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Douglas E. Abrams

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When teaching sports, teach citizenship as well

BY DOUGLAS E. ABRAMS

COLUMBIA, MO. // With the holidays upon us, thoughts will turn soon to New Year's resolutions. More than 35 million children — nearly half the children in America — play sports each year, so plenty of parents and coaches would do well to resolve to make sports better for boys and girls in 2007.

"Making sports better" means no more adults slugging one another at games for children as young as 6. No more "select" teams that cut 8-year-olds. No more adults whose zeal to win has fueled an epidemic of overuse injuries in preteens pushed too hard, too fast. No more teams whose hectic schedules drain the youngsters and threaten the family dinner with extinction.

But "making sports better" also means finding new ways to teach children the lifetime citizenship lessons we expect from athletics. Because experience is the best teacher, the best New Year's resolution for 2007 is to encourage young athletes to learn by doing.

I coach with the Central Missouri Eagles youth hockey program, whose teams each do a community service project during the season. Last winter, the Eagles high school team collected hundreds of stuffed animals for sick and injured children at the University of Missouri Children's

Hospital and then visited the bed-ridden patients to distribute the toys and spread warmth and cheer.

The 11- and 12-year-olds on the Eagles pee-wee team collected hundreds of backpacks and stuffed animals for abused and neglected children, who often arrive in family court traumatized and carrying only whatever personal belongings they can quickly stuff into a plastic garbage bag. The Eagles mite and squirt teams, the 6-to-10-year-olds, collected cans of food for the local food bank to feed hungry children and their families.

Each Eagles team chooses its own service project, even the 6-year-olds. When the players work to improve the quality of community life, their parents and coaches teach citizenship through the vehicle of sports. Eagles players now understand better what it means to go hungry or to find yourself in the children's hospital or family court through no fault of your own.

The players learned the lessons firsthand, and citizenship learned early lasts a lifetime.

Douglas E. Abrams, a law professor at the University of Missouri, serves on the Expert Panel of the Center for Sports Parenting at the University of Rhode Island. He has coached youth hockey since 1968. His e-mail is abramsd@missouri.edu.

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