

## UNREAL SPORTS KIDS AND PARENTS

By Dan Woog -- Westport (CT) News -- July 8, 2005

In the uber-competitive world of rankings, Westport is at or near the top in many categories – for example, teardowns per week (and square footage of new homes), or SAT scores (and hours spent on SAT prep courses). Some of us are proud, others embarrassed; all accept these facts without much thought, as the price of living in this little corner of paradise.

But we should all bow our heads, and give thanks we don't inhabit that part of hell that dwells on reality TV. I'm talking about Bravo's clumsily named but brutally frank show, "Sports Kids and Parents." It airs Wednesdays at 10 p.m., and unlike most Bravo offerings, it is not repeated six squintillion times a day. You've got to watch (or TiVo) it that night. Believe me, it's worth it – if only for the sense of schadenfreude you get from seeing other adults behave far more self-centeredly, immaturely and bizarrely than you ever dreamed of acting.

I've lived in Westport my entire life, and been involved in youth sports here for nearly as long. In those years I've seen a few instances of less-than-sporting behavior, times when men and women crossed the line between promoting what's best for their children and other youngsters, and promoting themselves and their kids.

In retrospect, though, such occasions were rare, and the influences of peers – other parents and coaches – eventually brought the miscreants to heel. Compared to what goes on on "Sports Kids and Parents," Westport is la-la land.

It's hard to know which of four parents on the show is more loathsome (the fifth, a female basketball coach, is a gem). Because she's the biggest target, though, we'll start with Sharon. This is a woman who in middle school years ago did not make the cheerleading squad, and was teased by other girls. Now she's got a daughter, and Sharon is using her to get back at all those meanies.

The little girl, Sarah, is a cheerleader. Not just any cheerleader, mind you; she lives in Texas, so she's a competitive cheerleader – at 8 years old. Sarah is enrolled in tons of classes – gymnastics, dance, cheering, you name it. Her schedule is booked tighter than most CEOs, and she works in more of a frenzy than a Wall Street trader.

Every Monday Sarah has a stomach ache. One weekend she had swollen glands. All she wanted was to sleep, but her mother sent her off to compete. Her final admonition was to not look at any of the other girls – particularly her "archrival," Nicolette.

Sarah went out, shook her little body suggestively, and won. Nicolette congratulated Sarah, but that wasn't good enough for Sharon, who had previously declared that finishing second was not an option. Without even a nod to how proud she was of her daughter, Sharon said, "That trophy is going on the shelf. Now it's time to get back to work. Because when you're on top, someone will always be out to get you."

Yet Sharon is June Cleaver compared to Karen. She's the mother of five children in South Glastonbury; the older two girls are competitive riders. Karen is in the middle of a divorce so, as expected, times are tough. The oldest girl, Karli, works three jobs to help pay for her lessons, competitions and horse. One of those jobs is mucking out stalls – shoveling manure, tossing hay, doing the dirty work most 17-year-old girls in Connecticut suburbs would flee in horror from.

It's bad enough that Karen compares her daughter to Paris Hilton, and says Karli thinks the world revolves around her. But then we see Karen defending her 90-minute, seven-day-a-week Bikram yoga classes as crucial to keeping her family together, because they allow her to center herself and feel good. Karen's passive-aggressive behavior is difficult to watch; thankfully, Karli's realistic attitude and hard work balance out her mom.

Speaking of thanks, I'm glad I have not met anyone in Westport like Craig. He's a former Western Michigan University football player now living in Southern California. Despite an MBA, he works three low-key jobs – including delivering Domino pizzas – in order to devote his entire life to making his 8-year-old son, Trenton, an NFL star.

Craig has hired a semipro player to work with Trenton (whom Craig calls “one of the fastest boys in the state”). The coach runs Trenton up and down stadium steps and sand dunes. He drills him incessantly. He even takes him to one of his own semipro games, where Trenton watches the hitting and tackling with what seems like pure horror.

Craig's over-involvement would be laughable, were it not so sad. Last week, for example, he wrote a letter to University of Michigan football coach Lloyd Carr. It was supposedly a joint project, in which Trenton would explain how much he wanted to go to UM, and hoped Coach Carr would notice him -- but Craig wrote every word, and wrote it all down. He even signed Trenton's name – then crossed it out, and handed the pen to his son. “In cursive?” the boy asked plaintively.

We never see Trenton interacting with teammates or playing with friends. The only time he seems happy, in fact, is when he plays his guitar or recorder. But that's not unusual on “Sports Kids and Parents.” None of the youngsters has time for friends – except Lindsay, the basketball player whose coach/mother has the sense to sit her out when low grades and an active social life threaten to disrupt the team.

Perhaps the loneliest athlete is Bryce, a 16-year-old figure skater whose mother watches every practice session, and criticizes every mistake (though from the looks of her, she has never set foot on ice herself). The only time we saw Bryce's father was when he commented after a fall: “He sucks.”

I know that everything I see on “Sports Kids and Parents” may not have happened exactly as it is shown. Reality TV, after all, is pretty unreal. On the other hand, Bravo can't show something that never occurred. The parents on this show do put tremendous pressure on their children. They do manipulate them psychologically – sometimes purposefully, sometimes not – to the point of child abuse. They are victims of their own unfulfilled hopes and dreams, and they are living much of their lives through their children.

It's almost a game to mock the over-involvement of Westport parents in their children's lives. Happily, nothing I've ever seen here comes close to the sickness of the games other parents, in supposedly less competitive places than Westport, play.