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SPORTS

## Kid Sports: Is Our Obsession with Winning Making Us Lose the Point?

*A recent survey shows — surprise! — that the more seriously we take youth sports, the less fun kids have*

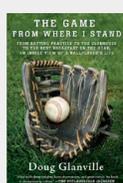
By **DOUG GLANVILLE** | @dougglanville | October 25, 2011 | 19

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GETTY IMAGES

At the age of 7, I put on my first baseball uniform as a member of Joey's Children's Wear of Teaneck Western Little League. From that day forth, I would continue to wear team colors — through high school, college and until I retired from Major League Baseball in 2005. Even in between seasons or off the field, I would find ways to adorn my baseball attire, from my Phillies Halloween costume in the early 1980s to my "acting" in the movie *Summer Catch* in the late 1990s.



Glanville's first book, *The Game from Where I Stand: A Ballplayer's Inside View*, was published in 2010.

Looking back, I realize that my first uniform housed a pristine state of what sports meant to me. I was able to see baseball as a blank canvas, the art of the game fusing color and imagination onto a field of green without boundaries. Yet with experience and time, I realized that an innocence had flaked off this uniform, layer by layer. Maybe it started with an unfair benching, a particularly rambunctious teammate's parent fighting for his son or daughter, or an angry

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manager berating an umpire for a suspect call.

Today, as my molting comes to an end and I see that it is time for me to pass the torch to my children, I worry about the negative elements that are accelerating the process of an innocence lost. To respond to that concern, I joined the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (I am on their research committee) to study youth sports in America. What **we found** was both reassuring — and troubling.

The reassuring part is that our country loves sports, with the vast majority of kids participating. Coaches have wide and great influence over our youth. In fact, they have more influence than parents. But the data of our study also showed that there is often a parasitic relationship between winning and how a game is taught and celebrated. This obsession forges unhealthy expectations in coaches, in the professional aspirations of young athletes and in our efforts in how we invest in sports as a nation. Winning at all costs is costly.

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This study also showed that early specialization — focusing on just one sport above all others — leads to diminishing returns for those who participate. Playing a variety of sports reduces the stress of prematurely having all eggs in one basket, which can lead players to desperate measures to excel and make them enjoy the game less. Having “fun” was important to young people — once they stopped having fun, they lost an interest in playing. And when parents fight in the stands, or coaches have to recruit to fortify a Little League team, or children are not allowed to enjoy sports because they are not “good enough,” fun often goes out the window.

My oldest child is only 3, so for now, I will enjoy the window that I am in before I inevitably sign him up for soccer and Little League. Right now, the only uniforms my kids will be wearing are their Halloween costumes — my son as James from *Thomas the Tank Engine*, and my daughter a color-rich rainbow. I hope that when the time comes, my daughter’s rainbow costume can symbolize what sports will be — something that everyone can enjoy at any level and that allows young people to fly high above the clouds of their greatest potential.

*Glanville, a Major League Baseball player from 1996 to 2004, is an analyst for ESPN and the author of [The Game from Where I Stand](#). The views expressed are solely his own.*

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CanisNLibris

I've seen sports crowd out all kinds of other activities. The family get togethers must be arranged around the child's sports schedule. Family dinners are postponed so the kid can be at practice or at games. Music lessons and practice time, scouts, even religious obligations are shortchanged so that the kids can be at sports events. Families with multiple children find it hard to make any kind of commitment to any other activity. I don't think this situation produces well-rounded people. I don't think it builds community. And I don't think it's much fun.

4 months ago 13 Likes

Like



Terry Clifton

How would you know? Have you lived that life? I do, every weekend. The truth is, that we do miss other "family" activities, and our schedule is basically non-existent. However, we wouldn't have it any other way. Our daughter plays competitive softball, and we travel 8-10 hours for tournaments and practice. She's the driving force behind this crazy life. She wants to do it, and the rewards are a college education and a million memories. You see, while some see it as crazy, we don't. We eat together, play together, and we are constantly talking, singing, and the relationships we have formed with other parents are priceless. Also, when we are on a road trip, we stop at all the "brown sign" sites on our way. Our daughter has learned about how hate can wipe out generations of people at the Holocaust Museum, visited Jefferson's Monticello, rode Space Mountain at Disney World, she has walked 1,000 of miles of our national parks, museums, aquariums, and made hundred's of friends; all because of her drive to play softball. We couldn't be prouder of her. Oh, one last thing, she hasn't made below an "A" since the 8th grade, and she's number 1 or 2 in her class, she's also very liked and popular by her classmates and team mates alike. How's that for well rounded?

4 months ago in reply to CanisNLibris

3 Likes

Like



fixkid

It sounds like your daughter and your family are an exception and for that you should be congratulated. Only 0.7% of girls playing high school softball earn a college scholarship. So, one needs to enter this world of youth competitive athletics with realistic expectations that include fun, character building, learning the meaning of teamwork and sacrifice, etc., not with the purpose of getting a scholarship or playing professionally.

4 months ago in reply to Terry Clifton

6 Likes

Like



Terry Clifton

We along with our daughter are very much aware of how many scholarships are given out to girls who don't play basketball. She's carrying a 4.0 with every thing from Calculus to Advanced History. We are not naive, but there are plenty of parents who are, regardless if their children are boys or girls. Thank you for the nice words. We will be traveling to Pennsylvania this weekend for another College Showcase Tournament, and some time at Gettysburg Battlefield and surrounding attractions.

4 months ago in reply to fixkid

Like



Kirk Mango

There is a give and take with everything. It can build community and well-rounded people, however, emphasis must be placed in the right areas to do so. I have to say that to many times it is not.

It is not sports per se that are the problem; it is the people controlling the implementation of them that is at issue.

4 months ago in reply to CanisNLibris

Like



Aging1Computer2Geek

I never grew up seriously engaging any team sports. In my youth, you're more likely to find me nosing through a book than handling any kind of ball.

The upshot is that I can spot a good writer. Mr. Glanville if your baseball is as good as your literary skills, you must have been a wonder to see in the field!

4 months ago

6 Likes

Like



Kirk Mango

Agree, very well written!!!

4 months ago in reply to Aging1Computer2Geek

1 Like

Like



Terry Clifton

There will always be obsessives in anything, sports are no different. We all know that parent who screams at every call, who has their kid decked out in the latest and greatest equipment, and so on. However, for every one of those parents; there are hundred's of other parents that are there at every game; teaching their children how to cope with losing, and how to win with honor and dignity. The greatest teaching moment in sports isn't about winning or losing; it's how to teach your child to give one's all, to never settle for less than the maximum effort despite the outcome. The newest movement in children's sports are to give trophies just for showing up; that's counter productive and it rewards apathy. Children need to know that as they grow; the world gets more competitive, and they need to be be ready. Because if they don't land that job in the future; they don't get a trophy for just for showing up.

4 months ago

3 Likes

Like



Jeff W

Doug,

Good article, as usual. If I may put in a plug for a fine group that solves some of the problems you mention (and I am not affiliated in any way with the group), I would suggest that interested readers get in touch with the Positive Coaching Alliance.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P...>

4 months ago

2 Likes

Like



Kirk Mango

I agree, PCA is a solid group that is very knowledgeable regarding solutions that address the very issue Doug brings out in his piece.

4 months ago in reply to Jeff W

Like



White Veils

I live in such a sport-crazy town that I fear if i choose not to overwhelm my children with afterschool sports activities, they will not be able to participate in things when he gets older. My husband and I both work full time, and we just can't afford the camps, etc, or the time it takes. I think it's a pity.

4 months ago

2 Likes

Like



Kirk Mango

Doug,

This is a very well written article that is right on target. It is heartwarming to see a former professional athlete speak so eloquently regarding a topic so close to my frame of reference. My sports experiences are so far removed from what too many kids are learning today I cannot even begin to expound on them here. I will be doing a supportive follow up piece to your article Nov. 9th on my Tribune Chicagonow blog.

Again, great piece Doug.

Best,

Kirk Mango

"The Athlete's Sports Experience"

"Becoming a True Champion"

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Again, great piece Doug.

Best,

Kirk Mango

"The Athlete's Sports Experience"

"Becoming a True Champion"

4 months ago

1 Like

Like



Sean

Hey Doug... you bring back memories.. I played in Teaneck Little League for Rocklins back in the early eighties! Grew up with Lawrence Frank & the rest of the gang in Teaneck. Loved your article.. really touches the real reason to play sport.

4 months ago

1 Like

Like



ORVsentinel

While I applaud the dialogue around the issues surrounding youth sports (I have been in the trenches now for almost 15 years dealing with dysfunctional systems), I wish more time was spent actually fixing those issues. The ugly truth is that the "business" of professional and amateur athletics combined with our dependency on technological innovation have left the traditional social systems dedicated to youth athletics obsolete. If we don't re-invent the way our communities deliver youth athletic services, a highly fragmented and unaccountable system will continue to dominate and our sentimental recollections of how it used to be in the past will be less and less meaningful. Organizations dedicated to education and shaping adult behavior are really just superficial band-aids. The organizational design of the youth athletic delivery system in the United States has been ravaged. Until that is fixed, the rest is all just "feel good" effort and discussion.

2 months ago

Like



Gary B

However, I'd like to see sports taken up by the community--like Little League and Pop Warner Football and Saturday Morning Soccer--like it's done in many other developed countries that are kicking America's butt in effective education where the US cannot crack the top 25 out of 33--and not by schools. US schools can no longer afford it--even with smoke screens like Pay to Play--and for many athletes focus is taken off academic learning. Yes, I know, football is all some kids have and they're all going to make it into the NFL but more likely prison if their dreams of glory are not realized and they don't have a good, solid education. And while I'm at it, it's not the schools responsibility to keep your overweight and obese children svelte and fit. Turn off the TV, pull their heads out of the Doritos bag, and have them walk to the store for orange juice.

Like

4 months ago

Like



Gary B

Both my girls, eight and twelve, swim (outside of school). I heartily cheer them on, not because I envision stardom or even opportunity for them, but because I want them to challenge themselves to defeat their biggest rival: mediocrity.

4 months ago

Like



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4 months ago

Like



Jeff W

for some reason, I am unable to post the entire link at one time...the last few words are: Positive\_Coaching\_Alliance

4 months ago

Like



Jeff W

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P...>

4 months ago

Like

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