
Ease up, parents. If sports aren't fun, what's the point?; [All Edition]

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Full Text (955 words)

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An open letter to parents:

It's the start of another school sports season, another clean slate on which to write a new script. And, lord knows, we need one. It's not been the easiest of summers for youth sports. A youth league in New Bedford was stopped for a while because of parents fighting. Parade magazine recently ran a big story on youth sports, the gist of which was what a disaster they've become, over-organized, misplaced priorities, full of fear and loathing, the whole enchilada.

So here are five things to remember:

* Stay Home Once In A While:

I'm not exactly sure when parents decided that an athletic event can't take place unless they are there. Which is not inherently a bad thing, of course. Obviously, parents being involved in their kids' lives is a good thing, but there's a flip side to this, too.

There's little question that parents at athletic events raise everyone's anxiety level, most of all the kids'. The Little League father has become a cliché. As has the father who is trying to live his own career over again through his kid. Kids aren't clueless. The very fact that their parents take their sports seriously reinforces the message to kids that how they perform is important. This has ramifications, especially when kids are not having a lot of success.

The more I'm around youth sports, the more I've come to believe that everyone would be better off if parents simply stayed home once in a while. If nothing else, it would be a message that sports are just something kids do, important certainly, but not life and death either.

* Coaches Are Not Always Idiots:

Talk to virtually any coach nowadays and the first thing they tell you is it's not the kids who are the problem, it's the parents. Parents with unrealistic expectations. Parents who complain that their kids don't play enough, aren't showcased enough, whatever. Parents who chip away at a coach's role. Rest assured, there are easier things nowadays than being a coach.

And even if a particular coach is an idiot?

So be it.

Dealing with idiots is a fact of life, a lesson everyone should learn, kids included.

Specifically, we don't always work for people who think we are as (1) glamorous, (2) brilliant, or

(3) charming as we think we are. The trick is to deal with it.

Coaches are in charge, pure and simple. They determine who plays. They determine how the team plays. They determine all of it. And sometimes it's not always fair. Then again, life is not always fair, another lesson kids should learn. Kids who understand this, and learn to make their own peace with it, are ultimately better off than those who continually hear from their parents that some coach is shortchanging them, even if it might be true.

Maybe it's this simple: You're not the coach. So don't coach.

* Have A Sense Of Reality:

What are you trying to get out of all this?

That's the question you should be asking yourself.

If you're trying to get a college scholarship, you probably have a better chance buying lottery tickets. Truth be told, not too many kids get athletic scholarships, regardless of the sport.

That's just the way it is, and odds are you aren't going to change it. In other words, if getting a scholarship is the goal, you are only setting up both yourself and your child for disappointment and broken dreams.

It's infinitely more realistic to establish more achievable goals. Sports should be about being on a team, learning how to compete, learning how to deal with adversity. Sports should be about playing for the love of them.

Above all, sports should be about the present tense, an end in itself, not a means to an end.

B It's All Right For Your Kid To Fail:

Somehow it's become un-American to fail.

We're never supposed to lose.

Were always supposed to hear cheers, and win awards.

Is it any wonder so many kids seem to have disappointing athletic careers?

One of the great overlooked facts of life is that every time someone wins someone else loses. This symbiotic relationship should constantly be stressed, this sense that winning and losing are two sides of the same coin.

The great lesson is we often learn more from failure than from success. At their best, sports teach kids to come back from adversity, to come back from losing, no small thing in a society that's become all about instant gratification and a sense of entitlement. At their best, sports teach kids that it's what they do after they fail that's the most important, the ability to persevere, to keep coming back, even when it's difficult.

Can kids learn any better lesson than this?

B Lighten Up.

Maybe the most important of all to remember.

It's impossible to be around youth sports and not see too many parents who are not having a whole lot of fun. Complaining about the coach. Yelling at the referees. Putting pressure on their kids, whether they mean to or not. Draining all the joy out of everything.

To what end?

The great truth about sports is that when they're finally over, the games of childhood put away forever, whether you won or lost ultimately doesn't matter. What matters is the relationships you had with the people you played with, the things you shared, the experience. What matters is how much fun you had. Everything else eventually gets blurred, as irrelevant as yesterday's newspaper, as forgotten as some old team roster.

So above all, enjoy it.

Sports are supposed to be fun.

If they're not, then what really is the point?