

# Stress in Youth Sports

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In many circles, concern about stress placed on youth sport participants seems to be the most frequent topic of discussion when youth sports is mentioned. Is there stress in youth sports? Of course there is! Not only do the athletes experience stress, but so do the coaches, the parents, the officials, and the administrators.

What is stress? Stress is produced when someone feels that their physical and/or psychological well-being is threatened. They perceive that they may be harmed in some way.

Is stress negative? Not necessarily. Actually, there are two types of stress:

- ☒ Eustress, which is pleasant stress.
- ☒ Distress, which is potentially harmful stress.

Many of you may now be thinking, how can there be pleasant or pleasurable stress. Competitive sports activities are a source of both eustress and distress, as are any types of competitive activity. We might argue, for example, that the video game industry exists to provide a source of eustress! The enjoyment of competition is reported by young athletes as one of the top three reasons for which they participate in youth sports. Why, then, does there seem to be such a concern about stress in youth sports?

One perception appears to be that youth sports are more distressful than other activities in which children participate. Fortunately, this is not the case. Simon and Martens, in a study reported in the 1979 issue of *Journal of Sport Psychology*, found that youth sports participation produced state anxiety levels in the same range as other typical competitive youth activities such as band and classroom tests.

In fact, of the nineteen activities they examined, band solos produced the highest level of state anxiety. Within the various sport activities studied, individual sports produced the highest levels of state anxiety, followed by small group team sports (such as basketball), with the large group team sports resulting in the least state anxiety.

This is actually a fairly logical finding. When an individual feels personal responsibility for the outcome, they are likely to experience greater stress than someone who is part of a group/team which shares the responsibility for the outcome of the activity.

This is not to say that distress is not a problem in youth sports. Stress has the potential for making youth sport participation an unpleasant experience for the children, and for coaches and parents also. The more we understand about stress in youth sports, the less likely it is to result in significant problems.