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## The Challenge Facing Parents and Coaches in Youth Sports: Assuring Children Fun and Equal Opportunity

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THE CHALLENGE FACING PARENTS AND COACHES IN  
YOUTH SPORTS: ASSURING CHILDREN FUN AND  
EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

DOUGLAS E. ABRAMS\*

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I thank Professor James R. Devine, Bob Bigelow and Kathy Spadone for their perceptive comments on drafts of this article. I also salute my first Wesleyan hockey coach, Hedding Professor of Religion, William A. Spurrier, longtime chairman of Wesleyan’s religion department and University Chaplain. Rev. Spurrier captained the Williams College hockey team in 1938-39, played for the New York Rangers organization during his graduate studies at Union Theological Seminary in the early 1940s and founded Wesleyan’s hockey program in 1955. Bill was a man of ethics and an aspiring coach’s role model, who shared his solid values about youth sports with me for three decades before he passed away in November of 1999.

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*Youth sports systems that are created for the greatest good of the greatest number of children will be the right choices for all children – from the child who appears to have the greatest athletic potential at a young age, to the child who may not show that potential until later, to the child who never shows any athletic talent.*

— Former Boston Celtics basketball player Bob Bigelow<sup>1</sup>

I. INTRODUCTION

Youth sports today brings both good and bad news. The good news is that organized sports programs enhance the vitality of communities large and small because twenty-five to thirty million children, nearly half of all American youngsters, join at least one program in any given year.<sup>2</sup> At some time during their childhood and adolescence, nearly all children have some experience with organized sports.<sup>3</sup> Outside the home and schools, no other activity reaches so many children from coast to coast.

The bad news is that about seventy percent of these youngsters quit playing by the time they turn thirteen, and that nearly all quit by the time they turn fifteen.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the dropout rate begins ac-

1. BOB BIGELOW ET AL., JUST LET THE KIDS PLAY 37 (2001).

2. See, e.g., FRACTURED FOCUS: SPORTS AS A REFLECTION OF SOCIETY 177 (Richard E. Lapchick ed., 1986) [hereinafter FRACTURED FOCUS]; JOY AND SADNESS IN CHILDREN'S SPORTS 10 (Rainer Martens ed., 1978); GLYN ROBERTS, *Motivation in Sport: Understanding and Enhancing the Motivation of Children*, in HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON SPORT PSYCHOLOGY, 405, 411 (Robert N. Singer, et al. eds., 1993). In 2000, there were 70.4 million children under the age of 18 in the United States. See FEDERAL INTERAGENCY FORUM ON CHILD AND FAMILY STATISTICS, AMERICA'S CHILDREN: KEY NATIONAL INDICATORS OF WELL-BEING 2001 2 (2001).

3. See, e.g., Bari Katz Stryer et al., *A Developmental Overview of Child and Youth Sports in Society*, 7 CHILD & ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRY N. AM. 697, 697 (1998); *Having Fun is a High Priority*, USA TODAY, Sept. 10, 1990, at 14C (estimating that only 1 in 20 children has played no organized sport).

4. See, e.g., FRED ENGH, WHY JOHNNY HATES SPORTS 3 (1999); LYLE J. MICHELI, SPORTSWISE: AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR YOUNG ATHLETES, PARENTS, AND COACHES 31, 128 (1990); TERRY ORLICK & CAL BOTTERILL, EVERY KID CAN WIN 15-16 (1975); RICK WOLFF, GOOD SPORTS: THE CONCERNED PARENT'S GUIDE TO COMPETITIVE YOUTH SPORTS 38 (2d ed. 1997); see also, Doug Carroll, *Coaching the Coaches*, ARIZ. REP., Jan. 18, 2000 (quoting Mike Pfahl, Vice President of the National Alliance for Youth Sports: "In any industry, if 70 percent of your clients are dumping you, then you should fix it").

celerating as early as age ten. When researchers ask youngsters why they quit, the answers reveal a national disgrace. The answers given most often are that practice sessions and games stopped being fun because parents and coaches imposed too much pressure to win, yelled at them for making errors and cut or benched less talented players.<sup>5</sup>

Some children drop out of a sport because they enrolled as an experiment and learned they did not like the sport after all. Particularly in the early teen years, some youngsters stop playing when they realize that they lag behind their peers in skills or strength, and others stop when they develop new interests or find part-time employment. Many of the children who cite "new interests" or "part-time employment," however, probably began looking elsewhere only after the adult pressure cooker spoiled their youth sports experience, or deprived them of meaningful participation. Children are smart enough to know that play is supposed to be fun and to grow dissatisfied when it is not.<sup>6</sup>

When we listen to the children's own reasons for quitting, the high dropout rate means that millions of child athletes quit early through no fault of their own, but because adults taking away the fun have made them miserable.<sup>7</sup> The adult-induced dropout rate

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5. See, e.g., D. STANLEY EITZEN & GEORGE H. SAGE, *SOCIOLOGY OF NORTH AMERICAN SPORT* 76 (Brenda Flemming Roesch et al. eds. 1978) (3d ed. 1986); JACK HUTSLAR, *BEYOND X'S AND O'S: WHAT GENERIC PARENTS, VOLUNTEER COACHES AND TEACHERS CAN LEARN ABOUT GENERIC KIDS AND ALL OF THE SPORTS THEY PLAY* 75 (1985); MICHELI, *supra* note 4, at 128; ORLICK & BOTTERILL, *supra* note 4, at 7-8, 20; Terry Orlick, *Evolution in Children's Sport*, in *SPORT FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTHS* 169 (Maureen R. Weiss & Daniel Gould eds., 1986); Robert S. Weinberg, *Why Kids Play Or Do Not Play Organized Sports*, 38 *THE PHYSICAL EDUCATOR* 71, 73 (May 1981); Mike Dodd, *Children Say Having Fun Is No. 1*, *USA TODAY*, Sept. 10, 1990, at C1. See generally Harold W. Kohl & Karen E. Hobbs, *Development of Physical Activity Behaviors Among Children and Adolescents*, 101 *PEDIATRICS* 549 (1998).

6. See M. J. Ellis, *WHY PEOPLE PLAY* 100 (1973) (concerning role of fun in play activities); see also WEBSTER'S THIRD NEW INT'L DICTIONARY 1737 (1971) (defining "play" as "to engage in recreational activity; amuse or divert," and defining "game" as "an amusement or pastime; diversion, play"); *id.* at 933 (defining "sport" as "something that is a source of pleasant diversion; a pleasing or amusing pastime or activity; recreation"); *id.* at 2206.; cf. *PGA Tour, Inc. v. Martin*, 121 S. Ct. 1879, 1903 (2001) (Scalia, J., dissenting) (noting that "it is the very nature of a game to have no object except amusement (that is what distinguishes games from productive activity)").

7. See Eryn M. Doherty, Comment, *Winning Isn't Everything . . . It's the Only Thing: A Critique of Teenaged Girls' Participation in Sports*, 10 *MARQ. SPORTS L.J.* 127, 129 (1999) (offering number one reason why children drop out of organized sports is because sports are no longer fun for them); see also Pohla Smith, et. al., *When Sports Aren't Fun for Kids Anymore*, *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED FOR KIDS*, Sept. 1997, at 13 (citing study by National Youth Sports Coaches Association stating kids quit sport programs because they are no longer fun).

also means that the nation squanders opportunities to teach millions of children valuable character lessons that can come from athletic competition.<sup>8</sup> Athletics, after all, can teach nothing to a child who has quit.

Too often, the damage is permanent because many children quit with their self-esteem so tattered that they despise athletics and avoid participating for the rest of their lives, even in such invigorating “carry-over” sports as swimming, bicycling and jogging. Lingering emotional scars deprive these dropouts of playing well into middle age and beyond, a substantial deprivation in light of the demonstrated health benefits of lifelong physical exercise.<sup>9</sup>

Before discussing some of the ways in which many parents and coaches hurt children in youth sports, we should place things in perspective. After coaching youth ice hockey for more than thirty years (including the last eleven as president of a youth hockey program), I firmly believe most parents and coaches want sports to be a positive influence on their children. I believe most parents and coaches do not mean to hurt child athletes. I believe most parents and coaches behave themselves during their children’s games and practice sessions.

But youth sports has also suffered from plummeting adult values in the past few years, and the free-fall shows little sign of slowing. For more and more parents and coaches, zeal to win eclipses any effort to provide fun or teach character lessons. Too many parents routinely seek special privileges for their children at the ex-

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8. See Doherty, *supra* note 7, at 129 (stating, “[p]sychological abuse can exist between a child/adolescent athlete and her parents. Parents use their athletes for their own gratification and exploit them because of it . . . . As a result, these athletes [may] suffer psychological and physical ailments which [may] have a debilitating effect on their lives.”).

9. See, e.g., UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, HEALTHY PEOPLE 2000 55 (1991). The United States Department of Health and Human Services stated that:

Regular physical activity increases life expectancy, can help older adults maintain functional independence, and enhances quality of life at each stage of life. The beneficial impact of physical activity touches widely on various diseases and conditions. Regular physical activity can help to prevent and manage coronary heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, osteoporosis, and depression. It has also been associated with a lower rate of colon cancer and stroke, and may be linked to reduced back injury. It is an essential component of weight loss programs.

*Id.*; see also *Humiliation of Ineptness on the Field Never Left*, L.A. TIMES, May 21, 2001, Pt. 5, at 4 (letter) (describing, for example, writer’s one-year Little League baseball experience, when coach played him only one inning all season: “I struck out and horribly screwed up a play in left field. For the remainder of the season, I was invisible to the coach. The shame and humiliation of that one night at age 9 never went away. I’m 50 now.”).

pense of other youngsters. Many parents and coaches hurt child athletes emotionally and physically, often without realizing the degree of their hurtful behavior. Additionally, more and more parents and coaches behave disgracefully during games and practices.<sup>10</sup>

If adults continue to deprive children of fun and equal opportunity in sports, we will pay a heavy price, both as individual families and as a nation. The intolerably high dropout rate demonstrates that child athletes will not put up with lost fun for long because youngsters have more ways than ever before to pass their free time. They can avoid overbearing adults by hanging out in shopping malls, surfing the Internet or sitting in front of video games or cable television. Regrettably, they also have the streets. Teenagers need a sense of belonging that comes from being part of a gang, and a sports team is like a gang. If adults continue to drive a few million youngsters to quit their sports teams by their early teen years, many of these youngsters will find their way to other gangs, or at least begin to run with the wrong crowd. The outcome will not be pretty.

Teenagers nowadays also have easy access to drugs and alcohol in and out of school.<sup>11</sup> If millions of youngsters continue to turn off on sports by their early teen years, many will turn on to something else, and we know what that "something else" might be.<sup>12</sup> "If my children get high on sports," parents tell me, "maybe they won't get high on you-know-what."

With the behavior of so many parents and coaches spiraling downward in recent years, adults with values need to view youth

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10. See, e.g., Patrick Connolly, *Spoil Sports: Whether They're Yelling at Coaches, Arguing With Referees or Giving Pointers*, TENNESSEAN, May 6, 2000, at 1D (quoting Fred Eng, president of National Alliance for Youth Sports, who concluded that in last five years, number of problem youth sports parents has increased from about 5% to about 15%).

11. See Richard Marosi & Theresa Moreau, *Teens' Abuse of Legal Drugs on the Rise*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 23, 2000, at A1 (noting that abuse of prescription pills and painkillers such as Vicodin, Ritalin and antidepressants is on rise on many school campuses due to easy access of drugs); *Teen Drug Use Unchanged; Smoking Drops, but More Students Are Taking Ecstasy*, WASH. POST, Dec. 15, 2000, at N8 (reporting that 14% of eighth graders and 30% of high school seniors drank five drinks or more in past two weeks; 15.6% of eighth graders, 32.2% of tenth graders and 36.5% of high school seniors used marijuana in past year; and 3.1% of eighth graders and 5.6% of high school seniors used drug Ecstasy in past year).

12. See Mary Wilds, *Project Helping Steer Children Toward Free Time Fun*, CHI. TRIB., Oct. 29, 1999, at 3 (quoting Sue Miller Lloyd, substance abuse counselor at one Chicago elementary school: "Children who do not take part in conventional activities such as sports sometimes end up in trouble with drugs.").

sports as a challenge.<sup>13</sup> Children face challenges in sports all the time – learning new skills, making the big play or getting the big hit. But principled adults face an even greater challenge. First, we must acknowledge that producing bumper crops of athletic drop-outs year after year is intolerable in a nation that firmly believes athletic competition enhances children’s physical fitness while teaching valuable character lessons.<sup>14</sup> Then we must find ways to keep sports fun for youngsters, must stop behaving in ways that drive youngsters to quit before their time, and must assure equal opportunity for all youngsters who wish to participate.

Many parents and coaches are failing miserably at this challenge. Psychologists have begun speaking about “youth sports rage”<sup>15</sup> as fistfights and other physical and verbal confrontations in-

13. See *Hills v. Bridgeview Little League Ass’n*, 745 N.E.2d 1166, 1194 (Ill. 2000) (“the unhappy truth is that violence in youth sports has become commonplace . . . . Acts of fistfighting, beating and even homicides involving parents, coaches and officials at children’s sporting events are appearing in the media with ever increasing frequency.”) (citing *Special Report: Out of Control*, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, July 24, 2000).

14. See, e.g., D. STANLEY EITZEN, *SPORT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY* 115 (1979) (discussing “the belief held by most adults that sports participation has positive consequences for youth”); EITZEN & SAGE, *supra* note 5, at 74 (discussing findings of researcher who reported “almost universal agreement among parents that children’s sports have primarily a positive effect on family life . . . Sports programs were also seen as aiding parents in socializing their children, in that it taught them the value of teamwork and discipline.”); Elmer Spreitzer & Eldon E. Snyder, *The Psychosocial Functions of Sports as Perceived By the General Population*, 10 INT’L REV. OF SPORT SOCIOLOGY 87 (1975) (reporting that 90% of respondents believed sports teaches self-discipline, 70% believed it encourages fair play, and about 70% believed it teaches good citizenship and respect for authority); Ben Brown, *Don’t Believe Old Myths About Sports*, USA TODAY, Sept. 13, 1990, at C1 (reporting USA TODAY/NBC poll in which 84% of parents said they thought “organized sports helps a lot in making child physically fit”); *Having Fun is a High Priority*, USA TODAY, Sept. 10, 1990, at 14C (reporting poll in which 84% of parents said youth sports helps children get physically fit, 74% of parents said youth sports helps children’s self-confidence, 76% of parents said youth sports helps keep children out of trouble, and 64% of parents said youth sports helps children learn to handle pressure); Mike Tharp et al., *Sports Crazy!*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., July 15, 1996, at 30 (discussing U.S. News/Bozell poll that reported 93% of Americans believe children learn value of teamwork from sports, and that 88% believe sports teaches children value of discipline and hard work); Tom Weir, *High School Sports Have a Place*, USA TODAY, Dec. 28, 1983 (discussing national survey finding that 77% of parents believe sports can teach their children important lessons children cannot learn in classroom).

15. See, e.g., Bill Dedman, *Where Children Play, Grown-ups Often Brawl*, N.Y. TIMES, July 29, 1998, at A10. The term derives from “road rage,” a label describing drivers’ aggression marked by anger, foul language and lack of self-control normally inappropriate in everyday life. See, e.g., *Road Rage: Causes and Dangers of Aggressive Driving: Hearing on H.R. 105-34 Before the Subcomm. on Surface Transportation of the Comm. on Transportation and Infrastructure*, 105th Cong. 59-60 (1997) (statement of Dr. Leon James, Professor of Psychology, University of Hawaii).

volving parents and coaches have disrupted youth leagues, frequently brought under control only by police intervention and actual or threatened criminal prosecution.<sup>16</sup> Brawling parents have even disrupted preschoolers' T-ball games.<sup>17</sup> In one such brawl precipitated by a dispute over an umpire's call, more than twenty parents and coaches spilled onto the field, swinging punches and tackling each other while bewildered children looked on.<sup>18</sup> Interviewed afterwards, some of the five-year-old T-ballers said they actually thought the adults were entertaining them by staging a wrestling match.<sup>19</sup>

Most victims of adult youth sports violence have emerged only with hurt feelings, cuts and bruises, or an occasional broken nose or split lip. After an informal Massachusetts youth hockey scrimmage in July of 2000, however, one player's father beat an opposing player's father senseless while the ten-year-olds watched in horror. Ironically enough, the attacker was enraged about rough play during the scrimmage. The victim, a forty-year old father of four, lapsed into a coma and died after being removed from life support.<sup>20</sup>

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16. See *Hills*, 746 N.E.2d at 1194 (containing situation where first base coach for Little League team was beaten and attacked by manager and assistant coach for opposing team); see also *Forrester v. WVTM TV, Inc.*, 709 So. 2d 23, 24 (Ala. Ct. Civ. Apps. 1997) (involving father's defamation suit against local television station that aired video of father yelling at his son, grabbing the boy and slapping him twice in his face when child was called "out" in Little League game); BIGELOW, *supra* note 1, at 67-69 (discussing assaults by youth sports parents); WOLFF, *supra* note 4, at 41-42 (same); Mary Lord, *When Cheers Turn to Jeers (and Tears): Moms and Dads as Spoilsports and Hoodlums*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., May 15, 2000, at 52; William Nack & Lester Munson, *Out of Control: The Rising Tide of Violence and Verbal Abuse By Adults at Youth Sports Events Reached Its Terrible Peak This Month When One Hockey Father Killed Another*, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, July 24, 2000, at 86 (discussing recent incidents); Alan Sutton, *Adults Losing Cool at Kids' Games A Growing Trend*, CHI. TRIB., May 19, 2000, at 16.

17. See, e.g., Anne Cowles, *Remember Parents: It's Only A Game*, ATLANTA J. & CONST., Apr. 8, 1999, at 15 JM; see also John Wilkens, *Good Sports? Adults Put More Emphasis on Winning But Kids Just Want to Have Fun*, SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE, Mar. 25, 2000, at E-1.

18. David Cazares, *T-Ball Umpire's Call Sparks Punches*, SUN-SENTINEL (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.), Sept. 2, 2000, at A1.

19. See *id.*

20. See, e.g., Patrick Cole, *Kids' Sports Turn Deadly Serious; The Fatal Beating of a Dad at a Hockey Rink Points to More Parental Violence At Youth Games, Experts Say*, CHI. TRIB., July 17, 2000, at 1; see also Douglas E. Abrams, *Sportsmanship: Must Parents Learn From Kids?*, THE RECORD (Bergen, N.J.), July 12, 2000, at L7. The attacker was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced to six to ten years in prison. See, e.g., Douglas E. Abrams, *The "Hockey Dad" Trial Indicts Adults' Violence*, PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER, Jan. 16, 2002, at A13; Douglas E. Abrams, *Six to 10 Years For Killing*, TORONTO STAR, Jan. 29, 2002, at A20.



Youth-league referees and umpires now often deserve hazard pay. Two years ago, a forty-six year-old Wisconsin Little League coach made headlines for punching a sixty-year-old umpire who refused to call a balk on an eleven-year-old pitcher.<sup>21</sup> Now press reports of so-called “referee rage” appear almost daily.<sup>22</sup> Parents and coaches have punched, kicked, shoved, slapped, choked, head-butted, spat on and stalked youth-league officials during and after games.<sup>23</sup> Parents and coaches have spewn obscenities, made officials run a gauntlet to leave the field, followed officials to their cars, destroyed their property and leveled threats against them and their families.<sup>24</sup>

The risk of physical injury to youth-league officials has become so great that some have begun carrying cell phones on the field for quick calls to the police.<sup>25</sup> One official arrives early to his assigned games so he can park close to the exit and tell security guards in advance the section of the field from which he will leave; then he removes his whistle immediately when the game ends so no irate parent or coach can grab it and try to choke him.<sup>26</sup> To provide a measure of protection, the National Association of Sports Officials

21. See, e.g., Dedman, *supra* note 15, at A10.

22. See *Ref Rage*, WALL ST. J., July 12, 2000, at A26.

23. See, e.g., John Haydon, *Loud Parents Can Make Referee's Life Miserable*, WASH. TIMES, May 27, 2000, at C2; Will Higgins, *Fans' Derision Has Driven Refs From the Game*, INDIANAPOLIS STAR, May 16, 2001, at B1; Keith O'Brien, *More Officials Calling It Quits*, HOUSTON CHRONICLE, Sept. 3, 2000, at 23; Keith O'Brien, *The Umpire's Empire Falls: More Referees Quit as Playing Fields Become Battlegrounds*, ASHEVILLE CITIZEN-TIMES (N.C.), July 23, 2000, at B3 [hereinafter *Umpire's Empire Falls*]; Ron Menchaca, *Setting Up Safeguards*, POST AND COURIER (Charleston, S.C.), Aug. 24, 2000, at 1; Jason Riley, *Tackling a Shortage of Referees*, COURIER-JOURNAL (Louisville, Ky.), Aug. 16, 2000, at 1; Manuel Roig-Franzia, *Parents Rage On Sidelines of Games*, WASH. POST, July 15, 2001, at C1; *Rude Parents Causing a Shortage of Referees*, DAYTON DAILY NEWS, Sept. 18, 2000, at 2B; Dave Wedge, *Head-Butted Hockey Referee Calls It Quits*, BOSTON HERALD, June 9, 2001, at 8; Danny Wells, *Look Out! Are Umpires Safe? Youth League Officials Hope Abuse Doesn't Go Beyond Words*, CHARLESTON GAZETTE, July 14, 2000, at 1B; Edward Wong, *New Rules For Soccer Parents: 1) No Yelling. 2) No Hitting Ref.* N.Y. TIMES, May 6, 2001, § 1 at 1; *Youth Coach Allegedly Attacked Umpire*, WIS. STATE J., July 12, 2001, at B3.

24. See Haydon, *supra* note 23 (discussing parents' behavior toward Youth League officials); Higgins, *supra* note 23 (same); O'Brien, *supra* note 23 (same); Menchaca, *supra* note 23 (same); Riley, *supra* note 23 (same); Roig-Franzia, *supra* note 23 (same); *Rude Parents Causing a Shortage of Referees*, *supra* note 23 (same); *Umpire's Empire Falls*, *supra* note 23 (same); Wedge, *supra* note 23; Wells, *supra* note 23 (same); Wong *supra* note 23 (same); *Youth Coach Allegedly Attacked Umpire*, *supra* note 23 (same).

25. See Amy Donaldson, *Referees Bear Brunt of Attacks*, DESERET NEWS, Oct. 16, 2000, at A1.

26. See Eleena De Lisser, *Abusive Fans Lead Amateur Umpires To Ask Courts, Legislatures For Protection*, WALL ST. J., Aug. 1, 1994, at B1.

(“NASO”) now offers assault insurance to youth-league officials.<sup>27</sup> The NASO also offers “When They’re In Your Face and How to Deal With It,” a thirty-two page primer advising referees and umpires about how to manage confrontations with physically or verbally abusive parents and coaches.<sup>28</sup>

Small wonder that many youth sports programs lack qualified referees and umpires because they cannot find enough adults willing to endure abuse from parents and coaches.<sup>29</sup> As one NASO official explained, “[i]t’s not worth risking your life for \$50 a game.”<sup>30</sup> With the supply of adult officials dwindling throughout the nation, programs have been forced to rely on teenagers, many of whom quit once they or their parents begin fearing for their safety at the hands of other parents.<sup>31</sup> In fact, teenage officials often bear the brunt of the abuse because parents and coaches see them as easy targets and think they can get away with it.<sup>32</sup>

Many programs have also lost qualified volunteer coaches unwilling to subject themselves and their families to parental abuse and intimidation that can resemble the threats referees and umpires face.<sup>33</sup> More than a dozen states have enacted legislation making it a crime to assault youth coaches and officials, and at least

27. See Dedman, *supra* note 15, at A10; see also Rick Reilly, *Bringing Parents Up to Code*, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, Feb. 28, 2000, at 88. Concerning the NASO Assault Protection Program, see NASO, *Sports Officials Security Program*, at <http://www.naso.org/benefits/sos.htm> (May 7, 2000).

28. See NASO, *When They Are in Your Face*, at <http://www.naso.org/books/nb-biyf.htm> (July 21, 2000).

29. See, e.g., Haydon, *supra* note 23 (discussing parents’ behavior toward Youth League officials); Higgins, *supra* note 23 (same); O’Brien, *supra* note 23 (same); Menchaca, *supra* note 23 (same); Riley, *supra* note 23 (same); Roig-Franzia, *supra* note 23 (same); *Rude Parents Causing a Shortage of Referees*, *supra* note 23 (same); *Umpire’s Empire Falls*, *supra* note 23 (same); Wedge, *supra* note 23; Wells, *supra* note 23 (same); Wong *supra* note 23 (same); *Youth Coach Allegedly Attacked Umpire*, *supra* note 23 (same).

30. Tim Dahlberg, *Advocates, Officials and Even Legislatures Are Trying to Curtail . . . Sideline Rage*, CHARLESTON DAILY MAIL, June 2, 2001, at PIC.

31. See Nack & Munson, *supra* note 16, at 86.

32. See Heather A. Dinich, *Team Suspended For Parents’ Threats*, WASH. POST, July 12, 2001, at B2; Kate Taylor, *Young Referees Suffer Abuse From Adults*, PORTLAND OREGONIAN, Dec. 21, 2000, at 1.

33. See, e.g., Edward Lee, *As High Schools Continue to Grow, Parents Take a More Vocal — and Confrontational — Role in Coaches’ Lives*, BALTIMORE SUN, Apr. 18, 2001, at D1; Bob Luder, *High Schools Losing Good, Young Coaches Because of Demands, Pressures*, KANSAS CITY STAR, Jan. 22, 2001, at C1; John Powers, *Trying to Check Hockey Parents: Leagues Are Frustrated By Abuse of Coaches*, BOSTON GLOBE, Feb. 9, 2001, at A1.

a dozen more states may soon follow.<sup>34</sup> The force of law now must restrain parents and coaches during children's games.

To maintain safety and civility, beleaguered youth sports programs now must divert attention from the children and waste time and money figuring out ways to control the adults. Some programs post security guards, often paid from funds that otherwise would be spent on the children.<sup>35</sup> Many programs have instituted zero-tolerance policies to curb adult violence and profanity.<sup>36</sup> More and more programs conduct mandatory preseason sportsmanship classes to teach parents basic civility.<sup>37</sup>

To muzzle overzealous parents and discourage coaches from benching less talented youngsters, some sports programs no longer post standings or award first-place trophies at the youngest age levels, when children barely in grade school first experience the exhilaration of athletics.<sup>38</sup> Some programs enforce "parent-free

34. See, e.g., 18 PA. CONS. STAT. ANN. § 2712 (2000) (criminalizing simple assault against sports officials); W. VA. CODE ANN. § 61-2-15a (Michie 2000) (making battery against an athletic officials punishable by fine and jail time); CAL. PENAL CODE § 243.8 (West 1999) (making battery against sports officials punishable by fine or imprisonment in county jail); DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 11 § 614 (1999) (criminalizing assault against sports officials); N.C. GEN. STAT. § 14-33(b)(9) (1999) (making assault and battery against sports official class one misdemeanor); KY. REV. STAT. ANN. § 518.090 (1996) (making assault against sports official a class A misdemeanor). For an analysis of existing state legislation criminalizing assaults on youth-league officials and coaches, see NASO, *Current State Legislative Statutes*, at <http://www.ieway.com/naso/current.html> (May 7, 2000). For an analysis of pending legislation to criminalize such assaults, see NASO, *NASO United States Map*, at <http://www.ieway.com/naso/usmap.html> (May 7, 2000).

35. See, e.g., Allen H. Johnson, *Bad News Boors: Parental Tantrums Prompt A Response*, NEWS & RECORD (Greensboro, N.C.), July 1, 2001, at H2; *Lack of Sportsmanship*, AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN, Nov. 14, 1997, at A14 (editorial); *Little League Brawl Leads to Indictment of 3 Men at Game*, AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN, July 22, 1995, at B4; Jill Young Miller, *Parents, Behave!*, ATLANTA J. & CONST., Oct. 9, 2000, at 1D.

36. See, e.g., Daniel P. Finney, *Leagues Focus on Sportsmanship*, DES MOINES REGISTER, Apr. 1, 2000, at 1; Lord, *supra* note 16, at 52; Tom Mashberg, *Youth Leagues Fed Up With Foul Play - By Adults*, BOSTON HERALD, March 26, 2000, at 1.

37. See, e.g., Joanne C. Gerstner, *Seminar to Focus on Sportsmanship*, DETROIT NEWS, June 16, 2000, at 5; *Violent Parents Mar Kids Sports*, DESERET NEWS, July 15, 2000, at D1; Steve Warmbir, *Belittle League Baseball*, CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, May 21, 2000, at 2.

38. See, e.g., Barry D. McPherson, *The Child in Competitive Sport: Influence of the Social Milieu*, in CHILDREN IN SPORT 247, 260 (Richard A. Magill et al. eds., 1982); Stryer, *supra* note 3, at 709 (stating "To better stress reinforcement for effort and participation, especially for children younger than 13 years of age, the end of the sports season should de-emphasize or even eliminate playoffs, All-Stars games, significant media attention, and elaborate championship ceremonies recognizing individuals. Such events should recognize all participants."); WOLFF, *supra* note 4, at 38; Erin Ayers, *What's the Score on Youth Soccer Rules?*, BOSTON GLOBE, June 21, 1998 (South Weekly), at 18; Menchaca, *supra* note 23, at 1.

zones” to insulate the field in sports such as soccer, where no physical barriers separate the spectators and players.<sup>39</sup> A few programs have even tried banning parents from attending some games altogether.<sup>40</sup>

Some parents stay home from their children’s games altogether to shield themselves and other family members from adult vulgarity rampant in the stands and on the sidelines. Fed up with foul-mouthed parents and coaches, a suburban Cleveland youth soccer program recently experimented with “silent Saturdays,”<sup>41</sup> an idea catching on around the nation.<sup>42</sup> Under the “silent Saturdays” program, adults may attend their children’s game, but they may not open their mouths - no cheering, jeering, or taunting of the referees.

The sorry race to the bottom hit home one Saturday last winter with my “squirt” hockey team, comprised of nine-year-olds. We arrived early for our game and went into the stands to watch a game between two teams of fourteen-year-olds. We also got to watch the parent spectators directing a steady stream of insults at the referees. At every parental outburst, the nine-year-olds would turn to me, cover their mouths and giggle. Child athletes now laugh at the grown-ups because the children know stupidity when they see it.

These unhappy developments share one common denominator: the wrongdoers are the adults, not the children. People over eighteen, parents and coaches, cause most of the problems plaguing youth sports today.<sup>43</sup> Children generally understand how to

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39. See, e.g., Tom Mashberg, *Experts: “Sports Rage” Roil Youth Games in Suburbs*, BOSTON HERALD, July 9, 2000 (News), at 6; Dale Russakoff, *Okay, Soccer Moms and Dads: Time Out! Leagues Try to Rein in Competitive Parents*, WASH. POST, Aug. 25, 1998, at A1.

40. See, e.g., JOY AND SADNESS IN CHILDREN’S SPORTS, *supra* note 2, at 333; PARENTS’ COMPLETE GUIDE TO YOUTH SPORTS 169 (Ronald E. Smith, et al. eds., 1989).

41. See Kris Axtman, *Teaching Mom, Dad to Lighten Up At the Game*, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, Jan. 24, 2000, at 1.

42. See, e.g., Valerie Finholm, *Trying Out a Parents’ Peace Accord*, HARTFORD COURANT, Sept. 22, 2000, at D1; Scott W. Helman, *S-H-H Saturday: No Yelling, No Cheering*, BOSTON GLOBE, May 7, 2000 (City Weekly), at 16; Mark Stewart, *Good Sports? Childish Behavior From the Stands and Sidelines Forces Youth Leagues to Muzzle Parents, Coaches*, WASH. TIMES, May 9, 2000, at E1; Tim Warsinskey, *Across America Parents Are Crossing the Line and Leaving a Trail of Emotional and Physical Abuse in Their Wake*, CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER, Aug. 6, 2000, at A1; David Woods, *Silent Saturday: Youth Leagues Are Putting the Muzzle on Coaches, Parents In An Effort to Avert Incidents of Rage*, INDIANAPOLIS STAR, Apr. 27, 2001, at A1.

43. See, e.g., *Hamilton v. W. Va. Secondary Schools Activities Comm’n*, 386 S.E.2d 656, 658 (W. Va. 1989) (discussing practice of “red-shirting”). “Red-shirting” is the practice where parents or coaches essentially take young athletes out of qualification from sports, hold the athletes back in school and keep them off the playing field for a year or two in order to “bulk them up” for a more impressive

play fair, act with sportsmanship when it is explained to them, and take defeat in stride. Many adults could learn from their children.

## II. FUN AND THE EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF CHILD ATHLETES

How can adults change our ways and return fun to youth sports? We must begin with a basic proposition: youth sports belongs to the youths, not to the adults. Adult spectators, coaches and league administrators are guests at the children's games. We are guests because if no adult attended, our hosts, the children, could still have a game. If adults created no leagues, the children might go without uniforms, formal schedules, league standings, all star teams, tournaments, playoffs, most valuable player awards, medals and championship trophies. But the children could still choose sides and play. Children do not need the adults unless we have something positive to offer.

The children are the hosts because they were there first. Until a few decades ago, children in towns and cities all across America generally conducted their own games without adult involvement. When youngsters wanted to play, they rounded up their friends and went to the local playground or sandlot. They chose relatively equal sides and perhaps rearranged the teams if imbalance became apparent, adjusted the rules to suit the circumstances, officiated the game, worked out their disputes one way or another and went home when everyone got tired. Adults were nowhere to be seen.

Adults assumed only a minor role in youth sports before World War II, mostly in public and private school systems and some local public and quasi-public recreation programs.<sup>44</sup> Little League baseball, for example, began in Williamsport, Pennsylvania in 1939, but was still confined to that state in 1945.<sup>45</sup> The "adultification" of children's sports did not begin until after the War.

Playground and sandlot sports lasted into the early 1970s, but many children today graduate from high school without ever hav-

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athletic showing once they return to the sport. *Id.* The *Hamilton* court categorized this practice as "cynical and pernicious manipulation" of children, which is done "for the glory of adults – overzealous coaches and parents." *Id.*

44. See, e.g., Gai Ingham Berlage, *Are Children's Competitive Team Sports Teaching Corporate Values?*, in FRACTURED FOCUS, *supra* note 2, at 191; Jack W. Bertyman, *The Rise of Highly Organized Sports For Preadolescent Boys*, in CHILDREN IN SPORT 2, 2 (Richard A. Magill et al. eds., 1982); STEVEN A. REISS, CITY GAMES: THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN URBAN SOCIETY AND THE RISE OF SPORTS 150-68 (1989); Vern Seefeldt et al., *Scope of Youth Sports Programs in the State of Michigan*, in PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN YOUTH SPORTS 17, 18 (Frank L. Smoll & Ronald E. Smith eds., 1978).

45. See, e.g., MICHELI, *supra* note 4, at 24; Arthur Daley, *30,000 Little Big Leaguers*, in JOY AND SADNESS IN CHILDREN'S SPORTS, *supra* note 2, at 21.

ing seen a pickup game.<sup>46</sup> Spontaneous neighborhood pickup games have approached extinction in the past generation, largely because family and community life has changed. More families than ever before are headed by single working parents, and more dual-parent households than ever before have both parents working full-time outside the home.<sup>47</sup> These parents do not want their children hanging around local playgrounds and would rather have the youngsters supervised by adults. Many neighborhoods also have fewer fields and sandlots within walking or bicycling distance because so many open spaces have become housing developments and so many school and municipal facilities remain closed to unsupervised choose-up games and other free play for fear of liability.

Most youth sports today are “organized,” that is, organized by adults who create, incorporate, administer, outfit, coach and officiate the leagues. Now that adults have taken over children’s games, the place of fun is not always secure. Parents, for example, frequently demand competitive travel teams for youngsters barely in grade school, most of whom will reach the end of the line prematurely as teenage burnouts exhausted from competitive pressure imposed too early.<sup>48</sup> Florida now has a state championship T-ball tournament for five and six-year-olds; this year’s state champs (whose “defense was incredible” and “really kept us in all the ball-games,” according to the exuberant assistant coach) traveled to South Carolina to play that state’s champions for the “regional” T-ball title.<sup>49</sup> The state and regional champs will undoubtedly have lots to tell their kindergarten classmates this autumn.

Some travel teams for children nine or younger play seventy or more games a season, complete with interstate commutes and hotel life that threaten schoolwork and academic achievement. Many of these teams play schedules longer than the professional teams in their sports. The grueling regimen would physically and emotion-

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46. See, e.g., Clay Latimer, *Single Minded Youngsters Are Moving Away From Multiple-Sport Ambitions, But What Or Who Is Driving That Choice?*, ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS, June 30, 2001, at D1; Mark Sappenfield, *Kickball Game? I Can Pencil In One Next Month*, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, June 27, 2001, at 1.

47. See, e.g., CARNEGIE CORPORATION OF NEW YORK, CARNEGIE COUNCIL ON ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT, GREAT TRANSITIONS: PREPARING ADOLESCENTS FOR A NEW CENTURY 9-10 (1995).

48. See, e.g., Stryer, *supra* note 3, at 707; David Noonan, *Stop Stressing Me*, NEWSWEEK, Jan. 29, 2001, at 54; Edmund J. Burke & Douglas Kleiber, *Psychological and Physical Implications of Highly Competitive Sports For Children*, 33 PHYSICAL EDUCATOR 63, 66 (May 1976); see also, Jim Brown, *When the Fun Goes Out of Games*, WASH. POST, Sept. 12, 2000, at Z10.

49. See Greg A. Bedard, *Okeehelée T-Ballers Keep Up Winning Tradition*, PALM BEACH POST, June 27, 2001, at 15.

ally exhaust adult professionals, much less children who spend their few spare weekend mornings in their pajamas watching cartoons on television.

Youngsters before puberty are often treated as commodities in pro-style league "drafts," sometimes complete with free agency, recruiting, waiver systems and trading.<sup>50</sup> Coaches often scheme to assemble powerhouse teams instead of collaborating to produce balanced leagues that would provide realistic challenges and minimize risk of injury from competition between dominant and less experienced teams, particularly in contact or collision sports. Coaches frequently assemble teams with eight-year-old "bench-warmers," many of whom quit because "bench-warming" at any age is public humiliation.

Unruly parents and coaches bait referees, verbally assault adolescent opponents, and unleash profanity they would deplore if it came from the mouths of their own children. Physicians report a disturbing epidemic of stress fractures, tendonitis, bursitis, joint disorders and other preventable overuse injuries caused by unknowing or overly competitive adults, who invite lifelong disability by pushing children's developing bones and tissues beyond their limits.<sup>51</sup>

Now that the adult guests hold a monopoly over children's sports, we have the responsibility to act like mature guests, and not like the troublemaker who sneaks the stink bomb into the picnic. Children have four basic emotional needs in organized sports, and they will not have fun unless the adults meet each one: 1) child athletes need to play without unhealthy pressure to win imposed by parents and coaches; 2) child athletes need to be treated like children, and not like miniature professionals; 3) child athletes need adult role models whose sportsmanlike behavior helps make participation fun; and 4) child athletes need to play without adult-imposed pressure for financial gain inspired by professional or big-time collegiate sports.

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50. See Steve Lopez, *Full-Court Press: Schoolgirl Basketball Stars Are Being Recruited as Heavily as Boys, and the Techniques used By College Coaches Are Just as Crass*, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, Jan. 19, 1998, at 84 (noting parent of high school girl handed his daughter's resume to college basketball coach and resume noted everything she did "since she was out of diapers").

51. See, e.g., JOHN S. HARVEY, JR., *Overuse Syndromes in Young Athletes*, in SPORT FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH 151 (Maureen R. Weiss and Daniel Gould eds., 1986); RUSSELL H. LORD & BILL KOZAR, *Overuse Injuries in Young Athletes*, in CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN SPORTS 281 (Frank L. Smoll & Ronald E. Smith eds., 1996); MICHELI, *supra* note 4, at 104-25. See generally John P. DiFiori, *Overuse Injuries in Children and Adolescents*, 27 PHYSICIAN AND SPORTSMEDICINE 75 (Jan. 1999).

A. Child Athletes Need to Play Without Unhealthy Pressure to Win Imposed By Parents and Coaches.

Adults who stress fun in youth sports are sometimes accused of being against competition. We are sometimes even accused of pampering children with “touchy-feely fun stuff” rather than using organized sports to toughen children for the dog-eat-dog world of adulthood.

Both of these accusations are nonsense. Competition is ingrained in American culture and most child athletes will be competitive no matter what the adults in their lives do or say. When the score is four to two, even six-year-olds know that the difference between having four and having two is the difference between winning and losing.<sup>52</sup> When supportive adults make sports fun, the inherent challenge of athletic competition can still “toughen” children by teaching them responsibility, perseverance, poise, loyalty, self-control, self-discipline and similar virtues. A few minutes before game time, the adrenaline flows because the nervous (translation: competitive) children know the game is something special. They do not need the adults to tell them, or to hector them with phony pressure.

Screaming, ridicule and other adult-imposed pressures do nothing to toughen child athletes, hone their skills or enhance their competitive spirit. Indeed, the pressure often backfires by inducing debilitating fear of failure,<sup>53</sup> which inhibits performance and leads some children to seek comfort on the sidelines by feigning or over-exaggerating injury or by quitting altogether at the first socially acceptable opportunity.

When it comes to fun and winning, many adults have their priorities backwards. With a minute left in last season’s final game, my “squirt” hockey team led the undefeated first-place team by three goals. With an upset in the making, one of the nine-year-olds turned to me on the bench and said, “Hey, this is fun!” The point is that most children know that winning is more fun than losing. If parents and coaches allow the children to have fun, most children

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52. See, e.g., CAROLYN W. SHERIF, *The Social Context of Competition*, in JOY AND SADNESS IN CHILDREN’S SPORTS, *supra* note 2 at 85.

53. Cf. John Holt, *HOW CHILDREN FAIL* 16 (1970) (stating children “are afraid, above all else, of failing, of disappointing or displeasing the many anxious adults around them, whose limitless hopes and expectations for them hang over their heads like a cloud”). See generally Michael W. Passer, *Fear of Failure, Fear of Evaluation, Perceived Competence, and Self-Esteem in Competitive-Trait-Anxious Children*, 5 J. SPORT PSYCHOLOGY 172 (1983); PARENTS’ COMPLETE GUIDE TO YOUTH SPORTS, *supra* note 40, at 119-28.



will work hard because they want to win. But if adults browbeat them about winning, the children will not have fun and most will ultimately quit. When fun comes first, desire to win follows. But fun must come first.

Many parents and coaches misbehave because they seek to shield their children from defeat, which the adults mistakenly liken to failure. The children need no shield, however, because defeat is a natural, inevitable and ultimately healthy part of growing up. Every day of every season, half of all youth leaguers competing in America lose. Each one returns to play another day. All child athletes taste defeat regularly because nobody plays on undefeated teams every year and nobody goes from season to season winning every meet or match in individual sports. Most great professional athletes learned how to lose when they were children, and these setbacks helped make them great athletes because defeat holds valuable short-term and long-term lessons.

In the short term, an athlete can learn more from losing than from winning. When a team cruises on a winning streak, players can lapse into complacency and begin to take success for granted. Even if they do not get "swelled heads," the players rarely stop to consider the need for change. When the team drops a few games, however, players begin asking themselves, "What are we doing wrong, and how can we do better next game?" Self-assessment is the seed of self-improvement.

In the long term, losses enable parents and coaches to teach children how to remain resilient in the face of adversity. For athletes at any level, coping with defeat requires more fortitude than basking in victory. Child athletes benefit from learning how to rebound from losses because, like it or not, frustration and thwarted ambition will occur throughout adulthood. Indeed, losses in life are more frequent than victories for most adults. Youth sports provide an ideal avenue for early exposure to setback and allows supportive adults to offer guidance with the stakes not nearly as high as they will be sometimes later on in life.

Furthermore, most child athletes handle defeat much better than many parents and coaches realize, and much better than many parents and coaches themselves do. Several times over the years, I have seen youngsters in the locker room chattering after a loss and looking ahead to the afternoon's in-line hockey game or the night's sleepover. Their obsessed parents were still in the rink lobby yelling at the opposing team or the referee because the parents could not accept the defeat their children had already put behind them.

Wanting to win is perfectly natural in youth sports. Indeed, when an athlete enters a game where peak performance is expected yet does not try to win, the athlete has not given an honest performance. For athletes and coaches alike, sportsmanship means playing hard to win within the rules, and then shaking hands afterwards and accepting the outcome with grace. For youth sports parents, sportsmanship means rooting hard within the bounds of decency and decorum and then accepting the outcome with the maturity expected of the children.

Sportsmanship presumes you want to win, but winning in youth sports means something only when it is grounded in solid principles. Winning is no source of pride when it comes from a win-at-all-costs mentality that takes the fun from the game, denigrates sportsmanship, benches youngsters or demands a measure of performance from the children that would make most adults uncomfortable if they had to meet the same standard in their own daily lives. The British Association of National Coaches is right on target: "Sport without fair play is not sport and honors won without fair play can have no real value."<sup>54</sup>

The paramount principle must be fair participation in games and practice sessions alike. Youth sports programs can have no benchwarmers. In survey after survey, nearly all children state unequivocally that they would rather participate and lose than warm the bench and win.<sup>55</sup> This unremarkable finding means that children join youth sports programs for the same overriding reason their coaches join — to participate actively in each game, and not to sit on the sidelines as inert spectators watching others. The coaches would not want someone to take away their right to participate, and the youngsters do not want that right taken away either. And make no mistake about it — in youth sports, participation is a child's right. As former National Basketball Association ("NBA") basketball player, Bob Bigelow, said, "[f]ew things violate a child's basic wants and needs — and his or her basic rights — more than sitting on a bench."<sup>56</sup>

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54. THE GROWING CHILD IN COMPETITIVE SPORT 8 (Geof Gleeson ed., 1986).

55. See, e.g., Jon C. Hellstedt et al., *Children and Sports: Anticipating Your Questions*, in ON THE SIDELINES: DECISIONS, SKILLS AND TRAINING IN YOUTH SPORTS 73 (1988); HUTSLAR, *supra* note 5, at 126; JACK H. LLEWELLYN & JUDY A. BLUCKER, *PSYCHOLOGY OF COACHING: THEORY AND APPLICATION* 146 (1982); Orlick, *supra* note 5, at 169; PARENTS' COMPLETE GUIDE TO YOUTH SPORTS, *supra* note 40, at 12; ROBERT J. ROTELLA & LINDA K. BUNKER, *PARENTING YOUR SUPERSTAR* 198 (Patricia Sammann & John Beck eds., 1987); Weinberg, *supra* note 5, at 74; WOLFF, *supra* note 4, at 39.

56. BIGELOW, *supra* note 1, at 166.

It is no excuse that the team needs to win and the coach thinks some children are not good enough to play. Athletes learn by doing, not by watching. Every youngster deserves a fair chance because some develop their physical skills later than others. Michael Jordan, for example, was cut from the varsity basketball team in tenth grade but was the best college player in the nation just five years later and one of the top five players in the world with the Chicago Bulls the following year.<sup>57</sup>

As guests at the children's games, coaches abuse their authority when they bench ten-year-olds, humiliating them and depriving them of fun before they have had the chance to learn the game, master the skills and decide for themselves whether they want to pursue the sport. Once a coach begins creating benchwarmers, winning has become the top priority and it is time for the coach to leave. Some prices are not worth paying in the quest for victory in youth sports. Excluding or demoralizing a child is such a price.

Some parents and coaches selfishly impose unhealthy pressure to win because they suffer from what child psychologists call "achievement by proxy,"<sup>58</sup> or sometimes simply "Little League Syndrome."<sup>59</sup> These adults strut around the stands if their child is a star or if the team wins most of its games, particularly if the adults with newly found bragging rights never starred or won often when they were young, or if they have not enjoyed much prestige or success in their own lives lately.<sup>60</sup> The same adults feel like heels whenever their child makes an error or whenever the standings show a losing record. No matter how much parents and coaches seek to live vicariously through the children, however, youth sports must serve children's needs, not adults' fantasies. As sports psychologist Rick Wolff tells listeners of his New York radio program, competition in youth sports is healthy, provided the people competing are the children and not the adults.

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57. See NBA, *NBA: Player Profile Michael Jordan*, at [http://www.nba.com/playerfile/michael\\_jordan/bio.html](http://www.nba.com/playerfile/michael_jordan/bio.html).

58. See, e.g., Ian R. Tofler et al., *The Achievement By Proxy Spectrum in Youth Sports*, 7 CHILD ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRY N. AM. 803, 807 (1998). See generally Bruce C. Oglivie et al., *Comprehending Role Conflicts in the Coaching of Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults*, 7 CHILD ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRY N. AM. 879 (1998).

59. See THOMAS A. TUTKO & JACK W. RICHARDS, *PSYCHOLOGY OF COACHING* 165 (1971); Steve Jacobson, *A Cure For What Ails Little League*, NEWSDAY, Aug. 13, 2000, at C21.

60. See McPherson, *supra* note 38, at 258-59; Richard J. Gonzalez, *Ex-Coach Calls For Ideal Little League*, CHI. TRIB., Apr. 22, 2001, at 6.

Most children play to have fun and be with their friends.<sup>61</sup> They do not play to entertain the adults, boost the adults' egos or improve the family's social status in the community. If parents or coaches want entertainment, they should hire a baby-sitter and take their spouse out to the movies or dinner. Youth leaguers are not unpaid entertainers. And before ego and aspirations for social status overcome sound judgment, adults should acknowledge that they have had their chance at youth sports and now it is the youngsters' turn. If adults want to impose competitive pressure to win, they should break out the liniment and the heating pads, join an adult league and impose pressure on themselves.

Too often, parents and coaches forget that in youth sports, winning is for today, but memories of fun last a lifetime. A simple experiment can help adults set priorities straight. If their child is playing a sport this season, ask the adults to think back to last month. What teams did the child play that month, and what were the scores? The adults probably cannot remember. Everyone forgets today's score before the end of the season, but decades later the children still remember the adults whose affection and support remained steadfast regardless of the scoreboard.

Children are quick to pick up on verbal and non-verbal cues made, sometimes unwittingly, by the adults in their lives. When a child comes home from a game, parents send a distinct message with, "Did you win?" They send a much different message by asking three other questions: "Did you have fun?," "Did you do your best?," and "Did you learn something today?" The last three questions teach children to measure success by internal factors within their control (such as whether they hustled or improved a skill), rather than by external factors beyond their control (such as whether the other team was more talented or whether a teammate made a costly error). Jim Thompson, founder of the Positive Coaching Alliance at Stanford University, urges adults to help their children set "effort

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61. See, e.g., Robert J. Brustad, *Youth in Sport: Psychological Considerations*, in HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON SPORT PSYCHOLOGY 695, 698 (Robert N. Singer et al. eds., 1993) (discussing studies in which most children said "having fun" was primary reason why they played organized sports); LAWRENCE GALTON, YOUR CHILD IN SPORTS 15 (1980) (discussing polls of two thousand high school students, in which 86% rated fun and enjoyment as their major objective in sports); LLEWELLYN & BLUCKER, *supra* note 55, at 146 (discussing studies in which 96% of child respondents said most important objective in playing sports is to have fun); *Having Fun is a High Priority*, USA TODAY, Sept. 10, 1990, at C14 (reporting poll in which 69% of children said they would prefer coach who puts priority on fun); John Rolfe, *We Want More!*, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED FOR KIDS, May 1996, at 4 (reporting poll in which 91% of children said having fun in organized sports was very important to them).

goals” rather than “outcome goals.”<sup>62</sup> Asking the right questions does not diminish the child’s desire to win, but it does teach that in youth sports, losing does not mean failing.

In the final analysis, Americans need to redefine the meaning of success in youth sports. Winning a game may mean that the winners were more skillful than the opponents. It may mean the youngsters were stronger or faster. It may simply mean they were luckier that day. But winning does not necessarily mean that the youngsters had fun, improved their skills or learned any of the character lessons athletics can impart.

Character comes from striving to win within the rules, rather than from actually winning. Even when the team loses on the scoreboard, children win when they have practiced hard for the game. They win when they have fun playing hard and clean, resisting temptation to stray from the rules. They win when they play to the best of their ability. They win when they learn from the game, improve their skills, accept the outcome and look toward the next contest. These victories teach the importance of hard work to achieve a desired goal, a valuable character lesson regardless of the final score.

As a coach of both winning and losing youth hockey teams over the years, I have felt a particular sense of accomplishment with teams that lost almost all their games yet had all the players re-enroll the next season because they learned and had fun in practices and games. The reenrollment rate is the youth coach’s true win-lost record. No matter what the standings say at the end of the season, the coach is a winner if most players come back next season; the coach is a loser if many quit.

In defeat, the ultimate test for parents and coaches is to “keep the fires burning” within each child. The adults can begin by reassuring the youngsters that winning and losing are equally acceptable outcomes in youth sports, provided the youngsters have tried their best to win. First, however, the adults must reassure themselves.

#### B. Child Athletes Need to be Treated Like Children, Not Like Miniature Professionals

Every parent knows that children are not miniature adults, but rather boys and girls with physical and emotional needs and capaci-

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62. See Jim Thompson, *Winning Shouldn't Be Everything in Youth Sports*, NEWS-DAY, June 3, 2001, at B8.

ties unique to childhood. But many parents and coaches nonetheless make youth leaguers miserable by treating them like pint-sized professionals.

Most coaches and parents enter youth sports with no training in coaching children or in the psychology of child athletes. Too many of the adults nonetheless think they know how to treat young athletes because they watch professional sports, watch the youngsters decked out in professional-style uniforms and never let it register that comparing professional sports and youth sports is like comparing apples and zucchinis. Professional sports features a few thousand elite adult athletes, who work under the glare of nationwide scrutiny, hardened by years of high-level competition; on the other hand, youth leagues serve millions of impressionable children of all ages and abilities playing in local communities.

Professional sports is big business, with lucrative television contracts, corporate sponsorships and big dollars riding on the performance of a minuscule percentage of all adult athletes who have risen through the ranks since childhood. Winning is the bottom line to the business executives controlling the billion-dollar sports industry's vast commercial enterprises. Players are employed to provide public entertainment and earn profits for owners and shareholders; they are not employed to have fun, learn anything or develop their character. When professionals are yelled at by their coaches and booed by fans for losing or making an error, these millionaires, who are paid handsomely, endure the punishment.<sup>63</sup>

Youth sports is entirely different. Youth leaguers are children, and they are growing, learning and playing, not working. Without fat contracts and a nationwide audience of millions, fun is the children's only remuneration and family and friends their only fans. The children's physical and emotional welfare, not winning, is the bottom line.

To help assure youth leaguers' well being, parents and coaches must forget everything they think they have ever learned from watching and reading about the treatment of professional athletes. Yelling at a player to correct mistakes or motivate, for example, may be effective with adult professionals (though I rather doubt it, given the temperament of today's professionals), but yelling is the worst way to coach or parent a child athlete. Adults should cringe when-

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63. See generally *THE BUSINESS OF SPORTS* (William P. Lineberry ed., 1973); JOSEPH DURSO, *THE ALL-AMERICAN DOLLAR: THE BIG BUSINESS OF SPORTS* (1971) (discussing business of professional sports generally); JERRY GORMAN, *THE NAME OF THE GAME: THE BUSINESS OF SPORTS* (1994).

ever they see an adult scold or ridicule a ten-year-old for an error without regard for the delicate sensibilities of the pint-sized player on the receiving end. It is no excuse that “the pros do it.” As a guest at the children’s game, an adult has no right to reduce them to tears for the way they play.

The unfortunate truth, however, is that some of the mistreatment parents and coaches inflict on youth leaguers, day in and day out, would pass for emotional child abuse if it occurred on “Main Street.”<sup>64</sup> The National Youth Sports Safety Foundation provides these examples of emotional abuse, which should provoke many parents and coaches to reevaluate their roles in the games children play:

- Forcing a child to participate in sports;
- Not speaking to a child after he/she plays poorly in a youth sports game or practice;
- Asking your child why he/she played poorly when it meant so much to you;
- Hitting a child when his/her play disappoints you;
- Yelling at a child for not playing well or for losing;
- Punishing a child for not playing well or for losing; and
- Criticizing and/or ridiculing a child for his/her sports performance.<sup>65</sup>

Adults can leave enduring scars not only by emotional abuse directed at the child (“active abuse”), but also by emotional abuse directed at teammates in the child’s presence (“passive abuse”). According to the Kids Sports Network, “[a]ctive child abuse in sports occurs when a child experiences harsh actions from parents or coaches, which result in feelings of lowered self-worth, fear, and/or failure. Passive child abuse occurs when a child observes another child being the recipient of harsh or abrasive actions by parents or coaches.”<sup>66</sup>

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64. See, e.g., Wilkens, *supra* note 17, at E-1 (quoting pediatrician who called youth sports “the greatest form of legalized child abuse in America”).

65. See National Youth Sports Safety Foundation, Inc., *Fact Sheet*, at <http://www.nyssf.org> (July 17, 2001); see also Kids Sports Network, at <http://www.looksmart.com/r?page=/search/frames/index.html&isp=US&name=&bgcolor=ffcc00&key=%22kids+Sports+Network%22&url=http%3a//www.ksnusa.org/&pskip=&nskip=15&se=3,0,4,0,20&index=1> (July 12, 2001) (defining “child abuse in youth sports” to include “screaming at a child for not performing well, slapping a player on his helmet for missing a tackle, using racial slurs or sexual put-downs, using negative nicknames, playing only the best players or demanding unrealistic performance such as no losses and no mistakes.”).

66. Kids Sports Network, at <http://www.looksmart.com/r?page=/search/frames/index.html&isp=US&name=&bgcolor=ffcc00&key=%22kids+Sports+Net->

Youth coaches seeking a convenient rule of thumb should show each player the respect they would want people to show their own children. "Each player" means "each player," including the least talented youngster as well as the stars - no exceptions. Coaches are teachers of the children entrusted to their care, and you can tell a lot about teachers by the way they correct students' mistakes. Because words hurt, the coach's repertoire should hold no place for sarcasm, ridicule, yelling or other punishment for making a mistake or failing to execute a play.

In their role as educators, perceptive coaches make an agreement with their players in the first preseason practice session. The players' part of the bargain is that they must try their best in practices and games, and must be willing to practice skills they find difficult as well as ones they have already begun to master. The coaches' part of the bargain is to teach, support and encourage each player patiently throughout the season.

Most of all, patience means tolerating mistakes because, particularly at the younger age levels, players trying hard will often do more things wrong than right. Youngsters cannot learn or have fun in a threatening environment dominated by fear of the coach, so the coach must tell them that it is okay to "do it wrong." In fact, coaches should encourage players to welcome mistakes, because mistakes are invitations to learn.

Jim Fullerton, Brown University's great former hockey coach, taught that players become well rounded by practicing their weaknesses 60% of the time and their strengths 40% of the time. Then he would tell players that they can pursue this parity only after identifying their weaknesses, and that mistakes help players to do that. Finally, Coach Fullerton would reassure youngsters that "the pros make the same mistakes you do; they just get paid more for it." He was right too.

Tolerance of mistakes is only the first step in treating child athletes like children. When a player needs correction after coming off the field during a game, the coach should never call down to the end of the bench so the whole team can hear the correction. The coach can get the message across just as well, and perhaps better, by calling the player aside or whispering to the player so only that player can hear it. Particularly in games, simple corrections work best because youngsters have trouble processing complexities in the heat of competition. If the player would be unable to absorb the

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work%22&url=http%3a//www.ksnusa.org/&cpskip=&nskip=15&se=3,0,4,0,20&index=1 (July 12, 2001).



correction during the game, the coach should make a note and talk with the player during the next practice session. If the correction would benefit the entire team before the end of the game, the coach should wait for an appropriate stoppage of play, when the correction can reach everyone, but singles out no one.

Mistakes are frequently more obvious than plays executed well, but coaches must remain alert for both because youngsters learn from praise as well as correction. As team leader, the coach holds the “power to praise,” and thoughtful coaches understand its potency. Because praise can be both a well earned reward and a great motivator, good coaches try to say something positive to each youngster at least once every practice and game, whether for a well executed play or simply for trying hard. I agree with the Positive Coaching Alliance’s Jim Thompson, who says that child athletes accept criticism best from coaches who maintain a positive learning environment with a five to one ratio of praise to correction.<sup>67</sup>

When correction is in order, the “sandwich technique” is effective because it treats children like children: “Sam, you’re playing great for us. But you want to keep your stick on the ice next time you’re out there. Keep setting up those plays.” Under this technique, the coach praises first, corrects second and praises again. Additionally, correction means exactly that — explaining the proper technique so players are not left to figure out criticism with little idea of what to do next. Children know that everybody makes mistakes, but they are sensitive to criticism, particularly criticism delivered in front of peers or without correction. And why shouldn’t children be sensitive? Adults are.

Performing intricate athletic skills in front of family and friends is challenging for most children, who are unaccustomed to having so many eyes watching their every move. They are trying not to make mistakes that would hurt the team, they are learning to play, some are struggling at it, and some may even lack the basic motor skills to play as well as they would like. Many adults get butterflies whenever they must perform at a business meeting or other public forum. We should not expect ten-year-olds to find public performance any easier.

Children deserve adult support and encouragement just for coming out for the team, committing themselves to practices and games and trying their best. By enrolling and sticking with it, the child demonstrates that he or she wants to learn skills, be part of

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67. See Positive Coaching Alliance, *The Positive Coach Mental Model*, at [http://www.positivecoach.org/initiatives/mental\\_model.htm](http://www.positivecoach.org/initiatives/mental_model.htm) (July 18, 2001).

the team and strive for victory. With unproductive use of free time always an option, this commitment deserves the respect of the adults in their lives. No child who tries hard should sense that parents or coaches consider him or her a failure for coming up short on the scoreboard.

The adults must resist the American tendency to shower attention on players and teams who finish on top while ignoring everyone else. Subconsciously or not, this tendency shapes our perceptions of athletes. Attendance and fan support inevitably sag, for example, whenever a pro team falls out of the playoff picture, even though games between “losing” teams can be as exciting as any other. Champions get to visit the White House, but hardly anyone notices second-place finishers and those further down in the standings. Studies have even shown that a large number of Americans subconsciously view winners as “good people” and losers as “bad people.”<sup>68</sup>

America’s winner-take-all attitude has no place in youth sports because only one team can win each game and only one team can finish in first place at the end of the season. Youth league standings typically show between five and ten “losing” teams for every first-place team. Adults sometimes make matters even worse by structuring meets and tournaments that guarantee fifty or more “losers” for every first-place finisher. When all the dust has settled, youth sports would have no “winners” without lots of “losers.”

Youth leaguers need to be treated like children after the game too, win or lose. After a loss or a bad game, a pat on the back from a parent or coach may mean more than words to a child because it signals unconditional support. Parents and coaches must accept defeat without blaming the referees, making other excuses, or scolding or belittling their own child or other team members. The youngsters are a captive audience in the back seat on the way home, but they deserve to ride in peace without being unwilling victims of their parents’ “station wagon syndrome.”<sup>69</sup> When children are prisoners to incessant criticism in the back seat after a game, victory inevitably produces not the thrill they deserve, but only relief that defeat was avoided.

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68. BERNIE SCHOCK, PARENTS KIDS AND SPORTS 31-32 (1987); *see, e.g.*, THOMAS TUTKO & WILLIAM BRUNS, WINNING IS EVERYTHING AND OTHER AMERICAN MYTHS 8 (1976) (describing positive characteristics attributed to winners and negative characteristics attributed to losers).

69. *See* WOLFF, *supra* note 4, at 54 (noting parents’ tendency to critique performance of their children after game).

Perhaps because they read about incentive clauses in professional contracts, some parents foolishly offer their children financial incentives for their performance. A youth baseball coach once told me about a boy who ignored his instruction to stop at first base on a hit to the outfield. The boy was thrown out at second by a mile. After the inning, he admitted he had heard the instruction, but told the coach he tried for the extra base anyway because "my parents pay me more allowance for a double than a single." By leading their son to believe that his worth in their eyes depended on performance on the field, the parents had induced the boy to spurn teamwork for a chance at a few dollars.

The American Academy of Pediatrics wisely instructs that "[a]dults must clearly show that the child's worth is unrelated to the outcome of the game."<sup>70</sup> When adults offer reward, praise or enthusiasm only after victories, children may sense that they hold the adults' esteem and affection only when they win. The natural reaction is to fear defeat for fear of losing that esteem and affection. Fear trumps fun and may even make quitting appear the best way out.

### C. Athletes Need Adult Role Models Whose Sportsmanship Helps Make Participation Fun

I see some version of "youth sports rage" in the stands almost every time I attend a youth hockey game. Over the years, I have coached children who were so embarrassed by their parents' lack of self-control at games that they specifically asked the parents to stay home. A few players have apologized to me for their parents' behavior. I have coached some youngsters who probably quit prematurely to end the family embarrassment, and I could hardly blame them. They could not have had much fun playing with one eye always nervously focused on their parents.

Outlandish behavior persists because many shortsighted adults remain blind to the role youth sports can play in strengthening family bonds.<sup>71</sup> When teenagers begin seeking independence from their parents and resisting their influence, organized sports still enables parents to share wholesome activities with their children.

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70. American Academy of Pediatrics, *Organized Athletics for Preadolescent Children*, 84 PEDIATRICS 583, 587 (1989).

71. See Jessica E. Jay, *Women's Participation in Sports: Four Feminist Perspectives*, 7 TEX. J. WOMEN & L. 1, 14, 28 (1997) (stating participation in sports builds child's self esteem, confidence, independence, self-control and assertiveness and noting high success rate of professionals, good health and mental acuity are sometimes due to sports participation).

Most teens want their parents and siblings to attend the games, root for them and share their experiences.<sup>72</sup> But instead of seizing this golden opportunity to bring the family together and remain intimately involved in their children's lives throughout adolescence, many parents behave in ways that drive their teenagers either to wish that the parents would not attend, or to quit playing altogether.<sup>73</sup>

Because children are influenced more by what adult role models do than by what they say, parents and coaches teach the wrong lessons whenever they act like jerks in public.<sup>74</sup> Youngsters would play just as well, and perhaps better, if their parents cheered hard for the team, without jeering or taunting the opposition. Why not even cheer the good plays made by the other team, who are, after all, only children.

Parents and coaches also teach the right lesson when they let the referees or umpires do their jobs free from verbal assault. Certified youth sports officials inevitably make mistakes because they, like the parents and coaches and children, are not professionals in the sport. For every mistake, however, officials make dozens of correct calls that only appear wrong to parents and coaches who do not understand the rules or do not see the action as well as they think they do. Many adults cry "mistake" as a knee-jerk reaction whenever a call hurts the team. Mistake or no, the irate adults will be entitled to perfect referees when the children become perfect players, the coaches become perfect coaches and the parents become perfect parents. Until that day of universal perfection dawns, fallible officials are part of youth sports.

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72. See, e.g., GARY ALAN FINE, WITH THE BOYS: LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL AND PREADOLESCENT CULTURE 203-04 (1987) (discussing survey in which 88% of Little League baseball players said they liked having their parents watch their games); see also Hellstedt, *supra* note 55, at 89 (noting in survey of fifteen- and sixteen-year-old ski racers, more than 60% wanted their parents to watch them race "very much," only 12% indicated preference that their parents not watch, 75% wanted their parents to watch them "right on the race course" rather than from base lodge).

73. See, e.g., Dodd, *supra* note 5, at C1 (reporting poll in which 37% of children said they would rather not have parents watch them play; one child said parents "get too hyper . . . You want them to say good stuff, then the pressure's on"); *Kids Speak Out: Violence in Youth Sports*, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED FOR KIDS, Aug. 2001, at 14 (quoting 10-year-old: "I sat down with my mom and told her that if she can't stop misbehaving, she can't come.").

74. Writing about rampant adult misbehavior in youth sports, columnist Dan O'Neill has diagnosed a disease suffered by too many parents and coaches: JERKS ("Juvenile Emotions Regarding Kids Sports"). See Dan O'Neill, *Fathers Need Coaching to Avoid Becoming Part of Jerk Fraternity*, ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, May 7, 2000, at D2.

Parents and coaches need to remember that if officials can hear profanity and other verbal abuse directed at them when a call goes against the team, the children on the field can also hear it. Adults should not shout anything from the stands or bench that they would be embarrassed to say in front of their youngsters off the playing field. The adults' conduct should not sink below the level they would find acceptable from their own children.

For boys and girls who choose to participate, organized sports can be an integral part of growing up. For one thing, athletics provides many youngsters their first important opportunities outside the home to distinguish between right and wrong and behave accordingly. Children are not born with ingrained attitudes about sportsmanship; good sportsmanship and bad sportsmanship are learned reactions and, for better or worse, parents and coaches do much of the teaching.

Many child athletes these days, however, display much better sportsmanship than their parents and coaches. This embarrassing turnabout is a stain on youth sports because adults, not children, are supposed to be the role models setting the example.

#### D. Children Need to Play Without Adult-Imposed Pressure for Future Financial Gain Inspired by Professional or Big-Time Collegiate Sports

Many parents impose unhealthy pressure on their child because visions of the "big payday" warp their priorities.<sup>75</sup> These parents compromise the child's fun in the quest for collegiate athletic scholarships and multimillion-dollar professional contracts.

Sometimes the pressure is merely to win, as if winning at a tender age is a sure gauge of proficiency. More and more parents nowadays, however, also push their particularly young children to specialize in one sport, hoping specialization will lead to the prized scholarship or professional contract. Year-round specialization can exact a high price, however. Not only will the child likely lose the fun of youthful experimentation and free play from a well-rounded athletic experience; the child may also suffer chronic overuse inju-

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75. See Johanna Espinoza, *Zero Tolerance Takes Hold: Youth Organizations Keep Watch on Unruly Parents*, IDAHO STATESMAN, Sept. 14, 2000, at O2 (stating many parents believe their son or daughter will be professional athlete, when few do); Dr. Steven Keteyian, *Obesity Can Be a Worry for Children Too*, DETROIT NEWS, Dec. 5, 2000, at O2 (noting only small percentage of all children grow up to be Olympians, college athletes or professional athletes).

ries as growing bones and tissues suffer continuous wear-and-tear from the same repetitive stresses and strains month after month.<sup>76</sup>

The root of the problem is that organized youth sports is mighty expensive these days, especially after parents pay registration fees, equipment costs and travel expenses. With annual tuition and other costs at some private colleges exceeding \$30,000, many parents perceive athletic scholarships as a reward for their years of chauffeuring and financial sacrifice in youth sports. When parents call me aside to discuss scholarship prospects for their ten-year-olds still in elementary school, however, I can only confess that my crystal ball is no clearer than theirs. I gently advise, though, that time has a way of humbling most ten-year-old superstars when other youngsters catch up.

News accounts of multimillion-dollar professional contracts blind many parents to the harsh sifting process that controls entry into the collegiate and pro ranks.<sup>77</sup> Professional athletes are so talented that they make their game look deceptively easy, but the odds against a child's making the professionals in any sport are about 12,000 to one or higher.<sup>78</sup> Two million children participate in competitive gymnastics each year, but only seven or eight participate in the Olympics every four years.<sup>79</sup> "Less than 4% of varsity high school football players play college football, and less than 1% of

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76. See generally American Academy of Pediatrics, *Intensive Training and Sports Specialization in Young Athletes*, 106 PEDIATRICS 154 (2000). Concerning overuse injuries, see *supra* note 51 and accompanying text.

77. See Editorial, PEORIA J. STAR, Dec. 13, 2000, at A05 (noting Alex Rodriguez of Texas Rangers was given ten-year \$252 million contract – richest in sports history); James Langton, *Violence By Parents Casts Shadow on U.S. Youth Sports*, SUNDAY TELEGRAPH, July 23, 2000, at 28 (stating parents see colleges handing out generous sport scholarships and millions earned by professionals and want their children to take part).

78. See AMERICAN SPORT EDUCATION PROGRAM, SPORTPARENT 49 (1994); see also EITZEN & SAGE, *supra* note 5, at 113 (stating "[I]n a given year about one million boys played football in high school, 31,000 played college football, and about 1,000 played professional football."); HUTSLAR, *supra* note 5, at 39-40 (describing "Sport Funnel," which begins with millions of child athletes at top and ends with few thousand professional athletes at bottom); BARRY D. MCPHERSON ET AL., THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SPORT 84-85 (1989) (remarking only one in 20,000 Little League players will earn tryout with major league team, citing 1988 study that found that odds of American child becoming professional athlete were four in one million for females and seven in 100,000 for males); SCHOCK, *supra* note 68, at 125 (noting child has 14,000 to one chance of playing professional basketball); Seefeldt, *supra* note 44, at 160 (estimating odds of becoming professional athlete are one in 6,666 in football, one in 14,000 in basketball and one in 1,200 in baseball).

79. See Stryer, *supra* note 3, at 704.

college players” are offered professional contracts.<sup>80</sup> “For every 2,300 high school senior basketball players, only 40 will play college basketball and only one will play in the [NBA].”<sup>81</sup> Because many professionals enjoy only a brief stint in the big leagues, the odds against having a successful professional career are even more overwhelming.

With daunting odds like these, parents eyeing the professionals might as well play the state lottery. Like adults who see a lottery winner’s picture in the newspaper and rush out to buy tickets, parents are sometimes tantalized by media accounts of players like Tiger Woods, Mickey Mantle and the Williams sisters, whose parents pushed them and won the “lottery” when the child made it big. These accounts are noteworthy precisely because they are so extraordinary and they do nothing to improve the overwhelming odds against reaching the professional level. Rational adults would not gamble their own valuable property at such odds, and they should not gamble their child’s fun either. Fun in youth sports is precious, and it belongs to the child, not the parents.

The cruel irony is that with millions of child athletes quitting in frustration by their early teen years because adults have taken the fun from the game, parental pressure undoubtedly aborts many more collegiate and professional careers than it creates. Some children who quit playing early, before ever developing skills and demonstrating genuine talent, would have had a better chance of reaching the collegiate or professional ranks with supportive parents who allowed them to engage in natural play. When a ten-year-old quits because of being cut, benched or continually yelled at by parents and coaches, who knows what might have been? What if Michael Jordan had quit after being cut from the varsity basketball team as a tenth grader?

Devoted parents should seek reward in the child’s physical and emotional growth from playing, a reward that money cannot buy, not in the pursuit of elusive scholarships or professional contracts. A youth sports career is fleeting because youngsters pass through adolescence quickly, emerging only with the memories, good or bad. I have seen children play their best for years, only to ultimately feel that they let down their parents for not reaching the collegiate or pro ranks. In a society that worships at the altar of

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80. *Id.*; see also RICHARD LAPCHICK, FIVE MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT: RACE AND SPORTS IN THE 1990s 260 (1991) (noting there are about 43 times as many high school football players as Division I college players).

81. Stryer, *supra* note 3, at 704.

athletic prowess, feeling like a failure for the rest of your life is not fun.

### III. EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN YOUTH SPORTS

#### A. Why Private Youth Sports Programs Deny Equal Athletic Opportunity, and What Parents Can Do About It

In organized youth sports, equal opportunity is intimately related to fun, not only because children know when adults are short-changing them, but also because inequality frustrates or excludes many children who want to play. Equal opportunity in youth sports is neither difficult nor impossible to achieve. Most parents and coaches know equal athletic opportunity when they see it, and when they work energetically to defeat it.

At the core, “equal opportunity” means that a youth sports program should enroll each boy and girl who wishes to enroll, and should assure each youngster full and fair participation in every practice session and game. No child should be cut or made uncomfortable for wanting to play, regardless of ability. The program should tolerate a waiting list only as an absolute last resort, and should maintain unavoidable waiting lists on a first-come, first-served basis without favoring particular children based on ability or family circumstance. No waiting list should be tolerated where careful scheduling, such as modest reductions in practice and game time for teams and players already enrolled, would create room for new teams rather than leave some children behind.

“Equal opportunity” also means enabling each child, to the extent possible, to play with children of roughly the same ability level. Children with five years’ experience, for example, would be better off not playing against beginners, and beginners would be better off not playing against seasoned veterans. Experienced players may become bored, beginners may become intimidated or embarrassed and wide disparities of talent increase risk of injury, particularly in contact or collision sports.

Where a program maintains “travel” teams for the more experienced youngsters, it should also maintain a “house” league if sufficient interest warrants. With several teams engaging in local play, vibrant house leagues permit broad participation by enabling less experienced children to have fun, develop skills and maintain self-esteem before moving to a higher level if they wish. In larger communities where a few programs conduct house leagues at roughly the same ability level and within convenient driving distance of one



another, a program can offer its house leaguers a taste of travel competition by scheduling a few games against teams from other house leagues.

“Equal opportunity” also means that every child should receive a fair amount of playing time each game. Modest disparity throughout an entire game may be unavoidable and can largely be made up at the next game, but chronic benchwarming is a public humiliation that leads some children to drop out. Fair-minded coaches know the difference between modest disparity and chronic benchwarming, and no coach assigns chronic benchwarmers by accident. Rules assuring only minimal participation, such as ones guaranteeing each youngster only two innings and one at-bat in a seven-inning baseball game, are shams when coaches can get away with giving the same players the short end of the stick game after game.

When all is said and done, “equal opportunity” means viewing community youth sports programs as a pyramid. The strongest part of a pyramid is at the middle and bottom, not the top. Elite teams have a role in older age groups because youngsters, including the relatively few players at the top of the pyramid, deserve opportunities to compete at their own ability level once they have mastered the basics. For most of these top players, elite teams provide their last chance to pursue excellence in organized sports because the collegiate and professional ranks will be out of reach.

Most youngsters, however, are not “elite” players and never will be. In any community, the “elite” cannot realistically include more than about 20% of youngsters who play a particular sport. A community fails its youth unless the community’s sports programs offer meaningful participation to the remaining 80% lower on the pyramid, including the least experienced youngsters at the bottom.

Regardless of their lofty rhetoric, however, most private youth sports programs reject “equal opportunity” because the adults in control want no part of it. Programs conducted by parks and recreation departments or other public agencies can mandate equal opportunity, but most private programs are conducted by “short termers,” parents and coaches who know they will be involved for only a few years while their own children are involved. With brief tenure assured at the outset, many adults in control cannot resist temptation to take what they can for their own children and their teams, even when they know their selfishness means depriving other youngsters.

Many private programs defeat equal opportunity by making unnecessary cuts or maintaining avoidable waiting lists so they can pursue victory by lavishing extra practice and game time on the most talented youngsters. Many coaches take the easy way out, forming “select” teams so they can win immediately without having to work patiently with less talented youngsters unable to produce quick victory. Other coaches belittle minimum-participation rules as a petty annoyance to be evaded whenever benching some players may pay off on the scoreboard.

In many private programs, it is no secret that winning a position on the board of directors is the easiest way to bypass tryouts and assure prime playing time for your child. Board members vote to appoint coaches of the most desirable teams, who will be smart enough to remember that board members who voted them in this year can vote them out next year. Subtle pressures help explain why even with modest talent, board members’ children and their friends so often happen to get selected for the most desirable teams and seldom need a seat on the bench.

With equitable private sports programs the exception rather than the rule, public officials frequently make matters worse. Most private youth sports programs do not own their own fields, gyms or other facilities; they use public facilities under license agreements with the school district, parks department or other public agency. The licenses often come at favorable rates or even free, on the rationale that the program performs a valuable public service by conducting a wholesome youth activity.

When they allocate scarce field and gymnasium time, officials often give priority to “elite” programs that maintain avoidable waiting lists, or that cut or wait-list large numbers of youngsters and then tolerate coaches who assign chronic benchwarmers. Programs open to all youngsters are often forced to settle for whatever facilities and inconvenient time slots are left because these inclusive programs cannot showcase the community’s best players, command headlines or conduct tournaments and travel teams that generate revenue for hotels, restaurants and other local businesses. In many communities, the unyielding demand for scarce athletic facilities assures that very little is left over.<sup>82</sup>

Where public facilities are scarce, officials must give first priority to programs that pledge to permit all interested youngsters to play. These programs must be assured access to facilities sufficient

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82. See, e.g., Kate Stone Lombardi, *Downside of the Sports Boom: A Growing Shortage of Fields*, N.Y. TIMES, June 10, 2001, § 14WC, at 1.

to meet the reasonable needs of all children, and access must be provided during convenient hours unlikely to discourage broad participation.

Taxpayers should insist that each youth sports program seeking to use public facilities file an annual application and a “child impact statement,” stating the number of children who sought to enroll the prior year, the number the program enrolled and allowed to participate and the program’s written policy for assuring each child fair participation in each practice session and game. Authorities reviewing applications should be alert for complaints that a program fails to practice what its written policy preaches. To determine whether a sports program truly serves the community’s youth, officials charged with assigning public facilities need to ask only one question: “How does the program treat its least talented player?” Adults conducting many private programs could not give an honest answer with a straight face.

Taxpayers should remain vigilant, speaking at city council and school board meetings to challenge these elected officials to act for the greater good whenever it appears that assignment of public facilities may shortchange inclusive community programs. These programs must receive their fair share because the only other major provider of youth sports, the school district, excludes too many youngsters who wish to play.

### B. Why Secondary Schools Deny Children Equal Athletic Opportunity, and What Parents Can Do About It

Schools generally offer two sources of athletics, interscholastic teams and physical education (“PE”) classes. Neither pretends to serve all children who seek the camaraderie and lasting memories of organized sports. Interscholastic teams generally skim the best players off the top and offer nothing to most of the student body, while PE classes generally offer only sporadic activity to youngsters denied places on interscholastic teams.

Interscholastic sports programs are important to the school and community,<sup>83</sup> but they generally have places for only about 25% of the student body, the most talented athletes.<sup>84</sup> The 25%

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83. See, e.g., *Vernonia Sch. Dist. v. Acton*, 515 U.S. 646, 648 (1995) (indicating respect garnered by student athletes from community); EITZEN & SAGE, *supra* note 5, at 109-12.

84. In the fall of 2000, an estimated 15,018,000 children attended grades 9 through 12 in public and private schools. See UNITED STATES CENSUS BUREAU, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES 2000, at 152, tabl. 241. According to the National Federation of State High School Associations (“NFHS”), 6,556,912 high

estimated figure might even decline in the immediate future because the number of high school age youngsters is rising.<sup>85</sup> When a school district absorbs steadily increasing enrollment without constructing new schools, available positions on sports teams will likely remain relatively constant despite a higher number of candidates from among the increasing student body.<sup>86</sup>

On the one hand, this 25% figure may seem artificially low because many of the remaining students join non-athletic extracurricular activities such as the marching band or the chess club without ever seeking a position on a sports team. At the same time, the figure may seem artificially high because some sports (such as track and field, cross country, swimming and football) typically have no-cut policies that offset sports (such as basketball, baseball and ice hockey) that typically cut large numbers of candidates.

The bottom line, however, is that only the most talented candidates make the varsity or junior varsity teams, and that interscholastic sports excludes too many youngsters and leaves them with no place to play except in community programs. No matter how many sports a school offers, the locker room door is closed to all boys and girls who are cut or discouraged from trying out in the first place. Many team members then warm the bench game after game because coaches know that winning is the surest way to keep their jobs, and to maintain their sanity by deflecting the wrath of parents, boosters and school administrators bent on victory. Even when a team follows a no-cut policy, the policy is usually a charade that merely allows any interested youngster to hang around as fodder in practice sessions with little or no realistic chance of ever seeing action in games, where most of the fun and fulfillment are.

No self-respecting educator would ever advocate a classroom curriculum that instructs only 25% or so of the most talented stu-

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school boys and girls participated in interscholastic sports during the 1999-2000 academic year. See NFHS, *Participation Survey 1999-2000*, at 56, available at [http://www.nfhs.org/part\\_survey99-00.htm](http://www.nfhs.org/part_survey99-00.htm) (October 21, 2000). The NFHS statistic appears artificially high, however, because it “[r]eflects participation rate, i.e., individual who participated in two sports is counted twice, three sports – three times, etc.” *Id.* n.3. Because many boys and girls play more than one sport, the 25% figure is estimated by assigning about one and a half sports to each participating youngster, that is by estimating that about three and a half to four million of the nation’s fourteen-plus million high school students play at least one interscholastic sport.

85. See, e.g., FEDERAL INTERAGENCY FORUM ON CHILD AND FAMILY STATISTICS, *supra* note 2 (reporting number of children in United States, which stood at 70.4 million in 2000, is projected to increase to 77.2 million in 2020).

86. See generally Robert Lipsyte, *Varsity Syndrome: The Unkindest Cut*, 445 *Annals, AAPSS* 15 (Sept. 1979).

dents and excludes everyone else. Too many school districts, however, offer competitive sports to only the most talented boys and girls while sending everyone else home or letting them participate only as spectators. If the varsity team does happen to win a major title, the hoopla may actually increase the inequity when boosters seek an even greater percentage of available resources, citing victory as proof of the school's excellence in athletics. The title actually proves only that the school's best players can win as long as the athletic department ignores the rest of the student body.

While continuing to channel money into interscholastic sports for the few, more districts than ever before balance tight budgets by reducing or eliminating PE classes.<sup>87</sup> According to a recent study by the National Association For Sport and Physical Education, 81% of parents with children in elementary and secondary schools believe that daily physical education should be mandatory, even though only 44% of their children are receiving it.<sup>88</sup>

Even when daily physical education is offered, classes frequently fail to serve a student's long-term needs because they stress sports that most adolescents stop playing in early adulthood, such as baseball and football, rather than "carryover sports" that can last a lifetime, such as swimming, jogging and racquet sports.<sup>89</sup> In the typical PE class, students engage in actual physical activity for only about a quarter of the class period; most of the period is consumed with instruction, administrative tasks and waiting.<sup>90</sup> Once exercise begins, PE classes frequently feature games like dodge ball, which regularly humiliate the least talented youngsters, encourage arrogance in the most talented and relegate most participants to the sidelines for much of every game.<sup>91</sup> Classes are often conducted by

87. See, e.g., Kohl & Hobbs, *supra* note 5, at 549; Marion Nestle & Michael F. Jacobson, *Halting the Obesity Epidemic: A Public Health Policy Approach*, 115 PUB. HEALTH REP. 12 (2000). See generally American Academy of Pediatrics, *Physical Fitness and the Schools*, 80 PEDIATRICS 449 (1987) (describing pressures that have led to decreased support for physical education classes).

88. See Michelle Healy, *Schools' PE Programs Are a Bit Lean, Parents Say*, USA TODAY, May 22, 2000, at D6.

89. See, e.g., Nestle & Jacobson, *supra* note 87, at 12; HEALTHY CHILDREN 2000: NATIONAL HEALTH PROMOTION AND DISEASE PREVENTION OBJECTIVES RELATED TO MOTHERS, INFANTS, CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH 15 (1992) (stressing implementation of physical education that will lead to "life long physical activity") [hereinafter HEALTHY CHILDREN 2000].

90. See HEALTHY CHILDREN 2000, *supra* note 89, at 15 (reporting 27% of class time spent in actual physical activity, 26% spent in instruction, 22% spent in administrative tasks, and 25% spent waiting).

91. See, e.g., Thomas Toch, *Say Goodbye to Dodge Ball*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., Nov. 16, 1998, at 70; Nancy Shute, *Go Out and Play*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., Apr. 6, 1998, at 69.

PE teachers who are uncertified in that field or who view their PE classes as drudgery to be endured before the final afternoon bell liberates them to coach the varsity.

Too many communities tolerate ineffective PE curricula while the nation suffers through an "epidemic of childhood obesity,"<sup>92</sup> with about a quarter of all children overweight and lacking sufficient physical activity.<sup>93</sup> Increased television watching, video game playing, reliance on fast-food outlets, dependence on automobiles and other lifestyle changes have taken their toll on children in recent generations.<sup>94</sup> Americans know full well that the pediatric obesity epidemic grows worse each year,<sup>95</sup> even if they are sometimes unwilling to make the hard choices necessary to help produce a cure.

Schools can often get away with ignoring the athletic needs of most students because too many people misunderstand the vital role of athletics in education. When school budgets appear tight, "athletics" may evoke images of fun and games, a luxury the curriculum can live without. Because physical exercise remains a powerful antidote to obesity and inactivity, however, athletics is not an expendable frill, somehow less important than other facets of primary and secondary school curricula. A healthy body is as important as a healthy mind, and elementary and secondary schools

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92. See Nestle & Jacobson, *supra* note 87, at 12. See generally Dennis Michael Styne, *Childhood Obesity: Time for Action, Not Complacency*, AM. FAM. PHYSICIAN 758 (1999); Scott O. Roberts, *The Role of Physical Activity in the Prevention and Treatment of Childhood Obesity*, 26 PEDIATRIC NURSING 33 (Jan. 1, 2000).

93. See Robert J. Kuczmarski et al., *Increasing Prevalence of Overweight Among U.S. Adults*, 272 JAMA 205 (1994) (stating between 20% and 27%).

94. See, e.g., *Facts About Childhood Obesity and Overweightness*, 12 FAMILY ECON. & NUTRITION REV. 52 (1999); Ross E. Andersen et al., *Relationship of Physical Activity and Television Watching With Body Weight and Level of Fatness Among Children: Results From the Third Health and Nutrition Examination Survey*, 279 JAMA 938 (1998) (comparing vigorous activity and TV watching with body weight and fatness); Kohl & Hobbs, *supra* note 5, at 549; Richard P. Troiano & Katherine M. Flegal, *Overweight Children and Adolescents: Description, Epidemiology, and Demographics*, 101 PEDIATRICS 497, 503 (1998) (listing factors that decrease amount children exercise). See generally National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Guidelines For School and Community Programs to Promote Lifelong Physical Activity Among Young People*, 67 J. SCH. HEALTH 202 (1997).

95. See, e.g., *Harris Poll: Public Believes Lifestyle Causes Problems*, AM. HEALTH LINE, Nov. 17, 1999 (discussing poll in which 61% of Americans said they believe "overweight youth who do not exercise" is health problem "more serious than others," 49% of Americans said overweight youth is problem that is "getting worse," and 49% of Americans said "obesity epidemic" is "getting worse"). Reporting that the number of deaths annually related to obesity is approaching the number related to smoking, U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. David Satcher, has urged, among other things, that schools provide daily physical education in all grades. See, e.g., *U.S. Warning of Death Toll From Obesity*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 14, 2001, at A26.

should teach the lifelong value of both. Indeed, for nearly a century schools themselves have justified interscholastic athletics as vehicles for enhancing physical fitness and developing character in the nation's youth.<sup>96</sup>

What can parents do? Because nearly all children attend school, universal physical education can be a major step toward assuring all children a measure of equal athletic opportunity. At the threshold, parents should insist on an effective elementary and secondary physical education curriculum taught by teachers certified in PE.<sup>97</sup> In the short term, PE classes must provide vigorous physical activity for all children, particularly during the autumn and winter months, when the weather sharply reduces the level of children's physical activity outside of school in many parts of the nation.<sup>98</sup> In the longer term, classes must teach the health benefits of a lifestyle rich in healthy aerobic exercise and appreciation for carryover sports.<sup>99</sup> The results of an effective physical education curriculum can last a lifetime because studies have shown that children with positive attitudes about their PE classes are more likely than other children to continue exercising into middle age and beyond.<sup>100</sup>

For children who wish to play competitive organized sports, however, instruction in daily PE classes can be only a complement, and not a substitute, for interscholastic or community sports programs. Because children excluded from interscholastic teams suffer twice when they are also excluded from community programs, parents must insist that community programs leave no interested child on the outside looking in.

"Double dipping" — playing the same sport simultaneously on an interscholastic team and in an organized community league — may also thwart equal opportunity and leave some children with nothing. Many interscholastic sanctioning bodies prohibit double-dipping in an effort to assure that interscholastic athletes, who generally practice regularly throughout the week on top of a full sched-

96. See, e.g., EITZEN & SAGE, *supra* note 5, at 104.

97. See, e.g., WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON FOOD, NUTRITION AND HEALTH: FINAL REPORT 49 (1970).

98. See HEALTHY CHILDREN 2000, *supra* note 89, at 14-15.

99. See, e.g., D. A. Bailey, *The Growing Child and the Need for Physical Activity*, in *Child in Sport and Physical Activity* 81 (J.G. Albinson & G. M. Andrew eds., 1976); James F. Sallis & Thomas L. McKenzie, *Physical Education's Role in Public Health*, 62 RES. Q. EXERCISE AND SPORTS 124 (1991).

100. See generally Kristi J. Ferguson & Charles E. Yesalis et al., *Attitudes, Knowledge and Beliefs as Predictors of Exercise Intent and Behavior in Schoolchildren*, 59 J. SCH. HEALTH 112 (1989).

ule of games, will have ample time and energy for academics. The prohibition also helps to prevent a relatively small number of players from consuming most of a town's athletic offerings. Particularly where facilities are scarce and the specter of wait-lists looms in community programs, parents of children facing exclusion should insist that the school board prohibit double dipping if no such rule otherwise exists.

All interested boys and girls, and not just star athletes, need and deserve equal opportunity to participate in organized sports throughout their childhood and adolescence. By denying most students the educational benefits of interscholastic athletics while frequently giving short shrift to PE classes, schools leave a pressing pedagogic and public health need that only community sports programs open to all children can fulfill.

#### IV. CONCLUSION: YOUTH SPORTS AS A LOCAL AND NATIONAL RESOURCE

More than two years have passed since the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Whenever a tragedy like Columbine occurs, adults hit the airwaves imploring communities to reach out to children with wholesome activities. We cannot reasonably expect sports programs to pinpoint potential killers, of course, because such random deviants are not readily identifiable. But sports programs can prevent much deviancy by reaching out to the greatest possible number of children, and by enriching their lives with the self-respect that comes from athletic competition, win or lose.

Too many communities, however, complain about high rates of teen alcohol and drug use, yet systematically exclude most teens from athletic competition by depriving them of fun, by starving or eliminating inclusive community sports programs, or both. I see a direct connection, describable in two sentences: (1) When large numbers of teens are excluded from team sports or from participating with peers in individual sports, many of these teens will drift toward other peer groups, including ones likely to cause trouble; (2) With time on their hands and without the opportunity to "turn on" to sports, many of these teens in their peer groups will turn on to something else, often drugs and alcohol. In a community that deprives most teens of organized sports, no one should be surprised when many teens travel down the wrong path.

With millions of children participating each year, youth sports programs organized by adults can be a valuable local and national



resource. Adults can be wholesome role models who encourage, supervise and teach children in a safe, secure environment. Adult participation of children's games can be a positive force in the lives of boys and girls of all ages and ability levels.

When thoughtful adults assure a prominent place for fun and equal opportunity, youngsters of all ability levels win because the challenges, successes and disappointments of wholesome athletic competition help shape their character and point the way toward adulthood. Parents win because youth sports provides children lifelong memories of victory and defeat shared with family and friends. The entire community wins because values learned in athletics help build solid citizens, many of whom will remain in the community to raise families years later. America also wins when these values help shape an entire generation, long after the scores of distant games have faded from memory.

These enduring victories will not happen, however, until more parents and coaches straighten out their priorities, move beyond selfishness and embrace the core principle — that the mission of organized youth sports is to serve all interested children and build character through fun.