

Youth Sports: Innocence Lost

by

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"I stopped going to gymnastics and soccer because after a while it became like work, no fun...I used to like it." (11 year-old boy, San Fernando Valley, California)

Adults volunteer their time, talent, and energy in youth sports in order to preserve civility, to ensure equal opportunity, to maintain a safe environment, and to provide adequate instruction. Years of observation and systematic study support the notion that most parents, coaches, and administrators get involved with youth sport programs for the right reasons and approach their new responsibility with their best intentions (Frankl, 2006a). What at first seems as an innocent activity (Herbst, 2000), however, turns in many instances into endless hours of travel, practice, and competition. Once overly invested and stretched, parents feel a moral justification to pressure their child to step-up her/his commitment and thus practice more often and for longer hours (Frankl, 2006a). Considerable financial, time, and emotional commitments are used as a leverage to extract more from the child, who is made to feel guilty if he/she does not deliver on the investment. There comes the time when parent and child, quite unexpectedly, find themselves caught up in "the middle of the highly pressurized, complex, and confusing world of competitive [youth sports] (Groppel, Loehr, Melville, & Quinn, 1989, p. 279)."

The Rise of Competitive Youth Sports Programs in America

While children have engaged in informal play since the dawn of human history it wasn't until the 1890s that adults teamed up to organize youth sport programs for boys in America (Wiggins, 1987). Within the span of one century organized youth sport programs have become an established social institution and a growing national obsession.

Historians point out to several nineteenth century agents of change that paved the way for the establishment of organized youth sport programs. By the 1820s an accelerated transformation from agrarian to urban and industrialized landscape in America was in full motion. In addition, an ongoing influx of new immigrants along with the development of new technologies resulted in modernization and led to the gradual decline of Puritan orthodoxy, the most powerful social institution of the times that placed restriction on sport and play (Betts, 1953, cited in Eitzen & Sage, 1993). The industrial revolution greatly contributed to the increase of worker productivity and pay, and gradually shortened the work week. Also, despite the fact that between 1890 and 1910, the number of children under 15 who were employed for wages increased from

1.5 to 2 million, by the year 1920, following the Keating-Owens Act passed by Congress in 1916, child labor or "child slavery" was cut in half (Clark, 2006).

The trickling down of economic prosperity led to a dispersal of leisurely sport activities from the upper to the working classes. In addition, the growing obsession with inter-collegiate and professional spectator sports all across America paved the way to the quick growth of preadolescent organized sport programs (Eitzen & Sage, 1993).

Many educators who initially embraced organized youth sport activities were quick to withdraw their support as they witnessed the adult organizers replace their initial "sand lot" or amateur orientation with overly competitive, professional attitudes. In 1932, Elmer D. Mitchell from the University of Michigan argued that highly competitive sports for children were inflicting unduly emotional and physical strain on youngsters. Mitchell noted that children were forced to prematurely specialize within the sport and utilize harmful and aggressive behaviors in order to be successful (Wiggins, 1987).

During its AAHPER Atlanta Convention in 1947, the American Association for health, Physical Education, and Recreation passed a resolution denouncing exceedingly competitive sports at the elementary school level. In addition, AAHPER passed a second resolution opposing any interscholastic competition for ninth graders or younger children (Wiggins, 1987). In 1949 the Joint Committee on Athletic Competition for Children of Elementary and Junior High School Age recommended that highly competitive sports programs for children be abolished (Wiggins, 1987). By 1952, AAHPER, the National Conference of Program Planning in Games and Sport for Boys of School Age, the National Conference on Physical Education for Children of Elementary School Age, and the National Recreation Congress issued statements against competitive sport programs for children (Wiggins, 1987). Between 1973 and 1995 no less than 20 position statements were issued by various professional organizations that addressed safety measures to be followed in youth sport programs (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1996).

The perception that physical education programs provided inadequate opportunities for "healthy competition" and exercise created a vacuum that was readily filled by institutions, such as the Boys Clubs and Boy Scouts, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and by concerned parents and community leaders. By the 1940s, adult controlled youth sport programs were quickly spreading and turning very competitive and intense (Wiggins, 1987).

While some of the most disturbing reports of adult inappropriate, and at times violent and criminal behaviors (Bigelow, Moroney & Hall, 2001; Coakley, 2007; Fiore, 2003; Frankl, 2004, 2006a; Herbert, 2000; Nack & Munson, 2000; Juhn, Brolinson, Duffey, Stockard, Vangelos, Emaus, E., et al., 2002) made the

headlines recently, the gradual loss of innocence in youth sports programs has been in motion for more than 70 years.

What Motivates Kids to Participate in Youth Sports?

"Sports are most rewarding when the judge of skill and the definer of challenge is the individual athlete. That is when the athlete receives two rewards: the joy of participating and the satisfaction of learning to know oneself (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1990, p. 6)."

Over the past five decades several researchers systematically studied the reasons children express when questioned about their motivations to participate in organized youth sport programs. For example, McElroy & Kirkendall (1980), asked youth sport participants to select any one of four choices for their most important reason for playing a sport. Responses by over 2,000 boys and girls, average age 11.9 indicated that their most important reason for playing sports was:

- to defeat your opponent or the other team (winning orientation—13.5% boys & 4% girls)
- to play as well as you can (personal performance—51% boys & 48.3% girls)
- to play fairly, by the rules at all times (fair play—24.4% boys & 37.6% girls)
- everyone on the team should get to play (total participation—11% boys & 9% girls)

Also, in a landmark study commissioned by The Athletic Footwear Association Drs. Martha Ewing and Vern Seefeldt of the Youth Sport Institute at Michigan State University investigated children's reasons for participation and/or dropping out from non-school youth programs (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1990). Boys and girls ages ten to eighteen (N=10,000) from eleven major cities in nine US states were asked to complete a questionnaire that probed the reasons they participate in their favorite sport outside of school, the reasons they quit and their feelings about winning. Following the results of the study, the authors concluded that sport participation and the desire to participate in sports, decline sharply and steadily between ages 10 and 18. Learning new skills, improving one's skills, and fun were pivotal reason for being in a sport, and lack of fun or coaching perceived as inadequate were the leading reason for dropping out. While motivations to participate may differ within and in between athletes, as was the case in the McElroy and Kirkendall (1980) study, young participants in the Ewing & Seefeldt (1990) study did not consider winning as a major benefit of sport competition.

In a study conducted by Frankl (1998) mothers (N=108), fathers (N=105), boys (N=170), and girls (N=171) from the Los Angeles area were surveyed during the 1996-97 youth leagues season (Total = 554 out of 556 questionnaires or 97.88% response rate). The ethnic distribution included African American (N=16; 2.87%), Asian (N=105; 18.85%), Latino/Latina (N=313; 56.19%), Caucasian (N=90; 16.16%), Pacific Islander (N=5; 0.90%), Native American (N=7; 1.25%), and

Filipino (N=21; 3.77%). The range of activities the study participants were engaged in included baseball/softball (32 girls & 53 boys, 16.7%), basketball (48 girls & 48 boys, 18.8%), football (7 girls & 31 boys, 7.5%), soccer (25 girls & 73 boys, 19.2%), volleyball (31 girls & 7 boys, 7.5%), drill team (39 girls, 7.6%), swimming (30 girls & 11 boys, 8%), track (7 girls & 7 boys, 2.7%), tennis (33 girls & 8 boys, 8%), and other (7 girls & 12 boys, 3.7%).

Child and parent forms each including 18 statements (adapted from Ewing & Seefeldt, 1990) about “participation in one’s best sport outside school” were used. Participants checked each item on a 1-7 (not at all important /.../ of utmost importance) Likert scale. Participants were also asked to select the “one MOST important reason...” from the 18 original statements.

Results regarding the question about the one most important reason and an analysis of the 18 items indicated that “To have fun” was the clear first choice for moms, dads, girls and boys. “To learn new skills” was the second choice for dads and moms, and 3rd & 4th for boys and girls respectively. “Winning,” came in 10th place for boys, 13th place for girls, 16th place for dads and 17th place for moms. These results were consistent with earlier findings (e.g., Ewing & Seefeldt, 1990; Gill, Gross, & Huddleston, 1981; Griffin, 1978; McElroy & Kirkendall, 1980; Sapp, & Haubenstricker, 1978; Skubic, 1956; Wankel, & Kreisel, 1985). Clearly, the available empirical evidence supports the notion that the overwhelming majority of children participating in youth sports do so for a variety of reasons other than the opportunity for fierce competition and winning. Considering the prevailing perception of adults as the main culprits regarding the escalation of competition in youth sport programs, this study revealed what may seem to some as a rather unexpected result. As a group, the studied parents demonstrated the strongest support for a “Pleasure Participation” rather than a “Power and Performance” (Coakley, 2007) philosophy for adult controlled youth sport programs.

Filling the Void

The 2006 Shape of the Nation joint report by the American Heart Association and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education concluded that a majority of US states are failing to offer students an adequate physical education program. It was also pointed out in this report that daily school physical education attendance has dropped from 42 percent in 1991 to 28 percent in 2003. To add insult to injury, physical education and health education were not included as a core curriculum in schools in the Clinton administration's Goals 2000 document (Trickey, 2006). In stark contrast, adult controlled youth sport programs have witnessed a meteoric growth over the past two decades. Some 23 million kids took part in youth sport programs and another six million participated in school sponsored competitive sports during the late 1980s (Brady, 1989). Chambers (1991) pointed out that of a total estimate of kids in the five to sixteen age bracket, close to 50% of all kids at that time, were affiliated with a youth sport program. By the late 1990s, Leonard (1998) reported that an

estimated 35 million kids between the ages of 6 and 16 took part in some form of organized youth sport programs. It is estimated that currently nearly 41 million kids are engaged in some form of extracurricular, adult supervised youth sport activity (Trickey, 2006). In 2005, the number of kids under 18 in America totaled 72.76 million (Kids Count Data Book, 2005). It would be therefore reasonable to assert that roughly 55-60% of kids under 16 in America are currently engaged in some extra curricular sport activity. It is no surprise that in an environment where nearly two out of three kids take part in some sport activity most parents encourage their children to join an organized youth sport program. Many adults seem to place little trust in school sponsored physical education programs and thus turn to school sponsored varsity athletics and to non-school related adult directed youth sport programs to fill in the void. While physical educators have not yet lost this battle there is an urgent need for a radical "change of course" in order to reverse the current trend of a "global meltdown" of physical education programs (Frankl, 2006b; Hardman and Marshall, 2000; 2004).

Sport Competition and Personal Development

A dominant and enduring tenet of North American society is that competitive sports breed sportsmanship, inculcate socially desired character traits, improve self-esteem, promote sportsmanship, facilitate pro-social and moral behavior, promote respect to authority (Frankl, 1989; Reppucci, 1987; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995; Thompson, 1993), reduce delinquency (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005), and improve fitness and health (Kohl III & Hobbs, 1998). A consistent stream of evidence that contradicts many of the perceived benefits of competitive youth sports programs (e.g., Coakley, 2001; Damore, et al., 2003; Garry & Morrissey, 2000; Guivernau & Duda, 2002; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003) has had little if any effect on the dominant conversation among youth sport parents, coaches, and league administrators. Despite clear associations between excessive pressure to compete and sport injuries (Young, 2000; 2004), for example, a majority of youth league organizers keep a weekly competition schedule during regular league sessions that is often preceded by pre-season games and later followed by special post league championship tournaments. When asked about his youth sport experience, a fifth grade student responded that: "If there were no sports, life would be easier because you wouldn't have to go play games every other day" (Colorado Springs, 1991, cited in Coakley, 1994, p. 104).

The main obstacle to the consistent application of a child centered philosophy in youth sport programs is the incompatibility of adult and child-like values. When adult values are consistently applied to youth sports, a utilitarian or functionalist rather than a child centered or a playful approach becomes the dominant style. A child friendly model that emphasizes "pleasure and participation" quickly gives way to a professional model that focuses on "power and performance" (Coakley, 2007). Funky drills and lead-up games, as well as significantly modified rules and equipment are not welcome where competition is geared to prepare the child for the next levels. An example of the way the popular media reinforces the

dominant creed is illustrated in the movie "Space Jam" (1996), directed by Joe Pytka. In one scene, a seven-year old Michael Jordan is shooting baskets in the dark. It is almost midnight on a school day and when asked by his father to stop and go to sleep, little Michael states that he wants to take one last shot, a shot at his dream which is to play for the University of North Carolina. The outrageous absurdity of the above described scene was missed by the vast majority of movie goers. The "logic" that a child must be very good at and dedicated to sports from a very early age in order to make it to college, however, reflects the general adult conversation about the "real goals" of youth sports. For too many adults, youth sports are serious business (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997) and the voices of those pushing for early specialization, more practices and tournaments are growing louder and have all but silenced the voices of reason (Bigelow, Moroney, & Hall, 2001). To his credit, Michael Jordan, one of the most accomplished and popular athletes of all times, made himself available at a series of commercials that ridiculed the notion that success in life can be achieved through a career as a professional athlete. Hopefully some kids did get the message that the road to success in adulthood is paved through education and not athletics.

The view that the lessons learned in sports have a direct positive impact on life and enhance moral and physical being is widely embraced by laypersons and is often accepted as a known truth by teachers, coaches, sport officials, administrators, and even some researchers. An adaptation of Lynne Cheney's comment during a debate with Gary Nash at the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour on October 26, 1994, sheds light on the status of the national conversation regarding youth sports. "The fact that [adults raise little objection to the state of affairs in youth sports and do not act proactively on behalf of their very own child's best interest], perhaps *speaks for the state of history...* "

The Lessons Kids Learn Through Competitive Sports

The origins of the view that sport competition builds character and promotes sportsmanship hark back to the ancient Olympic games. Nineteen century British historians revived the ancient Greek belief that virtues such as self-discipline, fairness, honesty, and courage are reinforced through athletic competition. While still very popular, the conviction that sport competition builds character has had little support among scholars who studied this question (e.g., Beller & Stoll, 1995; Bredemeier, 1995a; Bredemeier, 1995b; Bredemeier & Shields, 1984; Bredemeier & Shields, 1985; Bredemeier & Shields, 1986a, 1986b, 1986c; Bredemeier & Shields, 1987; Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Cooper, 1986, 1987; Frankl, 1989; Nixon, 1979; Ogilvie & Tutko 1971; Silva, 1983).

In 1971, Drs. Bruce Ogilvie and Thomas Tutko published a paper in the journal *Psychology Today* titled: "Sport: If you want to build character, try something else (Ogilvie & Tutko 1971)." In "Sports in America," one of his two non-fiction works, author James Albert Michener (1907-1997) points out that rather than develop character, athletics reveal character (a quote also often attributed to the

legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden). Sociological research indicates that a specific life experience may not be readily generalized to a different context (Coakley, 2007; Snyder, 1970). Athletic events take place in a particular space, under specific rules, and with distinct uniforms and special apparatus. Athletes are rarely invited to provide input about the activities during practice nor are they in a position to make decisions regarding lineup or game strategy during competition. Thus, in a competitive sport environment the rules are guarded by officials and the important decisions are made by the coaches. With little freedom to think independently, athletes find themselves trapped within the artificial and limited boundaries of the "game frame" (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986b, 1986c). In a context of Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning a strong emphasis on winning is associated with lower rather than higher levels of moral decision making (Frankl, 1989). Competition and over-emphasis on winning contribute to moral choices that reflect a "normative order" and a "utility" moral orientation rather than a "justice" or an "ideal-self" moral orientation (Frankl 1989). Poor sportsmanship is manifested in athletes' and coaches', as well as the media's and the legal system's, willingness to tolerate some form of physical retaliation among rival sport competitors. Thus, the net result of a "game frame morality" (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986b, 1986c) is the nearly universal acceptance of non-game related aggression as an inevitable part of the sport experience. When competition is fierce, these trends become more salient and are expressed across age and gender. Seefeldt & Ewing (1996) point out that youth sports may lead to a mixed result of a "character building and character challenging" effect. When contrasted with non-sport related activities, competitive sport participants "reported higher rates of negative peer interaction and inappropriate adult behavior" (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1996). Thus, the available evidence suggests that well adjusted and successful former highly competitive athletes are the way they are despite of, rather than as a result of, their sport experience (Coakley, 2007).

Youth Sport Programs' "State of History"

In my capacity as the author and administrator of the Kids First Soccer website over the past decade <<http://www.kidsfirstsoccer.com>> I am receiving a steady weekly stream of e-mails from youth sport parents, coaches, and administrators. During the mid-to-late 1990s I used to respond to questions about a soccer program for six and seven year-old children by explaining why a formal league experience of this "beautiful game" may not be suitable for children this young. Ten years later, I find myself writing suggestions regarding how to administer a formal league program to two-and three-year-old children! No, I have not given up but I have certainly changed my strategy from futile attempts at prevention to some form of "damage control." Regardless of what the experts say or do, this train has left the station decades ago and is now dashing in full steam toward some yet unknown destination. I am cautiously pessimistic as I look forward to a new generation of former little leaguers now turned parents to let their child be a kid and play the "beautiful game" or any other game in the present and not for some future goal. Children and adults alike share the view that fun, learning new

skills, improving one's skills, and fitness are the most important goals of an adult-controlled youth sport program. To shift the focus of youth leagues from adult to child centered values one may consider the following suggestions (based on Coakley, 2007, p. 132):

- Modify activity rules to facilitate action, especially action leading to scoring.
- Reduce the number of players and court size to increase individual player's time on task.
- Promote a relaxed, non-threatening environment, where children feel safe and have the time and opportunity to reaffirm friendships. Competition should never be allowed to turn into an experience that contributes to alienation between kids and adults on opposing sides.
- Reconsider the value of the experience of sport team membership as compared to the value of equal access to participation and success. Is it possible that the frequent reorganization of new teams; teams that are carefully balanced for equal opportunity, may increase fair play and excitement while substantially diminishing the high drama?
- Consider replacing some of the game days with additional practice and informal lead-up games, or better yet, altogether reduce competition both in scope and intensity.

While "it is never too late to change one's ways," as a Chinese proverb teaches us, "it is already very late." So what are we waiting for?

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Discussion

1. How may a functionalist orientation to the organization of youth sports be detrimental to a child-centered, play orientation approach? Explain.
2. How are the media and big business involved in the manipulation and the reinforcement of an adult value system in youth sports? Who are the main beneficiaries of this alliance? Explain.
3. What would you tell a parent of a three to five year-old boy or a girl that has asked you about enrolling their child in a team sport, adult controlled youth league? Would your advice differ when addressing a three year old as compared to a five year old child? Does the gender of the child make a difference?
4. Can competitive youth sports programs be instrumental in building self-esteem, pride, sportsmanship, a sense of right and wrong, and much more if, on the other hand, rivalries are played to the point of alienation and total lack of respect to the child wearing the other color shirt? Can competition, cooperation, and friendship survive the current "state of history" in youth sport programs? How about high school or inter-collegiate varsity athletics?