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# Sports Illustrated Features

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# Sports Should Belong to Kids, Not Parents

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
NOVEMBER 8, 2004

DEAR PARENT:

Thanks for the opportunity to work with your child this season. I hope we can have some fun together.

First, I want you to know I fully understand that nothing is more important to you than the well-being of your sons and daughters. Like all good parents, you want the very best for them—in school, in their young social lives, in their extracurricular activities and, of course, in sports.

I also want what's best for your child, as well as for all of his teammates. And to ensure a good experience for everyone, I'm going to need your help on a few key issues.

For starters, we need to remember the season belongs to the kids, not us. Your days as a budding athlete are behind you now, so don't use your child's sports as a chance to relive your glory years. Support him in good games and bad games, and don't add to the pressure on him by asking him to carry on your personal aspirations.

When you do look back on playing sports as a kid, did you ever strike out with the bases loaded, miss a key free throw or shoot the puck wide of an open net? Chances are, you did. Making mistakes is a reality for all athletes, regardless of age. But one of the lessons of sports is in working hard to overcome missteps. Perhaps you have forgotten that. So this season, if your son has a tough game, give him a reassuring smile instead of a scowl. Praise his effort instead of disparaging him for "letting you down." As his coach, I'm going to stay as positive as I can, and I hope I can count on you to do the same.

Also, know that it's my responsibility to help your son identify his athletic strengths, while also working with him to develop aspects of his game that need some polishing. Please give me the freedom I need to accomplish this. I have been coaching for a long time and have learned a lot, and I'm dedicated to passing those lessons along to your child.

Similarly, give me a chance to let your son play a variety of positions. While you may have always trained (or wanted) your son to play point guard, please don't worry if I decide to try him as a forward. Nothing is permanent when it comes to positions. Seeing the whole team in practice, I have a better sense of how he can help the team most.

I also understand that when you come to watch a game, you want to see your son play. And I know your son doesn't want to sit the bench. Sometimes I've wished that I had only enough players for each position. That way every kid would play every minute. But of course, that is never the case. I always have kids on the sideline, waiting to get their shot.

I'll make sure every kid plays as much as possible and, hopefully, helps the team do well. All the balancing and juggling of lineups isn't easy, so please bear with me. If your child truly feels that he's being shortchanged on playing time, encourage him to come and talk to me. (He can learn by standing up for himself rather than having you do it for him.) If you want to talk, that's fine too. We can always chat after practice, when I can listen closely to your concerns—not before, during or after games.

Youth sports have changed so much since we played them. The expectations and pressures are greater. Winning seems more important than having fun, and many parents think this is just the latest stop on the road to a college scholarship and a pro contract. But that will only happen for a very select few. So we just have to focus on helping every kid on this team have a terrific season. Let's work together to make sure that happens.

Sincerely,

Coach

Rick Wolff is chairman of the Center for Sports Parenting (www.sportsparenting.org), which offers sports parenting workshops to community and school groups.

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# Don't Let Kids Leave Teammates Hanging

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
OCTOBER 4, 2004

AN EXPERIENCED HIGH SCHOOL baseball coach recently told me about a predicament he confronted last spring. Before the season, one of his team's best players had come to the coach and said that while he loved playing varsity baseball, he also wanted to continue to play on his travel soccer team.

The youngster told the coach that the soccer team played mostly weekends in major tournaments where he could showcase his skills to colleges. The athlete acknowledged that there would be conflicts between his soccer and baseball schedules, but the coach didn't think the player really seemed to care. He just wanted to do both.

How did the coach handle the athlete's request? "At first I didn't know what to say," he told me. "I was just sort of stunned that a high school senior didn't understand the basic concept of team commitment and how it applied to him. So I explained that commitment to a team has to be 100 percent. It just won't work any other way. I told the youngster to make a choice, and he chose soccer."

End of the story? Not quite. The coach wasn't surprised when the player's parents complained. They didn't see a problem with the conflicts, even though the coach explained that it wouldn't be fair to players who were there for every game and practice. But when other parents complained—"He's one of our best players," they said. "You're penalizing the whole team, even though he'd be there for most of the games"—the coach began to wonder if his understanding of team commitment had become outdated.

Not too long ago these kinds of conversations never would have taken place. Young athletes wouldn't dream of ever missing a practice, much less a game. They understood what coaches meant when they enforced the team concept from the first week of practice onward. "It's not fair to everyone else if you miss a practice," coaches would bark at us. "If you aren't here and fall behind, the rest of the team loses out, because we're counting on you."

The problem can be traced to a change in the way kids are introduced to sports. These days, youngsters grow up playing two and sometimes three sports in one season. It's not unusual for an eight-year-old to play soccer, hockey and maybe tennis during the fall. Perhaps team commitment is not taken as seriously at these younger ages. Besides, it's the rare eight-year-old who has soccer practice or hockey practice five days in a row right after school. So it's a little easier to balance it all.

But as athletes advance through their community sports programs, the team commitment should become more of a priority. At the high school level, coaches usually want their athletes to be just as devoted to the team's success as the coach himself is. He isn't going to be too keen on letting a player show up whenever it's "convenient." Like that baseball coach, he'll expect everyone to be there all the time or not at all (with the exception of injury, illness or other such circumstances).

So what's the answer? While it may be difficult for talented young athletes to choose one sport during each season, in most cases, that's what they must do to be fair to their teammates and coaches. And if an athlete decides that he just doesn't think he can miss out on playing for a travel team, then he should make it clear to his travel team coach that his high school team comes first.

It goes beyond just fairness to others. The athlete herself benefits by being committed to a team. Players learn how to work together toward common goals and how to sacrifice personal glory (and ego) for the greater good of a team. Grinding away on a daily basis with one's coaches and teammates creates camaraderie and self-discovery.

But to make all this happen, everything starts with the athlete saying, "Yes, I will always be here."

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# Keeping Your Balance with a Crazy Calendar

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
AUGUST 23, 2004

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, my son played on a hockey team with the son of Marcel Dionne, the Hall of Fame scorer for the Red Wings, Kings and Rangers. Toward the end of the season, parents were discussing whether their kids would be signing up for a spring hockey league. The grinding schedule had lasted from mid-September through mid-March, and I wasn't sure that a spring session on the ice made sense for my son. So I asked Dionne how much hockey he played as a kid when he was growing up in Canada. "It wasn't too complicated," he told me. "We played hockey in the winter, baseball in the spring and soccer in the fall."

I kept that in mind as I encouraged my kids to play a variety of sports, but times have changed dramatically. These days, for many athletes (and their parents), the seasons don't stop. Kids play soccer on teams in fall, winter and spring, and then they go off to soccer camp in the summer. Just about any sport has year-round options, so they all overlap and often overextend kids who try to find time to compete in every sport they enjoy.

This isn't likely to change. In fact, it's up to you to help your family negotiate the nonstop sports calendar. Your kids can't lose sight of more important priorities, and the whole family shouldn't feel consumed by running from game to game, practice to practice, sport to sport.

During the critical developmental years when kids start playing sports more seriously, parents must try to teach their young athletes to maintain a sense of balance. While it's great that your kids enjoy athletics, it's essential that they, as NBA forward Grant Hill has said, "pack two parachutes in life." Hill's parents taught him the importance of varied interests. He excelled in school and learned to play piano. If basketball hadn't worked out for him, he would have had diverse experiences to draw from. Help your children prioritize their time among athletics, schoolwork and other activities. The good news is that kids who play sports generally manage time better, but they need parental support to learn this balancing act. Sit with them to map out all of their games and practices on the family calendar. It gives them a feel for the busy days and months ahead and what they must do to accomplish everything.

Taking this time with the calendar in advance can be as helpful for you as it is for your athlete. You can grasp how demanding the sports schedule is going to be on the rest of the family. Getting your son to and from practices and games can be a daunting enough task when he's just playing one sport at a time. Throw in a couple of other sports and perhaps another child with games of her own, and it can get downright chaotic. Unfortunately, too many parents don't think enough about how complicated these logistics can be. Preseason parental planning should involve everything from transportation (setting up carpools with teammates) to communication lines in case of emergencies or inclement weather. Organizing ahead of time can save you a lot of physical and emotional wear and tear later on.

Even if you do get organized, you'll still need a break eventually. So will your child, and you should encourage him to take one. Many young athletes think they need to play their sport (or sports) throughout the year to keep up with other players, but that's not the case. They should never feel pressured to take on so much that sports become more of an obligation than a fun activity. They will need some vacation time or simply a chance to step away and enjoy all the other aspects of being a kid. It will prevent burnout, and it will also refresh them for the seasons ahead.

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# Losing the Leadership of Our Classic Coaches

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
AUGUST 2, 2004

IT MAY SOUND LIKE A FAIRY TALE, but once upon a time coaches at all levels of youth sports were tough—and respected for it. They were fair, and their word was close to law. If you wanted to talk to Coach, you did so without Mom or Dad or the family attorney there. He didn't have to answer to overzealous parents for his decisions. Nobody ever thought of appealing sports concerns to the school's athletic director or the school principal, school board or superintendent.

Coach pushed you and your teammates to do your best, and you tried hard to live up to the words he used every day in practice: dedication, commitment, sacrifice, teamwork. You knew the coach would notice if you hustled and had the right attitude, and best of all was when he told you that he liked your work. For him to single you out was high—and rare—praise.

Parents went to games but rarely to practice. And I can't recall ever hearing about a dad calling a coach at his home during the evening or a parent getting in a coach's face about playing time. It just wasn't done.

Unfortunately, that's not the way it is anymore, and we're losing some great coaches as a result. With heavy parental involvement and interference today, many influential coaches who once played such important roles in the community are driven to give it up, citing the stress and pressures of the job. But aren't we parents the same people who used to revere the coach when we were growing up? Why in the name of "protecting our kids" are we depriving them of the same kind of coach/player relationships we often credit with helping us grow up?

It isn't easy for a parent to see a child getting the tough-love treatment from a coach whose style might seem abrasive or standoffish. You might want to step in and ask why the coach is treating your youngster in this manner. But think of it this way: You don't give your child everything she wants all the time. In fact, you often give her a dose of your own tough love. Even though your youngster might think you're being a little harsh, you know you have her best interests in mind. A good coach—even one with a gruff, off-with-the-kid-gloves demeanor—has the same thoughts and goals. He isn't giving his players a hard time just because he thinks that's what a coach is supposed to do. He's doing it because he wants the children to learn something, and he knows that mixing a little adversity with deserved positive reinforcement will help a youngster mature in important ways.

A good way to get a sense of a coach's effectiveness is to talk with his or her former players. They'll often say that Coach was tough when they played for him, that maybe they didn't even like him much. But now, looking back, they realize how much they learned from the coach—and not just about sports.

The next time your child encounters a coach with old-school style and ideals, take a step back before stepping in. Give the coach the time and space he's earned. If your son or daughter complains about something, don't overreact. Tell your athlete to be patient, to work hard. Remind your athlete that respect has to be earned from the coach; respect was never meant just to be handed out.

As a sports parent myself, I want my kids to have the same kind of coaches that I had when I was a young athlete. I've forgotten about the wins and losses in my sports career, but I remember my coaches. Art Mann. Eric Kantor. Karl Wiehe. Mike Cannold. Their lessons made a difference in my life. Interfering with a coach's leadership, no matter his style, could deny your kids similar experiences.

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# Burnout Takes Out Many Young Athletes

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
DECEMBER 29, 2003

IT'S NOT TALKED ABOUT TOO OFTEN, but the statistic is out there. Many parents who chauffeur their athletically oriented youngsters from one sport to another might not even know it exists. But they must confront it, because the number doesn't lie: According to the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University, 70% of kids will quit playing sports by age 13.

Nearly three out of four? How? Why?

It's perfectly harmless in some cases. Some youngsters are simply going through adolescence and discovering other interests. They want to try out for the school play or devote more time to their musical pursuits. Others may want to find a job to make some money or spend time with friends who aren't athletes.

What's troubling, though, is that so many quit because they've become victims of burnout. They say, "It isn't fun anymore." It can happen when a youngster is devoted to one sport year-round or jumps from sport to sport with many seasons overlapping. With the pressures on young athletes greater than ever, burnout is a huge concern.

It's a hard realization for parents who have spent countless hours driving to practices and a lot of money buying the best equipment. The almost daily commitment to youth sports has been part of their lives since their children were five or six years old. Now, just seven years later, the youngster no longer wants to get up early to swim or finds soccer practices tedious. Sports are more burden than pleasure.

Many well-intentioned moms and dads say, "Sure, my 12-year-old has enough energy to play for two soccer teams. She loves to play, and the extra games will give her added experience and a leg up on the competition. And it still won't be too much for her to also dabble in other sports like volleyball and softball." For many kids that may be true. But for others such devotion makes them tire of sports, and their parents often don't recognize it.

Parents are also surprised to discover that they have become part of the problem instead of the solution. They continue to put their own expectations for a child's athletic career ahead of the child's desire to have fun. They don't understand that teens want to try different things and start to make their own decisions—an important part of the maturation process. And sadly, parents don't change their tune even when they know the child wants to slow down. Too many turn up the heat instead of trying to understand what's happening. "C'mon," they say, "you have to work harder at your game if you want to get better." That is precisely the wrong approach.

Instead parents should talk with a youngster showing fatigue, disinterest or other signs of burnout. It's always healthy for kids to get their concerns and anxieties off their chests. Ask them what parts of sports they enjoy and if they get as much out of competing as when they started playing. If they don't, fine. Maybe it's time to take a break. Let them decide what to do, and support the decision they make.

If they do want to keep playing, help them avoid burning out again. Tell them it's O.K. to scale back their athletics and develop other interests, and encourage them to do so. There's never a better time to make sure they realize youth sports are about only one thing: having fun.

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# Stopping Sports' Most Troubling Tradition

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
DECEMBER 1, 2003

VARSITY HIGH SCHOOL softball players tell a sophomore that if she wants to make the team, she has to stand on a chair in the cafeteria and sing the school's fight song loud enough for everyone to hear it.

• After practice, all the junior varsity football players are brought into the locker room. The varsity players stick the jayvee players' heads in a toilet one by one and flush. The younger athletes are told that this is simply a longstanding tradition every team member must endure.

• All the freshmen trying out for the high school basketball team are lined up after practice, and whether they want it or not, their heads are shaved by older players.

In your mind, are these examples of hazing? According to a recent Alfred University study they are. The researchers defined hazing as "any humiliating or dangerous activity expected of you to join a group, regardless of your willingness to participate." And the study found that 45% of the high school athletes polled had been subjected to it.

True, some forms of hazing may be more extreme. The August incident involving a Long Island high school football team created horrifying headlines nationwide. So did the video of high school girls being victimized at a powder-puff football "ritual" in Illinois. These are shocking accounts of violence and despicable behavior. But the truth is, even mild hazing is hazing, and in 43 states it is against the law.

Parents and coaches, take note: You must face some very harsh realities about this problem.

First of all, as the Alfred study shows, hazing is widespread. Second, you must realize that hazing doesn't have to be a brutal attack. As mentioned, certain rituals may be intended in good fun, but many coaches will tell you that a very slippery slope takes mild, good-natured hazing to assault. Third, contrary to popular belief, hazing doesn't bring teams closer together. In my experience, it usually has just the opposite effect. Kids often end up hating those who put them through it. And finally, the physical healing from a hazing attack often occurs quickly, but the psychological scars can stay with someone for years.

Unfortunately, too many people still see hazing on sports teams as a harmless all-American tradition, whether it is at the high school, college or even pro level. But now is the time for parents and coaches to work together to stop it.

First, coaches must explain to the veteran players on their teams in preseason meetings that hazing ruins unity, hurts kids and breaks the law. Let them know that all forms of hazing are wrong and insist that it's their responsibility to break the chain. Then, parents, be sure you reinforce the coaches' messages. Ask your kid if he's ever been a hazing victim and let him know that it is a serious, punishable crime. If your kids are older players on a team, encourage them to start a new tradition of looking out for the younger kids instead of hazing them. No more freshmen having to carry all the equipment. No more shaved heads.

The anti-hazing message must be repeated so every kid hears it. As Hank Nuwer, a scholar who has written several books on the topic, says, hazing is not a "rite of passage"—it's a "wrong of passage." Hazing is one sports tradition that should be put to rest for good.

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# The Gender Line Shift Shouldn't Cause a Rift

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
SEPTEMBER 1, 2003

IN 2002, A FEMALE WRESTLER FROM Wirt County, W.V., made it all the way to the high school boys' state championship match. On the flip side, a male athlete in Massachusetts earned headlines recently by starring for his high school's field hockey team, and another, in Washington D.C., played girls' lacrosse because his school didn't have a boys' program.

According to the National Federation of State High School Associations, 2,870 girls played prep football in the 2001–02 school year, and 1,141 were on baseball teams. Similarly, about 2,200 boys played traditionally female sports in 2002.

More than ever before, girls and boys are sharing high school ball fields, courts and ice rinks. These athletes aren't necessarily trying to become "pioneers" for their genders. They just want to play a sport they enjoy. And while most parents and young athletes themselves have no qualms about boys and girls playing on the same teams when the kids are younger than 11 or 12, it often becomes an issue for parents when gender lines are blurred on the more competitive high school varsity levels.

But it shouldn't be cause for alarm. Because they compete together at the younger ages, I find that today's teens are generally quite accepting, and even supportive, of teammates and opponents of the opposite sex. If it isn't a big deal to the kids, it shouldn't worry parents who grew up in a time when sports were much more strictly separated.

That's not to ignore the sensitivities these situations can create—sensitivities you should discuss with your child up front. Be honest with them. Point out that they'll have to change in separate locker rooms, that they may be taunted by fans (and even opposing parents) during games, and, of course, that the coach is obligated to treat him or her just like every other kid on the team. Don't expect any special favors. Also remind your son or daughter that they could meet some initial resistance. Sure, kids are more open-minded today, but some may still be skeptical, and total acceptance could take a little time.

And keep in mind the health factors. There's no question that many female athletes can physically handle contact sports such as wrestling, ice hockey or football. Parents must make certain, though, that they and their children fully understand the risks involved with competing against mostly bigger and stronger opponents. You should talk this over not only with your child, but also with your child's doctor.

Lastly, when boys and girls compete, there's the potential "shame" of "getting beat by a girl." Teenagers being who they are, this can be a tough blow to your son's self-esteem, and you must help him put it in perspective. At first, be sensitive and give him some space, but later on in the evening see if you can get him to talk about his feelings. The more he talks, the better off he'll be. And remind him that she actually was no different than any opponent: She trained hard and is an experienced competitor. She's probably beaten many boys. And he may not want to hear it, but he should understand—as should everyone—that female athletes have come a long way in the three decades since Title IX became law. In many instances, their level of skill and athleticism exceeds that of boys and men the same age.

If your kids want to cross traditional gender lines to play a sport, make sure they grasp these potential issues. Then just be as supportive as possible, because it might not be easy for them.

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# Pesky Parents Can Push Quality Coaches to Quit

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
MARCH 3, 2003

In each of John Nicol's five years as boys' lacrosse coach at Yorktown (N.Y.) High, the Cornhuskers won the sectional championship. Under Nicol's leadership Yorktown, one of the nation's elite lacrosse programs, sent dozens of athletes on to play in college.

But the success came with a catch: a nightly stream of phone calls from parents. They would call his home to ask what he was doing to get their kids scholarships or to nag about their kids' playing time. These parents, who often took confrontational and accusatorial tones, so aggravated Nicol that he decided to leave Yorktown High. "I'd tell the kids to tell their parents not to call, and they still would," he says. "I just got fed up." Yes, even with all the wins and trophies, Nicol walked away last year.

He exemplifies an upsetting trend I've noticed. Many outstanding mentors for young athletes are leaving the youth and high school ranks not because they don't enjoy working with kids anymore. Not because they receive little or no pay for their efforts. Rather, they are hanging up their whistles just to escape the maddening barrage of calls from overly demanding parents.

Obviously, parents, you have the right to talk with the coach about what's best for your youngster. But be considerate of these men and women who dedicate so much of their time to helping your children. Remember that coaches have lives of their own.

Besides, everyone can communicate in other, more mutually beneficial ways. First, a preseason meeting can help manage expectations and answer in advance many of the questions that surface as a season goes on. All coaches should have these meetings, and all parents should attend them. (A Preseason Meeting Can Set The Stage For Success, Sept. 9, 2002, SI.) Also, as kids get older they—not their parents—should talk with coaches when concerns arise. Learning to stand on your own two feet is an important part of growing up. (Let Your Athlete Resolve Problems With Coaches, June 10, 2002, SI.)

But if parents insist on interacting directly with coaches, e-mail could be the most productive way to do so. This might sound like an overly simplified solution, but it has many advantages.

At the start of the season, the coach should still tell parents his phone number, but with a caveat: It is to be used ONLY for urgent matters requiring immediate attention. The coach will address all other comments, questions and concerns solely via e-mail. He should give out his address, a promise to log on as frequently as possible, and rules restricting parents to two messages per week and no more than 50 to 75 words per note.

Primarily, e-mail eliminates the emotion that often clouds conversations between parents and coaches. Fired-up parents frequently hear only what they want to hear, not the constructive criticism good coaches are trying to pass along. And embattled coaches can lose their tempers and shoot back with damaging comments, making a bad situation even worse. E-mail also provides a firm record of a discussion, which can help clear up future misunderstandings. And uncivil tones, unfounded accusations and unrealistic promises are less likely if everyone knows proof is just a print command away.

E-mail isn't a perfect solution, but it could help save the sanity of good coaches being driven to quit by overbearing parents. "The Number 1 negative part of the job is that interference," says Nicol, now a lacrosse assistant at Pace University. "It happens everywhere, and here's the bottom line: People are not knocking down doors to take these jobs. It's not worth it anymore."

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# Make Sure Officials Get Their Deserved Respect

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
DECEMBER 9, 2002

THE HIGH SCHOOL BASKETBALL referee knows the game he's working on Friday night is a big one. The teams, coaches and fans are going to be psyched. But he's not nervous. For starters, he's fully prepared. He has reffed for a long time, and he knows by heart the rules of the game. Sure, he gets paid a few bucks for his efforts, but it's certainly not about the money. He just loves hoops, and he takes great pride in calling an honest, objective, clean game.

The contest is a nail-biter, and the outcome hinges on one close call he makes. To do so impartially, he relies upon his years of experience, his instincts and his sense of fairness. But as happens with all close calls by officials, one side of the gym erupts in instant elation, and the other side erupts in immediate disappointment and anger.

He's lucky it isn't worse. For years fans would just grumble a bit if a call didn't go their way. Nowadays it can reach far beyond that, far beyond even screaming and yelling. How far? Consider that some officials have liability insurance in case someone sues them over a bad call or injury. And their medical insurance is vital too, with the alarming number of physical assaults they face. Bob Still, communications manager for the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO), has folders on incidents from across the country, and the folders keep growing. He gathers reports of despicable parents, coaches and players attacking officials or threatening them with bats, knives and guns.

"We happen to live in a society where we tend to blame other people when things don't go our way, and to me, that's a major reason why so many sports parents blame the ump if the kid strikes out," Still says. "It's not a question of whether the kid ever learned how to hit properly. He struck out looking because the ump didn't know the strike zone. The ump has become an easy target for frustrated parents who want to blame someone."

Does this mean all coaches, parents and players are guilty of unsportsmanlike behavior toward the refs? No, of course not. Thankfully most spectators and participants understand that they must respect the official and his judgment at all costs. But far too many do not.

NASO has more than 17,500 members nationwide, from youth league officials all the way to NFL and NBA referees. To help their members handle unruly crowds, NASO published a brochure called When They're In Your Face and How to Deal With It. It provides essential tips on defusing emotional situations. Sections include Seven Ways to Develop Thick Skin, How to Handle Verbal Challenges, When a Fight Breaks Out and If You're Attacked. It's sad that such a booklet even exists, but it's full of important information that should be mandatory reading for anyone involved in youth sports, not just officials. (To obtain a copy, go to www.naso.org.)

The brochure lets you see these situations from the official's perspective, one way to help make sure you and others treat officials properly. But a better way is to set an example. So the next time you're at your kid's game and you want to scream at or insult the officials, keep in mind that many rush from their day jobs to handle these youth and high school games. Remember that they're out there working as hard and sweating as much as the players. Understand that most officials take their jobs quite seriously, and they're doing their best to "call 'em as they see 'em." But most important, know that without them, there wouldn't be any games at all.

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# Prominent Athletes Can Teach Valuable Lessons

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
NOVEMBER 18, 2002

A FEW YEARS AGO the Green Bay Packers beat the San Francisco 49ers in a hard-fought, back-and-forth tussle at storied Lambeau Field. Steve Young was the quarterback for the 49ers, and Brett Favre called the signals for the Packers. After the game a television sideline reporter interviewed a muddied and battle-weary Favre. But Young, who had fought his way through the joyous cheeseheads surrounding Favre, briefly interrupted the interview to personally congratulate his counterpart on the win and for having played so well.

Of course, Young didn't have to do this. But he knew sportsmanship is a part of the game—of any game—whether you win or lose. Real athletes understand that they must maintain the integrity of the game. That's what counts above all else, and integrity always starts with sportsmanship.

These days it's hard to escape stories about selfish athletes who sacrifice sportsmanship for showmanship. But though you hear much less about them, many athletes are classy, and they can teach kids a lot.

The next time you and your youngsters watch a college or pro football game, pay attention to the players as the last few seconds tick off the game clock. You'll see exhausted opponents shaking hands and congratulating each other, often so sincerely that you can't tell who won or who lost. Such graciousness should be a part of any game, and you can tell kids about many other shining examples. How about when Chicago Cubs slugger Sammy Sosa came in from rightfield during a game with the St. Louis Cardinals to congratulate Mark McGwire on hitting home run number 62 in 1998? Or consider this one from an English Premier League soccer match two years ago: With the scored tied at one late in the game, West Ham United's Paulo Di Canio was surprised to see an open net as he prepared to receive a crossing pass. Then he noticed the opposing goalkeeper had collapsed to the ground in obvious pain. Rather than chip in the winning goal, Di Canio reached out and caught the ball.

This is true sportsmanship, a notion Anaheim Mighty Ducks assistant captain Dan Bylsma embraces on and off the ice. Aside from being a leader on an NHL team, Bylsma has also become a leader in the effort to educate youth sports coaches, parents and players on proper conduct. Bylsma has seen a tremendous increase in unsportsmanlike behavior from obnoxious parents and unruly coaches in youth sports. But rather than just shrug off his concerns, he's doing something about it.

Along with his father, Jay, Bylsma created IT PAYS—I Teach Positive Attitudes in Youth Sports. The organization promotes youth hockey as a fun activity that also can teach kids life lessons. IT PAYS lets parents and referees grade teams' sportsmanship, and the organization encourages respect for the game and for others by distributing brochures and behavior contracts that guide players, parents and coaches. Although IT PAYS is little more than a year old, it already has received an enthusiastic endorsement from the NHL, and its tenets are spreading throughout North America. (For more information check out the IT PAYS website at www.hockeyitpays.com.)

Sure, we always enjoy seeing an athlete win a gold medal, score an overtime goal in the NHL playoffs or hit a pennant-clinching home run. But even better is seeing one take an extra step to play the game the way it's meant to be played—to see one who knows winning and losing are only part of athletics and that sportsmanship is the real bottom line.

Rick Wolff is chairman of the Center for Sports Parenting (www.sportsparenting.org), which offers sports parenting workshops to community and school groups.

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# A Road Map to a Good Travel Team Experience

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
SEPTEMBER 30, 2002

PLAYING ON A TRAVEL TEAM can be a wonderful experience for a young athlete. Kids usually go through a series of tryouts to make these all-star-like squads, where they get to compete alongside other same-age athletes who share their passion and abilities. With good coaching and instruction they can really blossom in travel programs.

No wonder, then, that travel teams are so popular. Many communities have them for sports such as soccer, hockey, basketball, baseball and softball. Some start with children as young as seven, and many go through age 18.

But in addition to the usual concerns parents have whenever their kids play sports, highly competitive travel teams present unique issues you or your child might not have considered. To help you identify and understand these potential problems, here are questions to ask a travel coach:

**What's your philosophy on playing time?** When the local parks and recreation department runs a league, it often has minimum playing-time standards. But parents or coaches with no affiliation to the rec department usually organize travel teams, and they might not have any such requirements. If the travel coach tells you everyone on the team will get equal playing time, you're off to a good start. If, however, the coach says she wants to win, and to do so she's going to give the bulk of the playing time to the better athletes, then you must consider whether your child will play enough to thrive on the team.

**What are your credentials?** Unlike the many school or rec department personnel certified as coaches or physical education instructors, just about anyone can be a travel coach. That means you'll want to find out whether he has any background working with youngsters. Parents with kids who have played on the team before can give you good information about the coach and the way he runs the team. Make sure you talk to them before you and your child make any decisions.

**What's the time commitment?** Many travel teams have five- or six-month schedules that often coincide with the school year. So along with the important issue of possible burnout for an athlete always on the go, schedule conflicts could arise. The typical travel season includes one or two practices during the week with games on weekends, even holidays. Of course travel coaches expect their players to make every game and practice. If this is going to be a problem for your child, talk to the coach. (Also consider your own schedule because driving to games can sometimes take up to a few hours each way.)

**How many kids will make the team?** Based on the coach's answer, does your child have enough of a chance to make the team to justify the investment it would take? And while you hope the coaches would fairly decide which players they'll keep, you have no guarantee. The coaches' kids could get preferential treatment, further shrinking the number of "available" roster spots.

**What about the cost?** Signing up for the local youth league might require $50, but a travel team can charge a few hundred for uniforms, refs, field fees and tournament dues. And it can get even more expensive. A travel hockey team, for example, might cost a couple thousand dollars with the added expense of having to rent weekly ice time in the local rink.

**Will my kid have fun?** This ultimately is the most important question, and you should think twice if the coach responds by saying, "If the kids win, they'll have lots of fun." That philosophy should always raise a red flag about any coach.

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# A Preseason Meeting Can Set the Stage for Success

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
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THIS COACH ONLY PLAYS A HANDFUL of kids. Why didn't he tell us parents that before the season began?"

• "My daughter always gets benched because she has to miss practice on certain days. But I don't have a full practice schedule, so what can we do?"

• "My son and I didn't know the coach's policies on discipline, and now he's punishing my kid for breaking a team rule that we've never heard about before!"

If you're a coach fielding these complaints or a parent making them, there's a good chance you didn't grasp the importance of preseason meetings.

For coaches at any level of youth sports, the first date to put on your schedule every season is a meeting with the parents and players. It might only take 15 or 20 minutes, but it can set the tone for the whole season by letting you communicate your coaching philosophy, your approach to practices and games, and, most important, your expectations for the players.

For parents, attending the meeting is vital. Understanding right away where the coach stands will help prevent disruptive disputes during the season that keep your kids from enjoying their sports experience. Don't let yourself be blindsided by decisions and situations the coach discussed months before.

**Coaches:** Give the kids and their parents plenty of notice so they can be at the meeting. Make it clear that you want both parents to attend because you'll be discussing their behavior at practices and games as well.

Start the meeting by handing out practice and game schedules, a team roster with phone numbers, a list of equipment needs and their costs, and directions to away games. Also, if you plan to have a "team parent," this is the time to ask for volunteers or introduce one you already have in place.

Then you should review league rules, which requires some preparation. Beforehand you'll have to check with the league board of directors regarding such regulations as guaranteed playing time, eligibility questions and mandatory equipment.

If your league or team has a code of conduct, go over each part of it carefully and make certain every child and parent signs it and gives a copy back to you. Remind them this is an important contract into which they have entered.

Finally, talk about your coaching philosophy—how you will work with the kids and what everyone can expect from you in terms of issues like discipline, playing time and commitment. This is the best way to prevent future misunderstandings.

When you're finished, be sure to give everyone your telephone number and/or e-mail address. You might also want to include certain times during the week when you know you will be home and available for their calls.

**Parents:** The preseason meeting is a conversation, not a lecture. When the coach has finished speaking, ask questions—questions about anything and everything you want to know, because this will be your best opportunity.

Perhaps most important, you might find in the meeting that the coach's philosophy clashes with yours. If it is clear to you that problems are on the horizon, this is the time to see if your child can play on another team in the league.

Regardless of wins and losses, the best seasons in youth sports are those that are fun for all the players, parents and coaches. A preseason meeting is a great way to start down the road to that kind of success.

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# Strength-Training Tips to Lift Young Athletes

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
AUGUST 12, 2002

LAST MONTH I GAVE PARENTS SOME pointers on teaching their young athletes about the dangers of steroids (July 8 issue). Using drugs to build a more muscular frame is certainly a terrible mistake. But there's nothing wrong with active youngsters' trying to increase their strength, because they can do so in healthy ways. Here's how.

Most people used to believe that kids shouldn't lift weights until they were at least 16 or 17. Any younger than that, the thinking went, and they could seriously damage their developing bodies. Some even thought lifting could stunt a youngster's growth. But times have changed. Fitness coaches and pediatricians now generally agree that children ages 12–14 can start working with weights, and some experts say it's O.K. to begin even younger. Dr. Michael Axe, author of *Weight Training: Designing a Program for Children and Adolescents*, says his three kids all started at age seven. "The point of importance is that they're mature enough to know how to do it safely," Axe says. "And the equipment has to be the size for young children. That means the parents have to make special investments."

Parents also must make sure the youngsters aren't lifting on their own. "They should do so only under the strict supervision of a qualified trainer," says Greg Brittenham, a New York Knicks assistant coach who directs the team's training and conditioning. "And make your child's doctor aware of it."

The value of training with weights extends beyond the obvious. Along with building muscle, when done correctly and using a full range of motion, it can also improve bone structure and density and help develop a youngster's flexibility, exposing another old myth—that lifting weights has the opposite effect.

Brittenham and others in his field advocate a more functional approach to strength training for kids. Introduce them first to basic exercises that have little or no weight. The emphasis must be on using proper technique. As they get older, the weights can gradually get heavier and the number of different activities can increase. "I like a youngster to develop a strong foundation for his or her body, and a good, solid program to do that includes working with medicine balls, stability balls, balance boards and so on," Brittenham says.

He recommends that kids do at most three sets of eight to 12 repetitions for each exercise. They shouldn't lift more than three times a week, and they should never sacrifice technique for additional reps or weight. For safety reasons, Brittenham also discourages youngsters from lifting any weights over their heads or faces or any other lifting that unnecessarily strains their spines (for example, bench presses and shoulder presses).

According to Cedric Bryant, the vice president of educational services at the American Council on Exercise, kids ages 11–13 can begin doing some of the more traditional strength training exercises, but "really keeping the resistance loads light," he says. "When they hit about 14 or 15, you can start to think more in terms of some developmental-type resistance training programs. Then when they're 16 or older, they can move to entry-level adult programs."

And what can parents tell the skinny teenager who weight trains all summer but is disappointed in the fall when he doesn't see bulging biceps? "Relax," Brittenham says. "Just because you don't immediately see the results of your strength training doesn't mean it's not working. It's just that your body's hormones may not have fully kicked in yet to make those muscles pop out. But don't worry—you are getting stronger, and that's what counts."

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# Sensible Solutions for Playing-Time Disputes

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
MAY 13, 2002

THIS PAST WINTER the Blind Brook High boys' basketball team went 28–1 and won the New York Class C public school state championship. Even so, the school let coach Jeff Charney go after the season, his 13th as head coach and 25th at Blind Brook.

The roots of Charney's firing go back to the previous season. The team went to the sectional final, but a few influential parents, upset over their sons' lack of playing time, complained to the school board. As a result Charney was told this season would be his last. The state title couldn't save his job, even though he claims he tried to rotate all the players as much as possible.

As Charney's dismissal shows, playing time is one of the biggest issues facing coaches, parents and players in youth sports—especially as kids get older. When they advance into more serious middle and high school competition, winning becomes a bigger priority, and therefore the better athletes see more action.

Problems often erupt because a parent believes his or her child has more talent than some of the starters and whines, "Why can't the coach see that?" Parents will even badmouth other kids on the team in a thinly veiled effort to boost their own kid's stock. Such juvenile behavior does more harm than good, and you can approach playing-time debates in much better ways.

First of all, follow your child's lead. Sure, every athlete wants to be on the field. But the kids themselves are at practice every day and usually know best who deserves the most PT. So if your son or daughter isn't upset, you probably shouldn't be either. In Charney's case, "the kids knew exactly their status, but the parents didn't want to understand that," he says. "They just interject right away and say, 'My kid should be playing.'"

When your child truly feels shortchanged, suggest that he talk with the coach on his own. Handling situations like these without you will let him develop self-confidence and courage. You can help him rehearse what he wants to say, but give him the first chance to chat with the coach.

If that conversation doesn't clear up the matter, you can follow up with the coach. Just make sure you go see him with a level head, and always remember he ultimately decides who plays when. You must respect that even if you disagree.

In discussing the issue with the coach, don't try to argue that your child should play more. Instead be ready to listen attentively. Don't expect promises of increased minutes or innings, but ask him to carefully explain how your child must improve to earn more PT. Only when you hear what the coach has to offer can your son or daughter start to make progress toward getting a bigger piece of the action.

Parents also must realize how difficult it is for any coach to balance winning with ensuring everybody plays. Of course, it's easy for a coach to get all the players into lopsided games. Devising a rotation that keeps everyone happy in the close ones is much harder.

Coaches should make it a habit to get everyone off the bench at some point, even if it's just for a minute or two. Breaking a sweat and getting the uniform a little dirty lets kids walk away feeling they really contributed to the team's cause. And on days when the game gets out of hand, those second-string kids should get even more playing time.

The smart coach also knows that when he or she gives kids a chance, they'll usually step up and play better than expected. When the coach shows some real confidence in the player's ability to compete, more times than not, the youngster will respond in a positive way. Then everybody wins.

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# Give The Heave-Ho to Outrageous Behavior

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
DECEMBER 10, 2001

CONSIDER THESE recent news stories:

• A father, bursting with anger over the outcome of a youth soccer game, head-butts the ref and knocks him out.

• Emotionally charged parents at a kids' baseball game face off in a shouting match and then start throwing punches. The police are called to quell the riot.

• A father, upset with his son's lack of playing time in a hockey game, knocks the coach to the ground and threatens to kill him.

These are just a few examples of sports parenting rage, a blight that's now out of control. For all of us moms and dads and, alas, our kids too, this kind of outrageous behavior has become all too common.

But where did it come from? After all, it wasn't around when we were growing up. I don't recall parents going ballistic at our games. Sports parenting rage occurs when people invest too much time, emotion and self-identification in their kids' athletic pursuits. I think parents are so watchful and protective that when they see their little one get knocked to the ground in a soccer game, become the victim of a bad call in baseball or get shortchanged on playing time, their blood pressure skyrockets into rage range. And when that boiling point is hit, the parent loses control and lashes out at the ref, ump or coach with a blast of uncontrolled anger.

Clearly, something must be done. Fortunately, in more and more communities around the country, recreational directors and youth-league commissioners are working to keep parents in check. Here are three suggestions to help curb this problem:

• **Mandatory training seminars for the parents.** These sessions aren't about coaching strategies; they teach parents how to deal with the emotional ups and downs of watching their kids play sports. Jupiter, Fla., was the first community to make it mandatory for all parents of youth-league baseball players to attend this type of two-hour counseling seminar. If a parent doesn't show up, the child can't play in the league. The first-year results of these seminars were quite promising in terms of keeping parents on their best behavior.

• **Silent Weekends.** This unusual concept was first introduced in a kids' soccer league near Cleveland. Basically, parents (and coaches) are told they can't make any negative noise at games. Occasional supportive applause or light praise is O.K., but that's it. Many communities have since copied this idea; in fact, some towns even hand out duct tape or all-day lollipops to keep parents quiet. Hey, anything that works …

If your town hasn't tried a Silent Weekend, I urge you to. You'll be amazed at your ability to hear kids communicating with each other and even occasionally laughing at how much fun they're having. Too often those wonderful sounds are drowned out by the parents' hooting and hollering.

But here's my real question: Why not make every weekend a Silent Weekend?

• **Zero tolerance.** This is the most potent approach of all. Zero tolerance lets the ump or ref stop the game at any point if he or she feels a parent or coach is getting out of hand. The ref then has the power to toss the offensive adult from the area, on the threat of forfeiting the game to the opposing team.

Yes, this takes a little guts from the ref or ump (especially if the arbiter is a teenager). But once a league mandates zero tolerance, and its refs start bouncing loudmouths, it's amazing to see how quickly the rest of the crowd behaves itself.

Sadly, sports parenting rage is a problem that isn't going away soon. Thus, the time has come for you and your community to address the issue before somebody gets hurt.

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# Are Supplements Safe for Your Young Athlete?

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
NOVEMBER 26, 2001

YOUR YOUNG FOOTBALL PLAYER comes home with big plans for his future. "Dad," he says, "I'm 5′11″ and weigh 170 pounds. That's O.K. for high school. But if I want to be a star, I have to get bigger and stronger."

"And how are you going to do that?" you answer with a bemused smile.

"No problem," he says. "I've heard about nutritional supplements that can increase my bulk and muscle strength in a matter of weeks. If I start now, I can add 25–30 pounds—maybe more—by next season!"

Uh-oh, you say to yourself, this kid wants to use anabolic steroids. Doesn't he know about the possible health risks? "Son, have you ever heard of a great pro football player named Lyle Alzado?"

"Yeah, Dad, I know all about him. He took anabolic steroids for years, then died from brain cancer."

"That's right, son. And when he was sick, he said he believed the cancer was caused by steroid use."

"But the stuff I'm talking about is safe."

"How do you know? And what exactly are we talking about?"

"Well, there are lots of brands," he says. "But the key ingredient is called creatine. You can buy it in a health store."

Right here is where you need to do some research. Go online. Talk to his coach. Even talk to a doctor. According to Dr. Jeffrey Gershel, associate professor of clinical pediatrics at the Jacobi Medical Center, Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City, creatine is a naturally occurring body substance that helps facilitate energy for muscle contraction. Manufacturers contend that increased creatine in the system leads to bigger, more explosive muscles. Dr. Gershel has found it is most popular with boys in strength sports like football, hockey, wrestling and lacrosse. Female athletes use it too.

Despite creatine's widespread use, a real controversy surrounds it, because nobody knows how safe it is. No studies exist on the long-range impact for children and adolescents.

But it's sold in stores, your kid says, so it must be safe, right?

Hard to say. Before the Food and Drug Administration can remove a nutritional supplement from the shelf, it must prove the product is dangerous. Until then, creatine manufacturers are free to sell it to anyone. And let's face it, teenage athletes who want to gain strength are a very desirable market.

Therefore, assessing the risk of taking creatine (or any other dietary supplement) is up to you and your child. But guidance does exist. Beginning last year, the NCAA stopped letting member schools give athletes creatine. Pac-10 commissioner Tom Hansen said, "Our scientists were concerned that there is not enough research to make us confident of the long-term effects of usage." The National Federation of State High School Associations has also weighed in: "To minimize health and safety risks to student-athletes, maintain ethical standards and reduce liability risks, school personnel and coaches should never supply, recommend or permit the use of any drug, medication, or food supplement solely for performance-enhancing purposes."

So what's the right answer here? Well, we do know that anabolic steroids are extremely dangerous for our kids. Do creatine and other dietary supplements like androstenedione (which is banned by the NFL, NCAA and International Olympic Committee) and ephedrine (banned by the NCAA) fall into the same category? Right now no one knows for sure. And it's possible that creatine will, in fact, prove to be quite safe.

While the jury is still out, you might want to urge your athlete to follow approved workout and nutritional regimens if he or she wants to get bigger and stronger. Better safe than sorry.

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# Players Should Follow Rules Off the Field Too

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
NOVEMBER 12, 2001

THE BIG GAME IS Saturday afternoon, and to get the weekend off to a rousing start, a student throws a party Friday evening. Lots of kids show up, including several team members. And, not surprisingly, there's plenty of beer in the fridge.

The next morning—game day—the head coach walks into the locker room and tells several of his players, "Guys, I heard there was quite a party last night ... and that alcohol was served. Were you there?"

The players gulp and admit they were. "Well, didn't all of you sign the Athletic Code of Conduct?" he asks.

Indeed they had, although some of the players insist they didn't drink any beer. "No matter," says the coach. "You should've known better than to be at a party where alcohol would be present. That's what the Code is all about." With that, the coach suspends all of them for the day's game.

Of course, the team loses. And that night, the coach's telephone rings off the hook. "How could you suspend my kid?" one parent complains. "Don't you know he's got a chance for a college scholarship?" Another chimes in: "That Code of Conduct doesn't have any real disciplinary power. It's just meant as a guideline, nothing else." Another parent protests: "The Code applies only to my kid's behavior on school property. It has nothing to do with what he does away from school, on his own time. And besides, he told you he didn't drink any beer."

Welcome to the increasingly complex world of high school athletics. Not only is this coach angry that his team lost the game, he's also upset he had to suspend some of his key players. Even worse, he now has to defend his actions.

What can he do? He cites the Athletic Code of Conduct, a one-page document in which the student-athlete promises to behave himself or herself during the season and to avoid such undesirable, even illegal, actions as drinking beer, doing drugs and smoking. Customarily, it is signed by the youngster and witnessed and countersigned by the athlete's parent or guardian.

Beyond that, however, the document usually doesn't spell out disciplinary action for violations. Even school districts that do specify punishments can run into problems. For example, one high school coach told me a senior came to him and confessed he had been drinking the night before a game. The coach never had any reason to suspect the youngster. Once the athlete came forth, the coach praised him for his honesty but had no choice except to suspend him. "I wonder," said the coach. "Did I send the right—or wrong—message to this kid? By being honest he ended up costing himself a game." True, but the coach was also honest in his execution of team policy.

Years ago, parents rarely challenged high school coaches over rules enforcement. Today, however, many of them have no reluctance at all. Some will even threaten legal action if they feel the coach has handed out a suspension that endangers their children's opportunities for scholarships or pro contracts.

So how should coaches regulate behavior and enforce discipline? For that matter, is it even a coach's responsibility or should it be a parental responsibility?

I believe Codes of Conduct are appropriate. As one coach told me, "In the first meeting of the year, not only do I go over my team rules, I also describe situations kids might encounter—beer at parties, smoking and dealing with respect for others."

Does this help? I asked. "Yes, it does. Just as we prepare as a team for our next opponent on the field, we also have to prepare for our concerns off the field." Parents, you should expect no less integrity from your children's coaches.

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# Cheating is an Age-Old Problem in Kids' Sports

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
OCTOBER 1, 2001

THERE'S AN OLD SAYING IN BASEBALL: "It ain't cheatin' unless you get caught."

The truth is, though, whether you get caught or not, cheating is still cheating and still wrong. Sports parents and coaches who circumvent the rules either to secure a win or give their children extra advantages are violating the most fundamental law of sports—that everybody should play fair.

Sports parents everywhere were under- standably outraged this summer when they learned a celebrated Little League pitcher was not 12 years old, as his parents and coach purported, but really 14. Moms and dads have the right to assume that their children are competing on level playing fields—that is, the parents and kids on the other teams are playing by the rules too. But sadly, that basic assumption isn't always correct.

For the record, at least, everybody agrees that faking a player's age is a strict no-no. It's more than a competitive issue; it can be a safety issue. But this is only one form of cheating. Other kinds of playing fast and loose with the rules take place routinely throughout our kids' leagues. Some of this cheating is obvious; most is more subtle. No matter what form or shape it takes, however, cheating is wrong in every way imaginable. And it's particularly abominable when it comes directly from the grown-ups who are volunteering to help our kids enjoy sports.

Cheating is usually undertaken by overzealous—and sadly misguided—coaches or parents who want to give their children extra advantages over their competition. What a shame! Even the youngest athletes know cheating is wrong—so why don't their parents and coaches realize it?

For example, what about the coach who tries to pull a few strings so his youth team just happens to have the best players, even though the league mandates that talent be equally distributed? What about the dad who takes charge of the league's All-Star team just so his own child will make the squad? What about the coach who fibs about a kid's home address so he or she can qualify for another (and presumably better) traveling team in the neighboring town?

Or how about my personal favorite: when two dads claim to be "best friends" and are eager to volunteer as co-coaches for the same team. And then—what a surprise!—the two best players in the league just happen to be their sons or daughters and thus end up on the same team.

Aren't these forms of cheating too? Of course they are.

I often wonder if the people who hatch these schemes honestly think that others are unaware of their shenanigans. In truth, these coaches and parents are merely lying to themselves if they believe no one catches what they're doing. It's a shameful business, and no matter how you view it, everybody loses.

If you're a parent or coach who has tried to skirt the rules, it is time to stop what you're doing, look at yourself squarely in the mirror and ask why you've lost your perspective on what sports are all about. Remember, you're teaching young athletes that it's O.K.—indeed, even a good thing—to cheat to win, achieve and otherwise get ahead in the world. Ultimately, the problem is this: A victory, no matter how great, always feels hollow if the winner knows he cheated.

We should teach kids that there is no shame in losing. Defeat, like victory, is just a part of sports, and both offer important lessons. But if you compete and cheat, be prepared to suffer the consequences. As another old saying accurately points out, "Cheaters never win, and winners never cheat."

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# Don't Turn Your Child Into a Sports Specialist

BY RICK WOLFF

AS SEEN IN SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
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NOT VERY LONG AGO, I overheard this all-too-frequent conversation between a soccer coach and one of his top players:

"Son, I know you enjoy playing a variety of sports, but if you want to become something special in soccer, I strongly advise you start playing the sport year-round and give up all those other sports."

"But, coach," the young man answered, "I enjoy playing soccer, but I also like playing baseball and basketball. And I'm good at those sports, too."

"I understand. But if you specialize in soccer, who knows how good you could be?"

The confused athlete didn't know what to say. After all, he was only 12 years old.

When I speak around the country, one question always pops up: When should my child begin to specialize in just one sport?

To be sure, this is a valid question. But I'm disturbed by its implication that a youngster should focus on just one sport if he or she really wants to get ahead in competitive athletics. I disagree with the notion that as soon as young athletes decide which team sport is their one and only true calling, they should devote themselves to it.

The fact is that most kids who are athletic tend to enjoy a number of sports. Their seasonal interests might favor football or soccer in the fall, basketball or hockey in the winter, and baseball or lacrosse in the spring. Nevertheless, some parents simply don't want their kids to enjoy this sports potpourri. They believe that if their children focus on one sport for 365 days a year, they'll develop superior skills more quickly.

While this athletic theory of "keeping up with and getting ahead of the Joneses" may make sense to some, it doesn't explain why so many well-known athletes didn't take the "singular obsession" path to athletic success. Consider these examples: Cal Ripken Jr. was an all-state soccer player in high school before he signed to play professional baseball. Deion Sanders, football and baseball professional, was an all-state basketball player in high school. All-Star pitcher Tom Glavine was so accomplished in ice hockey that the NHL drafted him out of high school. Jackie Joyner-Kersee was a star basketball player in high school before becoming an Olympic gold medalist in track. And Cynthia Cooper, the two-time MVP of the WNBA, didn't even pick up a basketball until she was 16.

You get the idea. If your child is an excellent athlete with the constant desire to improve, it doesn't make much difference if he or she decides to specialize in a sport at an early age or plays several sports along the way. Ultimately, youngsters who are fast enough, or strong enough, or talented enough, will make the grade in whatever sport they select. In the meantime, especially when it comes to team athletics, don't worry about pushing your child into a sport too soon.

Keep in mind that athletic burnout is a real concern, and according to most studies, kids who "burn out" usually do so in their teenage years—just when they should be enjoying sports the most. To them, playing a single sport on a continuous basis can often take the fun out of the activity. Before too long it goes from being "fun" to being "work." Individual sports seem particularly susceptible to this. And when a sport becomes work, that's when youngsters start to wonder whether they might want to simply walk away from it all.

Although most kids discover a sport or two they prefer by the time they're 13 or 14, there is no perfect age for specialization. Let your children tell you what sport or sports they want to play, as opposed to your guiding—or pushing—them. Remember, it's their childhood, not yours.

Rick Wolff is chairman of the Center for Sports Parenting (www.sportsparenting.org), which offers sports parenting workshops to community and school groups.

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# Let's Make Youth Sports Fun for Everyone Again

BY RICK WOLFF

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UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI law professor Doug Abrams is deeply interested in youth sports. In his spare time, the former Wesleyan University hockey goalie helps coach high school and "squirt" hockey teams. Youth sports, after all, can be a joyful and rewarding experience for everyone involved. But Abrams has another hobby, too. Every day he scans databases for reports of outrageous behavior at amateur sports events. Since 1998 he has come across hundreds of episodes, involving out-of-control parents, coaches, refs and even players. And these days, says Abrams, only the most egregious and offensive acts even make the news.

Whether it's an irate Dad who charges into a locker room and throws a punch at a hockey coach, a Mom who verbally and physically abuses a ref at a soccer game, or a high school basketball player who elbows an opponent in the face at the urging of his coach, it's clear that too many people have lost sight of the purpose and value of youth sports programs. They are a minority, to be sure, but they are spoiling it for the rest of us.

Once upon a time—not that long ago, really—kids were left to their own devices to play sports on sandlots after school. The two oldest kids acted as captains and chose equal teams. Everybody played. There were no uniforms, no refs, no scoreboards, no league standings, no trophies, and perhaps best of all—no parents. It was just like Charlie Brown's All-Stars.

If a dispute occurred, the game stopped, and after a few moments of debate, the teams would declare a compromise—a "do-over." The disputed play was repeated, and the game went on as before. (In this age of ultra-organized participation, how many kids even know what a "do-over" is?)

When the score became too lopsided in those sandlot games of yore, the two captains would rearrange the teams. Even then, as kids ourselves, we knew it was more exciting to play in a close game than in a rout. But the bottom line was that we had fun. Pure, simple, competitive fun.

So, if playing sports was such a joy when we were kids, how come many of us have lost sight of those ideals as grown-ups? Why are we depriving our own kids of the pleasures of sport? True, organized competition is not going away in our society—indeed, it offers many valuable attributes, safety consciousness among them—but I fear that our children's fun factor has been diminished.

I began writing Parents' Guide to Kids' Sports in this magazine six years ago from my perspective as a parent, coach, former athlete and pro team psychology adviser. There was great interest in the subject then, but it's even greater now, because, frankly, some of the issues are more important, more serious. Too many parents and coaches feel that anything goes when it comes to their kids in sports. The prospects of college scholarships and pro contracts only make the stakes higher.

Increasingly, parents are becoming intense and confrontational. Coaches are losing their cool or burning out. And kids themselves are becoming disenchanted and simply walking away from sports—leaving behind all the many advantages that athletic competition, at its best, can provide.

Now that this column has resumed to cover all ages of youth sports, I'll be writing about what can be done, what is being done, and what should be done to make the experience beneficial for everyone. Whether your youngster is just starting out in sports or is competing at the high school varsity or junior varsity level, now's the time to take the games back from those who ruin sports. Let's give the fun back to our children.

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