of college and professional sports upon their children's games, from the organization of player drafts, to the imposition of structure, organization, and rules to a disproportionate emphasis placed on winning. This, despite the fact that in that same 1991 study, winning ranked seventh as a reason children played sports.

Much of the parental overzealousness can be attributed to the woefully misguided belief that athletic success at age 8 or 10 will translate into a college scholarship and financial riches as a professional. The fact is, there is absolutely no way to predict the future athletic success of pre-adolescents. Michael Jordan for example, was cut from his high school team as a 15 year old sophomore. For every child phenom like Tiger Woods, there are hundreds of pre-pubescent stars who fade into the athletic woodwork by the age of 16.

Further, research indicates that most children under the age of 12 do not have the cognitive ability to fully grasp the meaning of team strategy, tactics, and positioning required of team sports. As an example, consider youth "beehive" soccer; 20 bodies and 40 legs, all within 10 yards of the ball. Although it may be difficult for parents to accept, the fact is, it is next to impossible to pick the star of the future from a group of 8 or 10 year olds. If that is the case, why not just leave them alone so they can have fun? Rather than forcing children to adapt to games as seen and practiced by adults to meet their ego needs, youth sports programs should be adapted to meet the needs of children. In short, it is time to give youth sports back to the children.

But how will our children manage without adults supervising their athletic activities? Quite well, thank you. 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 when adults organize and administer their games.

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 barely move. By the end of the game, most players have never touched the ball. If left to their own devices, children will agree amongst themselves that the dominant player either not pitch or pitch with his or her opposite arm.

The primary goal of games organized by children is to play the game. That being the case, children will make the necessary adjustments to keep the game interesting and fun so everyone will continue to play. Without adult enforced structure, rules, and expectations, there is nothing besides the children actually wanting to play for fun holding the game together.

How do we restructure youth sports programs to give the games back to the children? "Deorganize" leagues for children 13 and under. In such leagues, after a brief period of fundamental skill instruction, say 25% of total time, leave the kids alone. Let them pick their own teams, make their own rules, and mediate their own disputes. Other

than a safety official, adults should not be permitted to coach, instruct, or even watch. Leave the kids alone. They will do just fine!

To make youth sports “about the kids”, parental responsibility should end with providing a safe playing venue. Give the kids a place to play, whether a gym or field, provide an adult supervisor trained in first aid, and get out of the way. Let them manage their own games. As a result, they will begin to develop those personal skills – organization, conflict resolution, leadership, management, and mediation – that make participation in athletics valuable.

While adults may cringe at denying children their "expert" coaching and administrative advice, the fact is, children’s interpersonal skills will develop more if they are left to manage their own games. And, without adult intervention, the games will be closer, more interesting, and most important, more fun. That is, after all, the reason we have them play sports, isn’t it?

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