

"Recruiting Practices in Little League: Who's Winning?"

by

Daniel Frankl, Ph.D., Professor
School of Kinesiology and Nutritional Science
California State University, Los Angeles

Introduction

I am a kinesiology professor with a specialization in sociology and psychology of sports and a specific interest in youth sports. Over the past thirty years I have been involved with various aspects of adult organized youth sports. Since the early 1980s, I have closely followed the phenomenal evolution and rapid expansion of adult organized youth sports in America. Some estimates indicate that as many as fifty percent of children ages 10 -18 in the United States take an active part in organized sports (Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk, 1992). Based on personal observations and some related evidence, I suspect that children from middle and higher income families participate in organized sports on a considerably larger scale (Chafetz & Kotarba, 1999; Thompson, 1999). Unfortunately, some of the very dedicated parents and volunteer coaches that make the youth league experience possible are also engaged in behaviors that are a source of growing concern with regard to the quality of that league's program.

Stacking The Cards

One example of misguided behavior by some youth sport coaches and parents is the practice of active child recruiting to a specific youth sport team outside the established guidelines put in place for the league's team building process. To assure equal opportunity of success to all children, youth sport leagues have devised elaborate rules and procedures for initial skills evaluations and the formation of teams (e.g., AYSO) that, at least in theory, would have an equal competitive opportunity off the starting line. Despite clear rules and expectations, some parents and coaches find ways to circumvent the established procedures. For example, some children miss the skills testing sessions at the onset of the league's season and then show up and are promptly "accommodated" by self-serving coaches. Another scenario is one where the parent manipulates the system and moves their child around. The right of all of the children in any youth league to have an "equal competitive opportunity" is either misunderstood or simply ignored by some adults. In addition to engagement in unfair recruiting, to add insult to injury, some coaches also run the score up on significantly less skilled teams and then are reluctant to follow established league procedures to counter such skill imbalances on the playing field. A strong supposition of the present situation is that any form of recruiting in little league is wrong because it undermines the league's cardinal premise of equal access to success for all children. In addition, the practice of recruiting outside the system blatantly violates most, if not all, youth sport leagues' established constitutions. "Equal

opportunity” or “equal access” means that all adults involved in a league make every effort to ensure that all rules and procedures are followed during the process of team formation in order to create a balanced distribution of talent across the league’s teams.

Is there a moral justification for recruiting practices in little league soccer, or any other youth sport activity?

While I cannot think of an argument to justify the practice of recruiting in Little League I am aware of some possible circumstances and/or rationalizations that may compel parents and coaches to engage in recruitment and other misguided behaviors. One such instance occurs when overly dedicated parents or coaches are caught in the “reverse-dependency trap” (Smith & Smoll, 1996), and they define their personal self-worth based on the child’s or the team’s success. Thus, to facilitate their child’s road to success some parents attempt to “place” their kids with a certain coach and team. Similarly, some coaches may try to “accommodate” little known but highly skilled kids on their team in order to improve their personal prospect of winning.

As is the case with “parent wishes” for a certain teacher and classroom for their child, I can understand a parent’s wish for a certain coach and a team. Also, parents may wish for their child a better chance for success, as compared to a losing experience on any given team. The dedicated hard working coach is often motivated to recruit children that share similar attitudes. A very committed parent often looks for a “serious” coach and likely brings to this equation a “serious” child. An understanding exists in such a scenario that recruiting, while prohibited by league rules, is serving a “higher” order of justice. Recruiting is perceived as legitimate by these adults because they claim it serves the special needs of highly skilled individuals. Highly skilled kids, according to this view, need a good coach and a winning team in order to grow. A counter argument that this view may imply is that less skilled kids will have enough room to grow with a less knowledgeable coach on a “losing” team.

If the above described views of justice and equality were true, the presented classroom analogy would have also been applicable to recruiting practices. I cannot even try to imagine a justified scenario in which the teacher and some parents manipulate the system to actively keep some children out of a classroom while allowing other students in. What makes recruiting practices in little league even more disturbing is the fact that the coach, the parent, as well as the child, often know in advance that they are deliberately breaking very clear league rules. Danny Almonte, the 70mph pitching all- star of the Bronx is a sad example of a high profile case of blatant adult led rule breaking conduct. One lesson that the “age regressed” or recruited child may learn from this experience is that he/she is special, and that her/his special talent gives her/him rights and privileges that may not be available to the less skilled child. Both behavioral problems and academic deficiencies displayed by high school and later college and professional athletes who functioned in a differential environment are very well documented in the literature (Bryant & McElroy, 1997; Coakley, 2000; Leonard, 1998; McPherson, Curtis & Loy, 1989).

Coaches, parents, and athletes that justify recruiting practices in little league are more likely to promote early specialization, uneven play time, and preferential treatment when dealing with problem behaviors. Starters on such teams seem to get away with transgressions that non-starters could not even consider without seriously jeopardizing their position on a team.

Recruiting and other violations of Little League rules are clearly wrong (Fraleigh, 1984; Lumpkin, Stoll & Beller, 1994) and also generate other dire outcomes for all involved. Why, then, do increasing numbers of parents and coaches find themselves intertwined in such plots?

One possible explanation is that coaches that recruit and parents that go along with or initiate such practices often see little league as a step in the child's preparation for the "next real thing." Thus, joining an AYSO soccer league, for example, in these adults' minds, is one step of many to follow. The next goal might be "Club Soccer," then high school varsity soccer, then possibly a full soccer scholarship in college, etc. This approach leaves no "time to waste" while playing for fun and friendship. The goals are demanding and stretch into a distant future. Pressure and stress are an integral part of this approach since it "prepares the child for the inevitable stresses of what's still to come." Is anything wrong with this picture? What happened to the genuine little league experiences of learning new skills, making friends, enjoying the challenges of competition? Is there really a need for more and at what price?

What can be done to curb team building and to enhance equal opportunity to success in youth sports?

There are practical solutions to the unfair and misguided practice of recruiting and team building in organized youth sports. Many years ago, while I was working on my doctoral degree in sport psychology I volunteered as a consultant and coach at the local soccer league. Every year we had a pre-season meeting in which we organized a clustered random distribution of talent. Each coach got to pull one name out of a hat that contained a cluster of the most effective players, and then we proceeded to the next hat until all teams were formed. We then opened the crumbled pieces of paper containing the players' names and spread our fresh roster in front of us. Then, all present in the room shared their "catch." At this point, coaches engaged in an exchange process that allowed parent, coach, child and even the child's friend, reunification. Each of the children's names was written on a colored paper representing a specific skill level group. The exchange procedure was very simple: a blue for a blue or green for a green. As soon as we all had our readjusted rosters we proceeded to the next and final step of this process. We now evaluated the newly formed teams as a whole and started addressing "luck of the draw" issues. Sharing our collective knowledge of most of the kids, we could estimate which teams had more and which had less talent. We then proceeded with some final exchanges between "shades" of blue or green in an effort to even out the playing field. Still, at the end of each season some teams turned in much better performances than other teams. Coaches understood that they were expected to serve league needs first and that they could not develop a "dynasty" or a "program" within the league. This

league's atmosphere was very pleasant and the focus of the vast majority of coaches and parents was set on children's needs.

As leagues expand, and arrangements such as those described above may no longer be administered with ease, a transformation that frustrates concerned parents, coaches, and administrators is taking place.

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