

PUTTING KIDS BACK INTO KIDS' SPORTS



CHRIS BALLARD · SEPTEMBER 2014

Many children simply don't have fun playing sports anymore. Here's a plan to reverse the "adultification" of youth athletics.

Last month, at a local coffee shop, I ran into a father I know from my daughter's school. While we exchanged small talk, he mentioned that he'd hired a local [Olympic](#)-level soccer player to work with his daughter. She was now receiving one-on-one coaching, as well as extended training sessions. Under this tutelage, she'd learn how to eat right, compete at the highest level, and prepare for what would surely be a glorious athletic future.

Did I mention our daughters just turned 7?

Such is the world of youth sports today. And this is by no means an extreme example. We're all familiar with parents sending children off to camps and gurus or driving them across state lines for tournaments. We bear witness to overzealous parents at youth basketball games, screaming at referees and children. We hear about middle-schoolers being courted by college programs, creating outsize expectations no 11-year-old could hope to meet. At night and on the weekends, we marinate in an American sports culture that glorifies winning and individual statistics above

all, from fantasy games to the scientifically measurable [depression](#) that occurs when “our” teams lose.

And then we wonder why our children don’t seem to enjoy sports as much as they once did. How many times have you heard the refrain “Back in my day, kids just went outside and played sports for fun”? It may be a tired trope, but it’s also very much true.

According to Michigan State University’s Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, a child’s No. 1 reason for playing sports is to “have fun.” Yet by the time they are 13 years old, 70 percent have dropped out of team sports.

The primary reason? You guessed it. According to a comprehensive study conducted a few years ago by the Women’s Sports Foundation (WSF), an organization founded by tennis legend Billie Jean King to advance the lives of girls and women through sport, the most common answer for both boys and girls is “because I was not having fun.”

This is a serious problem. When a child stops playing organized sports, he or she loses more than the chance to play a game: A child’s [athletic](#) participation is associated with higher levels of family satisfaction and improved physical and emotional health, academic achievement, and quality of life, according to the WSF study.

And this is to say nothing of the other benefits of organized sports, which provide a safe environment to learn about grit, humility, sportsmanship, leadership, and fairness while developing self-control, a lifelong love of movement, and an openness to being coachable.

That’s a lot to miss out on.

Which brings us to the crucial questions: What went wrong with youth sports? And how can we fix it?

WHAT’S BROKEN?



It’s difficult to track how many kids are involved in sports in the United States, but estimates from the WSF study and the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA) range from 21.5 million to 28.7 million between the ages of 6 and 17.

As noted, nearly three-quarters of those children leave organized sports by age 13, long before they leave school.

A key turning point occurs just as kids enter their teens. According to SFIA, there is a further 26 percent drop in the number of kids who play at least one sport, even recreationally, between the ages of 14 and 15.

By better understanding the forces that have taken the “play” out of “play ball,” we can help remedy the problem. Let’s look at the culprits.

OVERLY INVOLVED PARENTS

Only 2 percent of high school athletes receive college scholarships. That doesn’t stop an estimated 30 to 50 percent of parents from believing their child has a chance to play at the college level. Therein lies part of the problem.

John O’Sullivan, a coach and former professional soccer player, refers to this as part of the “adultification” of youth sports. He is the founder of the Changing the Game Project, an organization devoted to educating parents and coaches on making sports a rewarding experience for children.

“It’s the introduction of adult values into kids’ games,” says O’Sullivan, author of *Changing the Game*. “When I grew up, it was children competing against children. Now, more often than not, it’s adults [competing](#) against other adults *through* their children.”

This causes myriad problems. Dan Saferstein, PhD, a sports psychologist and author of *Win or Lose: A Guide to Sports Parenting*, works with young athletes, including U.S. hockey national youth teams.

“If you get a high-achieving, talented kid with a pushy, high-achieving parent, it can work out,” says Saferstein. “The kid can somehow rise to the expectations of the parent, and the kid may even share some of that drive himself.

“What can be tragic, though, is when you get a more driven, consumed parent with a kid who somehow, in the parent’s eyes, just doesn’t measure up.” The result, says Saferstein, extends further than sports: “The kid feels like a [failure](#).”

Parents often misperceive their child’s natural talent. “There’s a myth in youth sports that if you work hard enough, you can achieve anything,” he says. “It’s not true.”

But that can be hard for a parent to realize. So, instead, the parent throws money at the situation while pressuring his or her kid, ignoring the fact that the child might have a natural ceiling.

CUTTHROAT COACHES

In the WSF study, 22 percent of boys said they stopped playing sports because “I did not like or get along with the coach.” For girls it was 18 percent. (Other reasons included “I had a health problem or injury,” “I wanted to focus more on studying and grades,” “I did not like or get along with others on the team.”)

The issues are obvious: coaches who take youth sports too seriously, who mimic the fire-breathing coaches they see on TV, and who prioritize winning over development. Part of the reason for this, says O’Sullivan, is that even as sports have boomed and many coaches have improved their knowledge of the game, coaches seem to have digressed in their understanding of [kids](#).

“In the past, a lot of coaches were teachers who were also in charge of a team or running PE,” says O’Sullivan. “So they had a degree and a background in childhood development. Now, college soccer players, what do they do after playing? They say, ‘Hey, I should go coach soccer.’ The result: a lot of coaches who know a lot about the game — and little about children.”

What kids need to move forward in *any* activity is autonomy, enjoyment, and confidence, says O’Sullivan. The job of coaches is to make sure those exist: Does the game belong to the kids?

OUR CULTURE

The outsize influence of professional sports in America today also plays a role in the adultification of kids’ sports.

“The current dominant culture flows down from pro sports, and that’s about entertaining fans, and the only way to do that is to win,” says Jim Thompson, author and the CEO of the Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA), a nationwide organization dedicated to transforming the culture of youth sports.

“That win-at-all-costs mentality then colors everything, all the way down to T-ball,” he says.

The PCA offers a competing vision: youth sports as a development zone. Trying to win is still important, and the scoreboard is a crucial ingredient, but it isn’t everything.

Says Thompson: “Research from sports psychology indicates that when you focus on mastery, rather than the scoreboard, everything being equal, you do better on the scoreboard.”

SPECIALIZATION AND BURNOUT



Increasingly, kids are specializing early in one sport, operating on the false assumption that this is the only way to be successful.

On the contrary, O'Sullivan notes, the science shows that with the exception of a few sports like gymnastics and figure skating, most athletes benefit from playing multiple sports. They're less likely to suffer from overuse [injuries](#), less likely to burn out, and more likely to develop better all-around athleticism.

Convincing parents of this can be difficult, however, as conventional wisdom holds that mastery requires monk like devotion.

Take the 10,000-Hour Rule concept, popularized by author Malcolm Gladwell, which says the key to success in any field is practicing for a minimum of 10,000 hours. There's nothing wrong with the underlying message — you need to practice to get better. But the idea that anyone, and particularly children, need to devote themselves so completely can be harmful.

And the 10,000-Hour Rule is not universally true, notes exercise physiologist Ross Tucker, PhD. The original 10,000-hours study was done on violinists in 1993. But another study on chess players discovered that “some people become experts with less [time], and others fail despite doing more than 10,000 hours,” says Tucker. “The average time taken to become a master is 11,000 hours [in chess], but some did it on 3,000 hours of practice, [and] some haven't succeeded despite 25,000.”

Which is to say, every kid is different and unique, and should be treated as such.

ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY

One of the most common errors in youth sports is coaches confusing maturity with talent. Just because a kid is bigger than teammates doesn't necessarily mean he or she is more talented.

The result of this relative-age effect: Even though kids who have late birthdays may be up to a year younger than teammates, they are judged on the same scale. This leads to less-mature kids receiving less [coaching](#) and playing time and, ultimately, being cut out of the player pool early. The same often holds for late bloomers.

Gender, too, remains an issue, even with the impact of Title IX.

A 2012 study by the Sport, Health, and Activity Research and Policy Center for Women and Girls found that 31 states had high schools with enough roster spaces for at least half of the enrolled boys. Only 18 states could say the same for girls.

Demographics also play a major role. According to the WSF study:

- **Children of affluent families** enter organized sports earlier than those in lower-income families by almost two years.
- **Caucasian kids** (mean age 6.6) enter sports earlier than Hispanic (8.2) or African-American children (7.7).
- **Boys** are more likely to play on three or more sports teams, as are children of affluent families.

WHAT CAN BE DONE



The good news is that the situation is far from hopeless. Many proposed solutions exist, all of which ultimately address one central point: the fun factor. “For young kids, the absolute most important thing is that they have a good time,” says Thompson. “If they don’t, they’re going to drop out as soon as their parents will let them.”

FOR PARENTS

Message to moms and dads: It’s all about [perspective](#).

Saferstein explains it this way: “If you treat your kid’s soccer the way you treat your kid’s math, you’ll probably be OK,” he says. “Most parents don’t show up at their kid’s class and start screaming at them, ‘Carry the zero!’”

Instead, they do what all good parents do. “You offer help calmly, don’t get in their face, and don’t talk to them in the car about how they screwed up.” In other words, you let go a little.

Then, as kids get older, if they have success, it's important to try to separate yourself from the process as a parent. "Parents have to refrain from getting drunk on their own kid's talent," says Saferstein.

"The most powerful thing I've ever seen is telling your kid, 'I love watching you play.'"

Thompson encourages parents to adopt a dialed-back approach: Focus on life lessons while letting coaches and athletes focus on competing ("Let coaches coach" is something you hear often). He has written several books on the subject, and all are worth checking out.

When asked to pick the one thing he'd tell any parent, he settles on a simple concept: "The most important thing is to validate your child's courage for going out to compete. We don't think about that much, how scary it can be for a 7- or 8-year-old to go out on a soccer field."

In *Changing the Game*, O'Sullivan outlines what he calls the 7 Cs of a High-Performing State of Mind. He argues it is up to parents to help provide these Cs:

- **Common Sense:** Have some perspective.
- **Conditions:** Provide a positive environment.
- **Communication:** Keep it open.
- **Control:** Cede some to your children.
- **Competence:** Let your children see the results of hard work.
- **Confidence:** Foster it.
- **Caring:** You can never go wrong with unconditional love.

All of this becomes even more important if you are one of the estimated 75 to 80 percent of coaches who end up coaching their own children.

That's a lot to remember, of course. Asked for his single most important piece of advice, O'Sullivan offers up a mantra he learned from Bruce Brown, a longtime youth-sports educator. "The most powerful thing I've ever seen is telling your kid, 'I love watching you play,'" says O'Sullivan.

"What that says is, '[I love you](#) unconditionally whether your team wins or loses.' I've had parents and athletes call me up and say, 'I thought that was so dumb but it changed my life. Thank you, thank you.'"

FOR COACHES

The No. 1 change any coach can make, on any level, is to focus more on the positive. A recent study, published in *Social Neuroscience*, of undergrads at Case Western Reserve University, found that young people who are coached using a positive approach — envisioning future success, in particular — were more likely to be compassionate and open to ideas for improvement. They were also more likely to make lasting behavioral changes than those coached by people who focused on their weaknesses.

How to do this? The key, say both Thompson and O’Sullivan, is to combine fun with learning. “When we do ‘deliberate practice,’ we forget that kids also like ‘deliberate play,’” says O’Sullivan. “As coaches, we need to have a balance.”

So, for example, mix up the rigid drills with exercises where kids can freelance — such as those exercises that mimic schoolyard games like tag.

Of course, as kids get older, they need to develop a drive for excellence. And coaches want to win. That’s natural. Don’t shy away from it, advises Thompson; just don’t lose focus on player development at the expense of winning.

“There are two [goals](#),” he says. “Yeah, you’re trying to win — and at the same time, you’re looking out for them as athletes and people.”

Here are some strategies he suggests:

- **Use a ratio** of five positive reinforcements to each criticism or correction.
- **Use a buddy system** so that each player is tasked with filling up another’s emotional tank — that is, pumping each other up.
- **Make constructive criticism** kid friendly by couching it in positives and always giving the feedback in private.
- **When kids** do make a mistake, help them move past it by having them adopt a “mistake ritual,” a quick action that helps them move beyond the mess-up. (One popular ritual is to “flush” the mistake by having the athlete make a physical motion like flushing the toilet.)

“The most important play is always the next play,” says Thompson. This philosophy applies all the way up to the pro level. Last season, Los Angeles Clippers coach Doc Rivers helped out young, mercurial center DeAndre Jordan by counseling him that he couldn’t afford to be “emotionally hijacked.” So whenever Jordan got down on himself, or the refs, Rivers whispered, “Get past mad. Get past mad.”

Especially with young athletes, who tend to be perfectionists, this is excellent advice.

Finally, O’Sullivan advises, when in doubt as a coach, think back to what you really liked as a player. And if you can’t remember, ask the kids what *they* really like. This will provide an easy litmus test. As O’Sullivan says: “You’ll know you’ve made it fun when the kids say they want to come back.”

FOR ADMINISTRATORS

Parents and coaches play a crucial role, but it’s the leaders of youth sports who can create systemic change. After all, a coach can affect 10 or 12 kids; an administrator can create a culture based on development rather than competition. This then carries over to coaches.

With coaches who believe winning is the most important thing, one solution is to change the incentives. If Little League coaches are rewarded for winning — say, with a chance to coach the

All-Star game because their team has the best record — change the criteria. Instead, reward the coach who best meets a set of criteria based on development. (Admittedly, this can be hard to quantify.)

On an even larger scale, more leagues can embrace the ideals of organizations like the Positive Coaching Alliance.

They can also learn from the Long-Term Athletic Development (LTAD) model. It was developed in Canada in 2005 to address recurring issues in youth athletics, including inexperienced coaches doing the majority of the teaching, an overemphasis on competition that led to bad habits, and conflicting leagues and clubs taking the fun out of sports. The LTAD model is complicated, but the gist of it is this: Focus on developing “physical literacy” in young athletes through fun-based training, and delay true competition until near puberty age.

So far, LTAD has been successful in Canada and Great Britain, and a number of U.S. organizations are adopting its principles. (For more information, go to www.canadiansportforlife.ca.)

In the end, says Saferstein, the people who hold on to their love of sport the longest are the ones who really come out on top.

“I go to the noon game at my local YMCA and there are 60-year-olds still playing basketball,” he says. “If you can hold on to your love of the game for that long, whether it’s basketball or soccer or [tennis](#), you win.”

More important, he says, is that letting your kids see this — see the joy you take in playing the game just to play it, or in watching them play just to watch them play — will inspire them in a way that no pep talk or lecture or coach ever can.

Which is to say: If you still see sports as fun, chances are good your kids will, too.

PLAYING FOR MYSELF

What is it like to be a competitive youth athlete today?

Lorna McElrath is a 16-year-old junior at The College Preparatory School, a private high school in Oakland, Calif. In 2013, as a freshman at nearby Bishop O’Dowd High School, she was the starting goalkeeper on a soccer team that won the Northern Coast Section Division II championship. She currently plays for three teams outside of school, including with the California Olympic Development Program.

Her story is representative of the sacrifices and pressures involved with being a youth athlete today. The following are her words, taken from a lengthy interview and edited for clarity.

My first sport was gymnastics. I started in kindergarten and continued until the second grade, when I decided to quit because of the commitment. They wanted me to move up to 12 hours a week and I was only 7 years old! So I took a year off organized sports.

When I was in third grade, my friends were on a rec soccer team and they needed an extra player for a game. I fell in love with soccer the first time I touched a ball. A year later, I was playing in a rec game and a competitive coach was scouting for players. On our rec team, we all hated playing goalie so we rotated each game. I happened to be the one in goal that day. The coach saw me and asked me to try out as a goalkeeper. I've been sort of stuck in that position ever since.

That was fourth grade, and I began playing four to five hours a week and every weekend. In sixth or seventh grade, I left my local team in the Bay Area to play with one in Santa Clara. A lot of soccer, especially on the girls' side, is about getting recruited. One of my friends got her first recruiting letter in the eighth grade. The Santa Clara team had a lot better exposure, even at a young age. So my parents drove me an hour down and an hour back three times a week.

After eighth grade, I moved back to the Bay Area team and began playing a year ahead. Now I play on two pretty high-level teams. The other is in Mountain View and it competes in a nationwide league of college showcases. We just got back from a tournament in Las Vegas. We went to Kansas for the national championships last year.

My parents place a strong emphasis on the fact that playing soccer is not about getting recruited.

I don't mind the time commitment because I enjoy playing soccer. There are times when you get burned out. What I don't like is how restricting it ends up being. When I started playing soccer in fourth grade, that was it. Now I can't do volleyball or swimming or anything else. I've chosen what I'm going to do. It's so competitive and it starts at such a young age now that if I found a different passion, I'd be forever behind. I could never be at the top of a sport.

At school, I write for the school newspaper and I'm co-president of a club, but I don't do anything else that isn't flexible with my time. I don't get much sleep. I think I miss out on some parties, and some events, and going shopping, but I gain so much from having a team. As a group of girls, we spend so much time together — probably too much time together. They've been with me, crying my eyes out when we lose. They're just people that I can trust.

My parents have been extremely supportive. I've been so lucky. They have always been supportive of whatever team I play on, but also place a strong emphasis on the fact that playing soccer is not about getting recruited. So while I do email college coaches and I do go to tournaments, they've always said that it's about your growth and enjoyment as a person and if at any point you want to stop, you can stop. I've known teammates whose parents' sole interest is college.

There are dark sides, of course. Parents yell. I've seen parents almost get in a fight on the sidelines. My dad gets very, very passionate during games. When I was younger, if I played a bad game, my dad and I wouldn't really talk for a couple days. I used to get nervous before games. Butterflies in my stomach. I wouldn't eat. Back then I was playing not as much for myself but to impress my dad. I was scared of what his reaction would be if I played a bad game. So I played timid. I didn't play confident. It was a few years ago that I thought, "I have to snap out of this. I can't play for my dad anymore, I have to play for me." I started playing for my teammates, myself, my coaches.

The past couple of years it's been college this, college that. We've had 40 or 50 college coaches lined up on the sideline, taking notes. It's very intimidating. To a certain extent, I guess, I'm now playing for them. But you can't think about that. You just have to play for yourself.

I can't count the number of times I've decided to quit. Just said, "I'm done" after a bad game or getting benched. But there's always something that brings me back. I play so much soccer that it's become part of who I am. I can't imagine not playing soccer. I mean, I come home and what would I do? I've considered quitting and having a social life, doing fun things. But in the end soccer has always won out because I can't imagine not doing it and there are so many moments that are incredible. Like going to the national championships. And taking a trip to Hawaii with my team.

The competition is a big part of it. Even when I was 13, I wouldn't have been happy just kicking a ball around with no competition. That's what sports are: a competition. I don't think you can ever take that out of the game. It's what you need to be successful.

I want to play in college, hopefully, but I don't want to play soccer beyond that. There isn't really a woman's professional league that's well-developed, and there are just so many more important things to do in life than kick a ball around a field. It's just not that interesting to me. But I really want to play in college, because soccer is one of the best ways to get into a top-notch university. It's just so competitive.

If I didn't play soccer, I don't know where I'd be in life right now, but I don't think I'd be as successful as I am. The greatest benefits from playing sports are being able to stay calm under pressure and learning how to lead. Both of those have carried over to the rest of my life. Also, I have more confidence in general and when interacting with people. And this sounds cheesy, but sports help in overcoming adversity.

Soccer can be challenging. It's not fun a lot of the time. But that's how most of life is, right? You get out of it what you put into it.

BY [CHRIS BALLARD](#)