

Should Elementary School Children Take Part in Inter-School Sports Competition?

by

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Texts by leading scholars in the field of elementary physical education endorse the view that any form of competition should be kept out of the elementary physical education curriculum (Siedentop, 1998; Wall & Murray, 1990). Teachers that insist on including competitive sports in the elementary curriculum are advised to substantially modify the activity in order to facilitate the inclusion of all participants, and create a non-threatening, friendly environment (Pangrazi & Dauer, 1992). Also, since physical education teachers have full control of all teams in their classrooms they can pay special attention to the organization and pairing of individuals and teams of equal skill levels. Furthermore, a physical education teacher may reshuffle any team at any time in order to even the competitive fields. However, the implementation of very mild formats of competitive activities at the elementary level still run the risk of meeting the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional needs of only a small minority of elementary school students.

The most athletic students in any classroom benefit most from competition. They enjoy a physical, as well as, social and emotional advantage because they are the most likely to experience winning (Coakley, 2000). Data from observations of little league soccer games revealed that the most skilled athletes spend a disproportionate time with the ball. For example, analysis of game performance of an AYSO 1996 Boys' Division 6 game via videotape and Second Look for Soccer™ software, revealed that of a total 312 contacts with ball by 9 team "A" members during one 40 minute league game, four players made a total of 260 (80%) contacts with the ball. The remaining five players (played equal time and were rotated, including the goalie position) contacted the ball a mere 52 times, or 10.4 contacts per player for the game (Frankl, & Wright, 1997). Only two of the three leading players on the team have scored all of the team's goals during that whole season. The soccer experiment with first and second graders demonstrates that early competition creates opportunities for success for a very select group of kids. Such an environment that is clearly biased toward a small minority of the students is unacceptable in the school system.

The general consensus among youth sports experts is that some children reach the social and cognitive maturity that is required for successful participation in organized sports at the age of eight. The ability to understand the complexities of game strategies, however, is typically reached in children who are twelve or older. Thus, most children are not ready for competitive sports before they complete the first or second year of middle school (Coakley, 2000).

Another issue regarding the appropriateness of an inter-school competition at the elementary level addresses the concerns and potential risks that have been voiced by educators and professional coaches regarding early intense competition and specialization (Bryant & McElroy, 1997; McPherson, Curtis, & Loy, 1989; Pooley, 1981; Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk, 1992). The problems associated with an early start do not seem to be related to a particular activity. Rather, the risks are closely associated with levels of intensity, duration, and frequency of workouts in a particular sport. Furthermore, an early focus on one activity and the exclusion of other sports exposes the child to repetitive motion and impact injuries that affect specific limbs and joints. For example, gymnasts experience a higher than usual incidence of ankle, shoulder and wrist injuries. Similarly, little league pitchers, are prone to "little league elbow" problems (Williams, 1998).

When winning is overemphasized and taken out of context, children run the risk of serious self-esteem and social adjustment problems. On any given year in any given league a dozen to several dozen teams compete for one spot, to become the league's champions. In a winner takes all atmosphere, there inevitably are many "losers." Children in such environments end up being held responsible for events that are entirely out of their control. A child can play her best, try her hardest, and still lose. Early starts that are very demanding and stressful lead to early burn-outs and quitting (Williams, 1998). Adults I talked to that had such experiences spent many inactive years before they ever gave sports a second chance.

Why are competitive sports slowly and persistently infiltrating the elementary physical education curriculum? The idea certainly did not originate with teacher education professionals. Over a 25 year career in kinesiology and physical education, and close associations with numerous teacher education specialists I have not met one colleague that endorsed competition at the elementary physical education curriculum. I have, however, observed a deterioration in the employment of full-time physical education teachers in our school systems. The introduction of inadequately prepared part-time coaches into the system as well as the high visibility of varsity athletics at the high school and sometimes at the middle school levels may have contributed to the shift in attitudes about the appropriateness of competitive programs at the elementary level. The fact that millions of elementary school children across America are regularly involved in various little league competitive programs has also contributed to the current change in attitudes towards the implementation of competitive sports in the general education system.

What are concerned physical educators up against? Close to 90% of parents encourage their children to engage in sports and 60% of parents are involved in youth sports programs. Despite the very well documented reports of the many ills of competitive youth sports (Bryant & McElroy, 1997; Coakley, 2000; McPherson, Curtis, & Loy, 1989), and the fact that 85% of parents have concerns about youth sports programs, adult supervised non-school youth sports programs are rapidly growing and cater to some 25 million kids (Frankl, 1998). Almost 50% of the children ages 5-16 participate in

youth sports in America. Public non-profit and private non-profit sport organizations, private schools, private commercial clubs, and big business have all joined the frenzy of organized youth sports. The enormity of the youth sports phenomenon has all but completely muffled the voices of physical educators, psychologists, sociologists, physicians and other professionals' serious concerns about non-school adult supervised youth sport leagues.

The fact that many competitive programs for children under eight years old exist outside of the school system does not provide legitimacy to the introduction of these programs into the elementary school system. It does, however, create an ever growing pressure on school administrators and physical educators to join this new trend. While I do not see an easy solution to this problem, there are steps that physical educators can take in order to fight back to reclaim control over their profession.

Physical educators must be able to clearly articulate the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional, needs of their students and should provide a detailed list of the actions they undertake in order to meet those needs. Like other professions, we too must become more transparent regarding our accountability over reaching or not reaching our stated program goals. The world around us is rapidly changing and so must we. As the "fitness revolution" is gathering momentum we must join this movement and incorporate a mandatory health-related fitness program with clearly stated standard of "wellbeing" along with the existing skills instruction and skills testing programs. Finally, we must adopt texts that will supplement and strengthen the cognitive portion of our curriculum. Physical education deserves and should be a discipline within the curriculum that requires students a little more than just showing up. As we continue believing in ourselves and show our conviction and pride in what we do, we will also be in a better position to justify our cause rather than apologize and be defensive about it.

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