

Taming the Beast: Excessive Parental Involvement in Youth Sports

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Despite the presence of family members and younger siblings at the sidelines of youth sport events, reports of inappropriate and at times disturbing displays of misconduct by adults are on the rise (Butler, 1999; Carlozo, 2000, cited in Enigk, 2002). Tragic incidents, such as the savage beating to death of little league hockey coach, Michael Costin by Thomas Junta, a parent outraged by the roughness of the practice session (Nack & Munson, 2000) have revitalized the national debate about the deleterious effects of excessive parental involvement in youth sports. Mounting accounts of parent involvement in abusive and at times violent conduct toward officials, rival team parents and athletes, coaches, and too often, their own child are a source of great concern to league organizers and their sponsoring institutions (Bigelow, 2001; Cumming & Ewing, 2002; Fiore, 2003; Heinzmann, 2002; Herbert, 2000; Nack & Munson, 2000; Wolohan, 2002).

At first glance, it may seem counter intuitive that adults would display some of the fiercest emotions and acts of hostility at youth sports events. Yet, as Herbst (2000) rightly observed, of all fans, youth sports parents are the most dedicated and emotionally invested. Following is a list of possible reasons for the observed erosion of civil conduct at youth sports events:

- Nation wide, each year more than 30 million children, 4.5 million coaches, and 1.5 million administrators take part in a variety of youth sports programs. The yearly prevalence of diagnosable mental disorders among the U.S. adult population is estimated at 22 to 23 percent (Kessler et al., 1994, 1996; Regier et al., 1993). Some two percent have a Borderline Personality Disorder (Swartz, Blazer, George, & Winfield, 1990). Assuming that as a group sport parents represent the general population's rate of mental and/or addictive disorders, one may predict that as many as 120,000 to 1.3 of the 6 million sport parents and administrators that work with or around kids may be afflicted by some acute diagnosable mental disorder.
- To become involved, an adult needs to sign up, undergo a background check, and take part in at least one mandatory pre-league workshop. Still, violent and abusive adults with no criminal records are hard to detect and screen out without additional measures.
- Classroom teachers spend 4-6 years preparing for their role; most sport parents spend one evening or weekend day before they take charge. It is

- little wonder that a majority of well-meaning sport parents possess little or no knowledge of the emotional, psychological, social and physical needs of the children under their leadership.
- A steady expansion coupled with high attrition rates makes it increasingly difficult to keep all involved on the same page. I have witnessed several heated encounters on the sidelines that could have easily been avoided had the coach, referee, or parent-spectator known and followed the simple rules.
 - The dynamics of league expansion and change contribute to a growing gap between the “hard core” and the “new” sport parents. Activism rather than sensitivity to and understanding of children’s needs, has the upper hand in the shaping of the direction some leagues chose to follow.
 - Leagues that were started and run by well-intentioned adults turn over time into commercialized and highly competitive enterprises. In such environments, the spotlight tends to shift away from the kids as the drama of the “ego wars” between the adults in charge unfolds. A self-imposed pressure to win drives some coaches and the parents they serve to (1) engage in unethical and illegal recruiting (Frankl, 2002; Howe, 2002), (2) conduct excessive practices, (3) schedule too many games and tournaments, (4) emphasize early specialization, and (5) implement favoritism (Frankl, 2003).
 - A growing number of parents that initially embraced the league experience with great enthusiasm are caught in the “trap” of emotional and financial over-involvement. Lee (1993) identified two types of “hard core” parents. The “excitable” (loud, dramatic, overly protective, and self-absorbed) and the “fanatical” (controlling, confrontational, hard to please, preoccupied with winning and losing) sport parent. Actions of fanatical parents are particularly disturbing since they tend to take overbearing control of their child’s sport experience as their spouse and others helplessly watch the child’s struggle with unreasonable expectations. While disruptive to the league experience, fanatic parents inflict the greatest damage onto their own family and child. Highly stressed, embarrassed and prejudiced as being a troublemaker, many children of intense sport parents end-up losing interest and eventually drop out of sports (Buzby, 2000; Engh, 1999; Feigley, 1984; Vallerand, Deci, & Ryan, 1987)

Youth sports programs and the many unique opportunities they present to tens of millions of children could not have existed if it were not for the hard work and the sacrifices made by millions of devoted parents. Cumming & Ewing (2002) point out, that parents should be encouraged to support and show interest in their child’s sport pursuits, but they also caution sport parents to keep their involvement in a proper perspective. While no single writer has clearly identified the line that separates involved from over-involved sport parents, many have proposed steps that if closely followed greatly reduce one’s risk of landing on the “wrong side of the tracks.” (e.g., Abrams, 2002; Arland, 2002; Bach, 2002; Bigelow, Moroney, & Hall, 2001; Engh, 1999;

Fiore, 2003; Frankl, 2002, 2003; Gano-Overway, 2001; Herbert, 2000; Huddleston, 2000; Kamm, 1998; Kanters, 2002; Kanters, & Tebbutt, 2001; Popke, 2000; Votano, 2000; Western Australia, Department of Sport and Recreation, 2002; Youth Incorporated, 2003).

Parenting in itself is a challenging task. The added burden of sport parenting may be overwhelming for many parents since as the level of competition increases one's control over the situation diminishes. The fact that a child's every move is in plain view and under constant scrutiny is yet another source of stress.

Al Rosen, a former major league baseball player, suggested the following questions as a reminder of the scope of parental responsibility and involvement in their child's sport:

- Can you carefully listen to your child and fully support her/his choice to participate or not to participate in youth sports?
- Can you entrust your child to the coach and take a back seat?
- Can you allow your child to act independently and assume responsibility for both success and failure?
- Can you keep losing as well as winning in perspective?
- Can you invest the time and effort to learn as much as possible about your child's sport?
- Can you set your expectations at a level commensurate with your child's cognitive and physical abilities without ever comparing her/him to others?
- Can you be your child's most devoted fan without ever turning into a fanatic?

Parents who cannot reply to all of the above questions with a resounding "yes" should not panic. No one is perfect. An honest answer to Al Rosen's questions will help parents develop an awareness of their motivations to become and stay involved in youth sports. The realization that a problem exists is the first step on the road to a positive sport experience.

A periodic review of Al Rosen's questions may greatly reduce the need for elaborate "Codes of Conduct," "Silence on the Sidelines Days," "Parent Conduct Enforcers," and severe sanctions and fines. Recent trends and events, however, reinforce the need to actively seek out the help of educators, and mental health professionals who are steeped in youth sports issues and are willing to serve as league and program mentors (Kamm, 1998). In addition, youth sport programs may greatly benefit from partnerships and close cooperation with local and national academic institutions and its expert faculty (Martinek & Parker, 2000). The scope and magnitude of the harmful effects of excessive parental involvement in youth sports may no longer be effectively addressed by untrained albeit well meaning volunteers.

"Carrying the torch for less pressure and more perspective in youth programs may not be a popular position. Those who demand more games, more wins,

more trophies, more travel and more of everything can talk the loudest and sound convincing. It's up to all of us to have the courage to be just as passionate on the side of balance (Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association, 2003).”

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