

## ABSTRACT

### The Professionalization of Youth Sports in America

Jordan D. Cox, M.A.

Committee Chairperson: Sara J. Stone, Ph.D.

Adolescent athletes in America have unknowingly been turned into de facto professionals by existing organized youth sports systems. The current approaches have become overly injurious to participants and their families. This work explores the history of organized youth sports in America, some of the adult factors involved in youth sports, the cost emotionally and developmentally to kids involved, overuse injuries, and how youth sports has become big business. While competition is an integral part of American culture, strong alternatives to current youth sports systems do exist. Examples are given of efforts being made to reshape youth sports and provide healthier benefits to participants.

The Professionalization of Youth Sports in America

by

Jordan D. Cox, B.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of American Studies

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Douglas R. Ferdon Jr., Ph.D., Chairperson

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Sara J. Stone, Ph.D., Chairperson

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Corey P. Carbonara, Ph.D.

---

David W. Schlueter, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School  
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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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## DEDICATION

TO

My Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the gift of my salvation. I cling to His promises as expressed in Jeremiah 29:11.

My wife, Kristy, and daughters Jordan and Ryley for their understanding during my journey to the completion of this work. Their patience with a husband and dad was incredible. All of you are such a blessing to me.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

The landscape of youth sports in the United States has changed. In past generations, children played at their leisure. They played games and sports of their own choosing. They picked the teams. They made the rules or modified the rules as they saw fit for their environment. They served as the officials and administrators and a rough law of equity enforced fair play. Adults were rarely in charge. Culture has shifted, however, and now for more than a generation, this style and methodology of play has all but disappeared for American youth. Adults have become the “ultra-organizers” of youth sports. This “ultra-organization” has distorted what was once a healthy landscape. Adult behavior has become extreme for a variety of reasons, like the desire for college athletic scholarship monies, and has forcibly pushed this change on children. What parents want and what parents hope to gain from their children’s participation in organized youth sports is often at a polar extreme to what their kids want. These different motives frequently cause much of the stress encountered by both adults and children involved in youth sports (Harwood and Knight 2007; Fraser-Thomas and Cote 2009). This shift has come at an extremely high cost to kids and their families. Formation of select or elite travel teams, particularly for younger ages, combined with a drive toward early specialization in a specific sport has led to physical and emotional trauma for young people. Overuse injuries and emotional burnout because of a high pressure to win or succeed has reached well past alarming rates. While this evolution

has been consistent, it has been rapid. The combination of these and additional factors have created the professionalization of youth sports in America.

More children than ever before are participating in youth sports in the United States. The National Council of Youth Sports estimates that about forty-four million girls and boys play on organized teams in the United States, a number that has steadily increased in the past twenty years (National Council of Youth Sports). While other research places the participation numbers closer to thirty-five million, there is no dispute with studies that indicate approximately seven out of ten adolescents drop out of organized youth sports by age thirteen, primarily because it was no longer fun for the children or they felt too much pressure to win. Fred Engh, author of *Why Johnny Hates Sports* and president of the National Alliance for Youth Sports says, "Studies show than an alarming 70 percent of the approximately twenty million children who participate in organized out-of-school athletic programs will quit by the age of thirteen because of unpleasant sports experiences. That's 17.5 million unhappy, dispirited children. It's a frightening statistic that paints a rather bleak picture of organized sports in America today. The culprits are the adults who, in their roles as coaches, administrators, and parents, have misguided motives and ideals of what youth sports are all about" (Engh 2002, 3).

There are other viewpoints, however. Child psychologist Shane Murphy, and author of the book *The Cheers and the Tears: a healthy alternative to the dark side of youth sports today*, points out that sports by itself is value neutral and "there is no guarantee that placing a child in a youth sports program will help her build character, just as there is no certainty that a competitive youth sports experience will damage a child.



Where we view competition positively or negatively depends on how competition experienced is organized, and how it affects our children and ourselves” (Murphy 1999, 174). Despite being more clinical in his diagnosis of the problems with the current state of youth sports, he too, asserts the concern that too many young people are being hurt. He says, “My concern is that I see too many young people with a great love of sports that are driven away by the manner in which programs are organized. Somehow we take children, who have a natural desire to be active and to play, and we turn them away from sporting activities” (Murphy 1999, 20).

Interestingly, the debate concerning the unhealthy levels of pressure being placed on young people participating in youth sports is not new. It dates to the very beginnings of the most successful programs and their foundational missions. Many of these programs continue to enjoy immense popularity today. The most successful youth sports programs operated in the public schools, especially in the northeastern part of the United States. The first organized sports league for boys had its start in New York City in 1903. The Public Schools Athletic League began with three hundred players. By 1910, there were more than one hundred-fifty thousand children involved. The success of the school league seemed obvious based on the number of participants and spectators, but by the 1930s, educators had become concerned. “The emphasis on winning was too great, they warned. And the physical and mental strain of playing for championships was unhealthy for the young players” (Hyman 2009, 4). Professionals rethought the direction of competitive school athletic programs. Emphasis on winning was replaced with the loftier goal of developmental physical fitness for all young people involved. Leagues began to

disappear as elementary schools and junior high schools dropped their competitive teams in favor of less competitive offerings via intramural sports.

While the intentions of providing benefits to all children were admirable on the part of professionals, their decisions to alter the approach to programming created a gap that has become increasingly wider with each passing year. This transpired because, unfortunately, parents stepped into the void that was created. Sports historian Rainer Martens concedes this was a profound turning point and a gigantic blunder on the part of educators (Martens 1978). Those who knew what they were doing were no longer leading. These programs had previously thrived under the guidance of educators, recreation leaders, and even youth counselors from organizations such as Boy Scouts, Boys Clubs, and even the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) where in Springfield, Massachusetts, one of its leaders, Dr. James Naismith, invented the game of basketball in 1891. He nailed a peach basket to the wall in order to give children something to do indoors besides play volleyball. These organized sports efforts had for their focus, fun, recreation, fitness, and even deeper spiritual purposes as evidenced by the involvement of groups like the YMCA whose purpose was largely evangelical in nature. In his book, *Joy and Sadness in Children's Sports*, Rainer Martens writes, "Ironically, educators suddenly found themselves no longer leading the movement they had begun. Instead of well- trained professionals guiding the sports programs of children, well-meaning but untrained volunteers assumed leadership roles. Sadly, educators were left on the sidelines shouting their unheeded warnings and criticisms" (Martens 1978).

Despite America's Great Depression, youth sports programs began to emerge during this era. The Junior Football Conference was birthed during this period with

beginnings in 1929 as a crime prevention initiative in an especially troubled area of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1934, heralded college football coach “Pop” Warner spoke at a league function and so impressed officials that they renamed the endeavor in his honor.

Junior baseball, a creative effort of the American Legion to promote patriotism and good citizenship, was launched in 1926, a full three years earlier than its football counterpart. It was the spring of 1939, however, that saw the birth of what was to become perhaps the most famous youth sports program in American history. A Williamsport, Pennsylvania, lumberyard bookkeeper, Carl Stotz, debuted Little League baseball, reportedly on behalf of his young nephews and other boys, in order that rules, equipment, and life lessons would be designed to suit them.

Despite well-meaning intentions, there is little room for doubt that parents and others brought with them a distinctly different mentality to youth sports than their predecessors did previously. Their mentality was unfettered by the conventional wisdoms of the time which were being espoused by the academic experts versed in how intense competition might damage or otherwise inflict harm on children. In fact, these new efforts heightened the level of intensity for competition over the more commonly accepted recreational values.

While academicians sounded sirens of concern beginning in the 1930s, according to University of Washington historian Jack W. Berryman, with a “steady stream of proposals, guidelines, speeches, manuals, and periodical articles containing warnings against too much competition for elementary school children,” (Berryman 1975, 117) it was during this era that organized youth sports initiatives truly began to thrive. Just a

little more than a dozen years after Carl Stotz began his local four team baseball concept, Little Leagues were operating in twelve states under his guidance. This prompted noted New York Times sports columnist Arthur Daley to write in May of 1952 that Stotz's creation was "the biggest thing to happen to the sport since Abner Doubleday outlined his baseball diamond in Cooperstown in 1839" (Daley 1952).

Certainly not everyone was as romantically taken with these new organized youth sports efforts. The debate over youth sports being too competitive and unhealthy for children was addressed in an article published in the highly regarded *Journal of Health and Physical Education* in 1932 where experts warned of a danger seemingly ripped from modern headlines: early sports specialization. "Not only does [premature specialization] deprive the young athlete of the opportunity to brouse [sic] around and find his interests in the various sports and various positions, but it causes him to lose his adaptability...many athletic misfits are created" (Hyman 2009, 4).

New York University professor Charles Bucher vehemently took continued issue with the approaches of efforts like Little League baseball. A former elementary athletic director and coach, Bucher had an editorial letter printed in the New York Times just one week after the Little League World Series had crowned its new champions in September of 1952. Bucher listed reason after reason why parents should be wary of Little League baseball, then in its thirteenth season. To the professor, the entire enterprise was designed to please and entertain adults. Little about it struck him as right for adolescent boys. Bucher further continued his public concern about the excesses in this style of youth sports less than a year later in an article titled, "Little League Baseball Can Hurt Your Boy," which appeared in *Look* magazine, August 11, 1953. A highlight of Bucher's

piece— or lowlight, depending on the youth sports leanings of the reader— was the litany of horror stories chronicling deplorable behavior of coaches and parents. One story was of a father in Bucher's neighborhood in Armonk, New York, who boasted to friends that one day his son would pitch in the big leagues: “He has sold the idea to the boy and to some of the neighbors, too. Perhaps this boy will make it. But the odds are about 25,000 to 1 against him. When he discovers, as he probably will, that he is no budding Yankee or Dodger it may not do his ego much good. He may even feel he has let his father down” (Bucher 1953).

The National Education Association validated the concerns of Bucher and others in a forty-six-page booklet entitled “Desirable Athletic Competition for Children” which was released at a national news conference in Washington, D.C., on December 18, 1952. Author Mark Hyman writes the “The NEA report was a double-spaced demolition of youth sports. It panned the entire enterprise, concluding that “highly organized competition, patterned after high school and college sports, gives youngsters an exaggerated idea of the importance of sports and may even be harmful to them.” The report, which had taken three years to complete, urged adults to do away with the “high-pressure elements” in their programs, including all-star teams and newspaper and radio accounts of games” (American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation 1952, 3).

Due in large part to the debate over the shortcomings of youth sports and public pressure, President Dwight Eisenhower established the first President’s Council on Youth Fitness, appointing his vice-president Richard Nixon to lead the group. They were charged with keeping the nation informed on issues pertaining to children and their sports

lives. “The council's early recommendation echoed themes from the NEA report. Namely, "Schools...should focus increased attention on children who are not athletically gifted, rather than on 'stars'" (Hyman 2009, 11).

The same year Eisenhower established his presidential council, Carl Stotz, the man who invented Little League baseball, was ousted from the very organization he established. The dismissal came because of increasingly larger ambitions sought by corporate executives Stotz had initially invited to help manage his growing endeavor. For the last forty years of his life, Stotz was an outspoken opponent of the very organization to which his ideals had given birth. His disenchantment began with philosophical differences with other organizational leaders in 1955. Stotz filed a three hundred-thousand dollar lawsuit for breach of contract against the very program he founded. Stotz issued a statement about the matter which was reprinted in a local paper. He stated, “I would like to emphasize that I have not brought this suit with any thought of personal gain. All monies recovered as a result of this suit will be used solely for the purpose of perpetuating Little League Baseball as originally conceived” (Van Auken and Van Auken 2001, 74). Stotz was not in favor of the exploitation of Little League for financial gain.

Sports psychologists Richard Ginsberg, Stephen Durant and Amy Baltzell are among the many disturbed by the changes in youth sports. In particular they say the pressure focused on Little Leaguers during the World Series and other young athletes is “preposterous”. The trio contends that adolescent sports are not meant to be entertainment for adults. A clinician at Boston Massachusetts General Hospital, Ginsberg asserts, “First, though sports can involve serious play, especially as children get

older, it is play nonetheless. It isn't war. It isn't a life or death matter and it shouldn't be made into that" (Ginsberg, Durant, and Baltzell 2006, 12).

The issues of this debate are essentially unchanged since before educational experts, teachers, medical, and child development professionals gathered in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1938 to discuss these matters. These esteemed individuals reached a consensus related to the unacceptable risk to children involved in organized competitive sports. Their advisement to school officials created the withdrawal of professional support which allowed the gap to be filled by these numerous groups of untrained adults. Part of their resolution reads, "Inasmuch as pupils below tenth grade are in the midst of the period of rapid growth...be it therefore resolved that the leaders in the field of physical and health education should do all in their power to discourage interscholastic competition at this age level, because of its strenuous nature" (Murphy 1999, 29).

Following World War II, the baby boom in the United States led to increasingly growing levels of parental involvement in youth sports. Dads became coaches, officials, and administrators in the burgeoning youth leagues, and Moms became car pool and transportation managers. The real engine driving the metamorphosis in youth sports is, and has been, the parents.

To some degree adults must be involved in youth sports organizations. The entities could not exist without them. They are a requirement. Physical space must be secured to allow children a place to safely play. Kids must be physically transported to and from practices and contests. Administrative duties such as safety issues on behalf of children need attention. Teams often need uniforms. Games need referees in many instances. Yet, priorities seem to be strangely askew with no signs of becoming balanced

for the wholesome, well-rounded development of children. Shane Murphy observes, "The whole notion of sports organized by kids themselves has almost disappeared. What happened to sandlot baseball and street kickball? When exactly did each youth team get its own corporate sponsor? How can parents afford the time to travel with their children to so many "all-star" competitions, even in other states? When did national rankings of high school teams in various sports begin? And were parents always this vociferous on the sidelines during games?" (Murphy 1999, 4) Writer Reagan McMahan, author of *Revolution in the Bleachers: how parents can take back family life in a world gone crazy over youth sports*, states straightforwardly, "Winning has superseded fun, learning and development while youth sports have been transformed into a star system modeled on professional sports, with all its greed and excess and glorification of attitude and individualism" (McMahan 2007, xiv).

William F. Gaine, deputy director of the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association, goes a step further suggesting the proverbial challenge may be insurmountable. He feels young people entering high school today are increasingly "tainted" and "the norm that has been defined in the sports culture is contrary to the mission of interscholastic athletics. We are fighting a battle that almost can't be won" (Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall 2001, 297). Gaine's point is aptly illustrated by a 1997 article which appeared in *S.A. Kids Magazine*, a publication generated in San Antonio, Texas. The article's author, Dan Schofield, a youth specialist for the United States Air Force, pointed out how skewed things had become when he was told by an area youth sports organization representative that "at an age when even scores shouldn't be



important, this community selected elite teams of kindergartners. Why? Parents insist on it” (Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall 2001, 45).

Former pro basketball player and author Bob Bigelow in his book, *Just Let the Kids Play*, points out the absurdity of where youth sports in America finds itself.

Just imagine what would happen if the adults decided they ought to jump in, help out and organize tag games for their kids. Actually, you know what would happen. Within a few years, they would have sliced, diced and organized tag to death. The adults would start with their basic needs for organization and management. They would find the fields, organize teams, set schedules. If the kids were going to play tag, obviously they'd need adults to tell them how to play. They'd need coaches. The coaches would need assistant coaches to keep track of tag minutes, tag assists, and tag hits. The coaches would need to figure out how to beat other tag teams.

If they were expected to beat the other tag teams, the adults would worry that their taggers might not improve as quickly as the other taggers, so they would figure they'd need tag practices. The more, the better. Two tag practices and a tag game each week.

During the first season, the adults would notice different levels of tag abilities. Next, the adults would worry about how their best taggers could get better fast enough if they continue to play with their worst taggers....My kid needs more competitive tagging.

Enough adults would start to think this way they would contact The Town Next To Them, which would have started its own tag teams. Towns would get together and form a tag conference. Another board, more meetings. A regional tag commission. Our tag all-stars against your tag all-stars. That would result in tag evaluations and tag tryouts. Soon enough, some eight-year-olds would be told, "You're just not good enough to play tag (Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall 2001, 50).

The speed at which Baby Boomers have arrived at this juncture as parental sports adults is seemingly surreal. The vast multitude of adult-run directorates, highlighted by large youth sports organizations, has taken on a life of its own. It is an existence entirely new and perhaps beyond an individual's control to a great extent. According to Carl Honore, author of *In Praise of Slowness*, “These days the whole world is time-sick. We all belong to the same cult of speed” (Honore 2004, 3). This parenting style was ushered in by Boomers who decided their children would be afforded every opportunity and they

would become involved in the lives of their children in a manner rarely displayed by their own parents. It has, in effect, created a new version of childhood which is approximately one generation old. Ginsberg summarizes the situation uniquely. "Adults are not the problem. The culture is the problem," he says. "A lot of forces are pulling at parents. Because everyone is so damn busy, and the culture moves so fast, parents just get in line, without thinking why they're in line or what the line is about. It takes a grounded parent who has thought about the issue thoroughly to step back and say, 'I'm not sure this is the right thing'" (Hyman 2009, 23). Author Mark Hyman offers that Ginsberg's theory is rooted in a curious irony: that the busier and more distracted adults are, the more attention they pay to their children's sports games. Parents hope to somehow compensate for their sixty-hour work weeks. They know these venues will provide opportunities for them to spend time with their kids. It also allows them to feel like they are positively contributing to the well-being of their children by organizing car-pools and similar efforts. These younger parents sign-up their kids for more leagues, nudging their children into the most competitive travel teams and donning them with the most expensive sports equipment available. This distinguishes them from their own parents in one sense, because in the previous generation, the family social calendar rarely revolved around the sports schedule of the children of the family. The play of children, even the play in organized sports for children, was simply viewed differently by parents than it is now. Sociologists like Jay Coakley, have argued that in the past twenty years, parents have been burdened by a new societal expectation– that a "good parent"– knows where his or her child is twenty-four hours a day. This expectation did not exist in times past" (Murphy 1999, 43).

Today parents seemingly worry more about basic safety issues when their children are alone. Many children just a generation ago had the common experiences of “roaming” the neighborhood or riding bicycles to other neighborhoods to play with friends. Today, unsupervised time for children is especially scary to parents when compared to their own childhoods. Having their children involved in organized sports seemingly provides the answer to most perceived dangers and other concerns involving extended periods of time which lack adult supervision. With practices and games occurring several times each week and occupying the children in a so-called “structured” environment for several hours, parents do not worry about where their children are or what they are doing. San Francisco, California, area family therapist Peggy Wynne further contends that parents’ own competitive nature to prove to other parents that their kids are the smartest and the brightest have led to much of the problem of over scheduling. “A lot of the cultural pressure comes from the top down,” says Wynne. “High school sports today are what college sports used to be like– the attention, the focus, the practices– it’s all just dropped down a level. It used to be that kids could play high school sports for fun. It’s not like that anymore. It’s much more competitive. Kids used to use sports as a tool to be well-rounded, as something to try and something to do and a way to make friends that just doesn’t exist anymore. And that’s the real tragedy” (McMahon 2007, 129).

More children and adults find themselves dealing with these cultural sports circumstances because of two monumental shifts in the American sports landscape that have taken place within the past generation. The first is the rise in sports program

involvement opportunities for girls. The second is the unofficial adoption of soccer as the sport of choice for parents of preschool and grade-school-aged children.

Opportunities for a broader scope of sports participation for females at all levels of youth sports came with the passage of Title IX legislation by the United States government. While schools and organizations across the country continue to navigate the evolutionary effects of this historic legislation, simply stated, Title IX was passed to ensure females were given equal sports participation to males. In 1972, the year Title IX took effect, boys played high school sports at a ratio of 12:1 over girls. By 1992, that ratio was less than 3:1. As indicated on its website, the National Federation of State High School Associations statistics from 2009-2010 revealed girls comprise about 41.5 percent of high school athletics participation (National Federation of State High School Associations). This reality, however, has become a sharp two-edged sword. "The good news is that girls are catching up. But it's not all good news. As participation rises, so have influences transforming their games in troubling ways. Little girls now start on organized teams earlier than ever. In other words, as early as little boys. They're specializing in a single sport as middle-schoolers. They're being courted by year-round travel teams, trained by private coaches, and sent to sports summer camps where the goal is college placement. For these fundamental changes, all credit goes to Title IX" (Hyman 2009, 46). The realities for girls' involvement become increasingly important since research indicates that if a girl does not participate in sports by the age of ten, there is less than a 10 percent chance she will be participating in any sports activity when she is twenty-five years old (Engh 2002, 123).

In youth soccer, which became a permanent fixture on the United States adolescent sports scene in the mid-1960s, female participation is near 50 percent, with programs for boys and girls available as early as age three (United States Youth Soccer Association). The American Youth Soccer Organization began in Torrance, California, in 1964, adding its first girls program in 1971, and by the mid 90s had grown to nearly forty-six thousand teams with almost six hundred-thousand participants in forty-six states (American Youth Soccer Association). This is just one of many national youth soccer organizations in the country. The United States Youth Soccer Association (USYSA) began in 1974 and now boasts more than three million participants, ages five to nineteen, in 2002, playing in six thousand leagues (United States Soccer Association). The USYSA is the youth branch of the governing body of soccer in the United States, the U.S. Soccer Federation. The Federation is a member of the global Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), which began to host World Youth Tournaments in 1985. In his 2002 book *Fair Play: Making Organized Sports a Great Experience for Your Kids*, author Scott B. Lancaster offered this explanation of this cultural love affair with soccer. "Soccer embodies everything that is right about youth sports. Everyone plays, positions are interchangeable, and there is plenty of continuous movement and action. The low-key nature and lack of pressure that accompanies the sport appeals to kids, and soccer has grown quickly in popularity" (Lancaster 2002, 14). The biggest rise in participation came in the 1980s which saw the emergence of elite club teams, which now dominate the sport. Youth soccer in America is, however, vastly different than elsewhere. Youth soccer in the United States is a highly structured experience rather than "free" play or "street" play as it appears in other parts of the

world. According to a high school varsity soccer coach J.T. Hanley. “Here in this country, if there aren't bibs, cones, and a ball bag, there is no soccer going on, for the most part. There's got to be structure to it. There, the majority of it is the other way around. You might train with your club team twice a week, but you play soccer every day” (McMahon 2007, 24). He suggests that everywhere else in the world, soccer is for the most part a working-class sport, analogous to what inner-city youths here in America experience in basketball, in that they develop their game independent of a club. As they develop their skills they may become noticed. They are then brought into a club to learn the tactical parts of the game. That's the way soccer is everywhere else in the world. In the United States, with few exceptions it is all about the club and all established clubs are suburban, particularly for girls (McMahon 2007, 25).

This new-found attraction to soccer combined with additional opportunities for girls has dramatically altered how children play. Previously children spent preschool years and early grade school engaged largely in free play by themselves in their backyards or school playgrounds. They did this long before they were poured into uniforms and planted on fields with their games being scored and refereed by adult officials. Reagan McMahon shares this line of thinking, stating “Sometimes kids would invent their own game, with or without a ball, make up their own rules and scoring, and settle their own disputes over what's in or out of bounds, what's fair and what's cheating, how long a game lasts, etc. Their athletic abilities weren't being judged or ranked. They didn't face a draft or cuts. They had weekends and afternoons free and summers off. They traveled on vacation for fun, not to tournaments for interleague competitions. They tried

out new sports one by one as their bodies matured enough to be able to play those sports” (McMahon 2007, 26).

The women who won gold medals for the United States in soccer, gymnastics, softball, basketball and synchronized swimming at the 1996 summer Olympic Games in Atlanta were nicknamed the “Title IX babies.” These young women had played on college teams and many had received athletic scholarships to do so. It is this facet of the legacy of Title IX that has helped stir the parental wildness in youth sports for both girls and boys today. Parental desire for athletic scholarships is fueling much of the mayhem. It also plays a major role and influences decisions about early participation, specialization and select elite club teams. The facts are that less than one percent of children who participate in youth sports will receive a college athletic scholarship, (FinAid) yet the systems organized for youth sports are intentionally set up to showcase only the very best talent at even the youngest ages. Michael Clark, a key member of the team at the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports and an assistant professor at Michigan State University, clearly sees, “If these systems were structured differently, there's every reason to expect that the dropout rate would be significantly lower. We just force a lot of kids out. That's all there is to it” (Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall 2001, 99). Writer Bob Bigelow points out that if the owner of a business had a 70 percent failure rate on a product, he or she would shelve it. That leads to his suggestion that much of what has been created in the name of youth sports should be scrapped. Adults are looking to the highest levels of the sports entertainment industries to form the youth sports systems currently in place, all to the detriment of those participating.

Robert Cobb, dean of the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine and founder of the federally funded initiative Sports Done Right, which seeks to make youth sports more fun, positive, and inclusive, agrees with this position. He says,

There is no evidence. When you have fewer than 1 percent of the kids actually earning scholarships somewhere in sports, that leaves a big portion of them out of the winnings, that's for sure. And yet we create these elaborate tournament structures involving hundreds and hundreds of kids in an elite program in a region, with the parent expectation that they're all going to get scholarships, but the reality is that only one will get a scholarship. So you've created this whole structure in support of one kid getting a scholarship. Nobody in their right mind would want to be a party to that if they weren't the one kid. But that's what we do, and we hold out the promise and the hope that they will (Sports Done Right).

National staff coach for U.S. Soccer, Gary Allen, concurs. "We're putting too much emphasis on physically gifted athletes, instead of developing all those who want to participate. It's no wonder that we lose more than half of them by the time they are teenagers" (Allen 2000). Similar rebuke was issued more than forty years ago for all "highly organized sports for children" at the June 1958 American Medical Association's (A.M.A.) annual meeting in San Francisco, California. Dr. Fred Vittein, an A.M.A. official, told the group that structured sports leagues "shut out" all girls as well as boys who were not physically gifted. The system of catering to the most talented players "help perpetuate physical unfitness among the rest of the children," he said (Hyman 2009, 11).

Whether participating in hopes of landing an elusive athletic scholarship or for other reasons designed by adults, kids are paying a very high cost both physically and emotionally. Fred Engh, founder of the National Alliance for Youth Sports, recalls his initial reaction at a conference on youth sports in 1984 when a pediatrician claimed youth sports was, "the greatest form of legalized child abuse in America" (Engh 2002, 135).



Engh said he was stunned, but came to realize later that the doctor had a very good point. Jim Thompson, founder and leader of the Positive Coaching Alliance, believes it is simply greed that has led to such realities. Financial greed, physical greed, or emotional greed, it is the desire for more and more that has youth sports at this juncture. He asks, "Was it ESPN magazine that just had the top 6th-grade basketball player in the country on the cover? Why do we need to know who the top 6th grader in the country is? Maybe that kid will be another Michael Jordan. Can't we wait until he gets in high school or college to know that? It's that more, more, more" (McMahon 2007, 43).

Adults have turned the play of youth in organized sports into work. An increasing number of experts agree and believe that children deserve protection from this work. Bob Bigelow, along with his co-authors, Tom Moroney and Linda Hall, makes some very appropriate observations by pointing out that, "We have laws in this country about child labor. We restrict the age for drinking and driving. We legislate against secondhand smoke. We vigilantly guard for signs of child exploitation, child neglect and child abuse. Yet every day, all over the United States, parents sign their children into youth sports programs that have few if any limits on how many games their children will be forced to play, how hard and at what costs they will be pushed to win, and how young they will be held to adult standards, adult goals, adult-strength stress" (Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall 2001, 29).

Sociologist Peter Donnelly called for the enactment of some form of child labor laws in 1993 citing that when parents, agents, and administrators stand to reap a large profit or financial windfall from the performance of a child athlete, the young athlete deserves some protection (Murphy 1999, 14). Dr. Ronald Kamm, M.D., director of Sport

Psychiatry Associates, in Oakhurst, New Jersey, also strongly believes youth sports has gone too far. He states, "We enacted child labor laws eighty years ago to protect children from all this work. And now basically we're making play into work. And they're working as hard as they used to in sweat shops, some of them. I'm concerned about it, it's out of hand, and kids need downtime and seasons off and multiple sports. There is the occasional prodigy who just loves the sport and is focused on it, maybe a Tara Lipinski or a Tiger Woods. But most kids do better with many sports. It protects them and they don't get overuse injuries as much and it keeps them from burning out" (McMahon 2007, 66). Even those who work directly with young athletes in schools share that sentiment. Carlos Arreaga, staff athletic trainer at Bishop O'Dowd High School in Oakland, California, says he thinks youth are being exploited. "It's really kind of sad because I think our kids, to some degree, are being used for financial gain and ultimately for adults. This is a trickle-down effect from professional to college sports. Years ago the talk was about college athletes and how they're being exploited to some degree for the adults' benefit. And that's not a healthy thing" (McMahon 2007, 44).

Overuse injuries to young athletes have reached record levels and trends show no signs of decreasing. According to the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission, 3.5 million kids younger than fifteen received medical treatment for sports injuries in 2003, more than four times the number since 1995, when it was seven hundred and seventy-five thousand (United States Consumer Product Safety Commission). And many youth sports injuries— some studies say 30 percent or more— are caused by overuse (Bach, Schilling 2008; d'Hemecourt 2009). The high cost of sports medicine treatments like ACL (Anterior Cruciate Ligament) and Tommy John surgeries are expensive. They

are also increasingly common. Diagnostic tests like MRI's (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) are driving up the cost of medical care in general, so there is a price being paid by the whole society, not just sports patients (Kaplan, Ganiats, and Frosch 2004). ACL's, or Anterior Cruciate Ligaments, are the strands that run beneath the kneecap and connect the thigh bone with the shin bone. They are the stabilizers for the knees and receive most stress when an athlete jumps, twists, or quickly cuts movement from one direction to another. (This specific injury will be discussed in a later chapter). Tommy John surgeries refer to the Major League Baseball pitcher on which the procedure was first performed, and subsequently named, by Dr. Frank Jobe in 1974. The procedure involves reconstructing a damaged elbow using a tendon from another part of the arm. (This injury will be discussed further in a later chapter). The saddest fact related to these statistics might be that most overuse injuries that occur in youth sports participants are completely preventable with appropriate and proper rest.

Dr. John DiFiori, chief of the Division of Sports Medicine at the University of California Los Angeles' (U.C.L.A.) Department of Family Medicine, who has studied overuse injuries in young athletes for several years, suggests that young athletes have a better chance of avoiding overuse injuries if they avoid heavy training loads and early sport specific training and take adequate rest periods. "Prevention strategies such as gradual training progressions and educating parents and coaches should be employed in an effort to reduce injury occurrence and thereby maximize the enjoyment and benefits of youth participation in sports" (DiFiori 2002).

A stunning sign of the times was in June 2006 when the Lego Corporation announced it was closing one of its largest factories located in Connecticut. Chief

Executive Officer Jorgen Vig Knudstorp explained in a National Public Radio interview on June 21, 2006, the reason for the company's decision. Vig Knudstorp said, "What's going on is that traditional toys are disappearing because children have overscheduled lives now and there's little time for free play" (National Public Radio).

It would seem the troubles are very large for children when they don't even have time to play with blocks any longer. Reagan McMahon points to one simple thing as the culprit. "Because winning has become that important. The time has come to get our priorities straight. No trophy, no scholarship is worth endangering our child's health. We seem to have lost sight of the fact that these athletes are children, not facsimiles of professional players. We can't abdicate our role as protector because we've been seduced by the siren call of the scholarship. And remember, they didn't start out with a win-at-all-costs mentality— the kids getting Tommy John surgeries, the kids crash dieting, the kids taking steroids. They're kids. They got involved in sports because they love to play" (McMahon 2007, 95).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Adult Factors

It is clear the primary motive of children, especially younger children, who participate in organized youth sports is to simply have fun. Kids quit playing sports when other priorities take away that fun (Family Education). While seemingly straightforward, the capacity to support kids in their quest for this transparent desire through their play and competition becomes increasingly difficult because of the involvement, or in many cases, the over involvement of parents and other adults.

The wishes of parents who allow their children to become active in youth sports are frequently very different than that of their kids. Parental requirements from the experience can be at a polar extreme from an adolescent. The needs of adults are distinct. Author and psychologist Shane Murphy suggests generally well-meaning parents begin to act out of character as they become caught up in their child's competition, riding an emotional roller coaster. There is seductiveness in the youth sports experience and a narcissistic appeal in sports competition which draws in parents when their own kids are involved (Murphy 1999, 11).

These adult factors that exist, and the behaviors that are birthed from the motivations of these perspectives, are a main cause of problems present in America's organized youth sports programs. Parental behavior often becomes detrimental toward children, noxious and even injurious toward coaches, officials, and other adults. Their conduct often leads to litigation because of the fevered pitch at which their emotions may run. Lawsuits spring forth from incidents ranging from assault and battery to damages

being sought for a college scholarship or professional contract parents believe may never be attained. Reality is being overlooked if the understanding that the existence of youth sports programs is just for children. These endeavors are every bit as much for the parents and other adults, perhaps, more so. Adults direct these enterprises. They coach the children. They organize the leagues. They show up to watch. Because sight of this fact has been lost, it has become increasingly arduous to bring forth youth sports programs that meet the needs of the adults involved while remaining beneficial to children. “Such is often the case in youth sports,” writes former pro basketball player and author Bob Bigelow. “What adults want and need from youth sports is often not what children want and need. It’s as though the adults and the children live in different worlds and speak different languages” (Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall 2001, 2).

Dissecting the adult motives related to youth sports uncovers an emotional minefield. In a July 7, 1997, story which appeared in the *Dayton Daily News*, the coach of a highly competitive third-grade boys’ basketball team described his efforts to writer Susan Vinella. “We don’t want to lose a ballgame because we played the kids equally. It’s sort of like a business. I’m trying to put the best product on the floor.” The league director added, “We tell them our philosophy right up front. If parents don’t like it, it’s America and there are other places to play” (Vinella 1997).

Adults are often overly zealous in relating to their children’s sports involvement. This over investment can lead to an increasingly active role to the point of manipulation. Sports psychologist Alan Goldberg, who was interviewed for an October 2000 story which appeared in *Parents Magazine*, concluded, “Raising kids is the most emotionally evocative experience you will ever have, and rearing an athlete— no matter how amateur—

is particularly intense. Even if you think you're well adjusted, it can bring up a lot of stuff' (Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall 2001, 70). The tipping point for parental involvement reaching unhealthy levels for both adult and adolescent seems to occur when the natural instincts a parent possesses for their child becomes obsessive. This behavior is described by medical experts as "achievement by proxy" (Tofler and Knapp 1999). Adults live vicariously through the success of their children. Parental deeds can take on varying degrees of intensity, moving from a loving encouragement to a willful neglect of the child in order to serve the needs of the adult. According to psychiatrist Ian Tofler, the secretary of the International Society of Sports Psychiatry, parental actions move along a spectrum of progressive over-involvement. In the beginning, parents feel pride and offer their children support. The dynamic then moves to a level of sacrifice on the part of the parent. For example, a parent may skip work or neglect some of their professional responsibilities because of their interest level in their child's sport experience. Later this commitment on the part of the adult develops into obsession. The pressure placed on the child to perform borders on abusive as the identity of the child becomes lost in the goals set forth by the parent (Tofler and Knapp 1998, 803).

Parents understandably have a strong love and want the best for their children. This love includes desiring a successful sports experience complete with productivity and happiness for their kids. Naturally, parents do not wish to see their children hurt physically or emotionally. There is also a tendency for parents to want to see their own children outperform the children of others. Pulitzer prize-winning cartoonist, Joel Pett of the Lexington Herald-Leader, superbly captured these sentiments with a drawing showing two women exiting their children's school. The caption reads, "...but if

*everyone's* children achieve, how will we know ours are superior?" (Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall 2001, 49) These emotions, combined with parental hopes, dreams and expectations for their children are lived out in a public forum via organized youth sports. Anxiety for adults can easily occur since they are merely able to watch once their youngsters have donned their leotards, swimsuit, or uniform and stepped forward to compete with others on the gymnastics mat, in the pool, or on the court or field. "A big game becomes a powerful emotional experience for both parent and child. Also, parents know how much effort their child has exerted to reach their current level of skill and competitiveness. The greater the effort that has been expended, the more it means to the parent," according to psychologist Shane Murphy (Murphy 1999, 51). Thus, parents and other adults are a tremendous source of support for adolescent athletes in organized youth sports, and an equally great source of stress for children. Psychologist Richard Ginsberg states, "The question isn't whether we're emotionally invested in our children, because we are. It isn't whether we see ourselves in our children, because we do. It's when the investment becomes so great that what is good for the child is forgotten that real problems happen. When it becomes bragging rights or the parents finding meaning in their lives through the sports successes of their children, that's when you've entered the gray area" (Hyman 2009, 28).

Because of this natural attachment between parents and children involved in sports experiences, there is also a significant adult investment socially and financially as well. Parents are trapped when they over-identify with their own child because they can easily lose sight of what the child wants, expecting their own investments to somehow pay off and yield results that are tangible to an adult mindset. A child's participation is



no longer a chance to better their physical fitness or improve their social skills. For parents it can be viewed as the means to greater ends. These ends might be the goal of a college scholarship or a professional sports career with product endorsements and the financial windfall that accompanies these achievements. Parents are increasingly viewing their child's participation and their own outlay as an investment in the future. Professor Harry Edward, of the University of California-Berkley, believes that over the past thirty years, since the onset of television as the principal tool of highly saturated media presentation and intrusion, youth has been increasingly seen as a more productive period culminating in eighteen-year-olds coming out of high school signing ten million dollar basketball contracts and ninety million dollar shoe deals. "You have high school girl singing groups like Beyonce and Destiny's Child at 17, 18, 19, coming out of high school signing multimillion dollar record deals. You have rappers 18, 19 years old, driving \$150,000 Lamborghinis with \$100,000 diamonds around their necks living in fifteen million dollar homes, all projected by the media into the living rooms" (McMahon 2007, 115).

This attitude and approach by parents is becoming increasingly disturbing, especially to collegiate coaches who recognize many parents can be downright delusional about athletic scholarship monies. Ray Reid, men's soccer coach at the University of Connecticut, who has seen his teams win several Big East Conference titles and advance to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (N.C.A.A.) national championship, has a sense teenagers have an easier time accepting the bad news related to opportunities at the college level than their parents. Moms and dads have been long been involved in their child's sports careers as banker, carpool driver, travel agent, and sideline pacer. The

conversations, he says, are often, ““Coach Reid, we invested a lot of money in my son’s career– thirty thousand dollars in ten years. We’d like a soccer scholarship to get some of it back.’ “It angers me. I’m appalled by the attitude. My reaction is: That’s interesting. Your son is a mutual fund!” (Hyman 2009, 31-32) The parents with whom Coach Reid comes in contact are not unique. In 2006, Wisconsin pediatrician Dr. Robert Rohloff surveyed 376 mothers and fathers of sports players in elementary and middle school about their goals for their children’s participation in sports. Almost 40 percent told the doctor they hoped their children would someday play for a college team. Twenty-two parents said they expected their children to become professional athletes (Hyman 2009, 33).

Parents are running themselves and their children ragged pressing for a scholarship that statistically simply does not exist. Based on participation of organized youth sports in the United States, combined with those state organizations that compile the participation of high school athletics in the various states of the union, only about 5 percent of kids will ever play at the varsity level at some high school. This refers to the varsity level at a high school of any size. Statistics from there should be even more sobering to the parents of children in youth sports. The figures of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, (N.C.A.A.) which are estimates based on the numbers of scholarships and their respective related dollar figures at an institution, combined with participation estimates from the National Federation of High Schools are surprising to the undereducated about such matters. For example, approximately 3.5 percent of female high school basketball players will play at the college level. Of those athletes, less than one in a hundred will be drafted to play professionally, so only one player in five

thousand will make it to the pros. For male basketball players the percentage is the same. Approximately 2 percent of high school athletes will earn an athletic scholarship to play at any level of college sports (N.C.A.A.). Even the N.C.A.A. advises “that this small number means high school student-athletes and their parents need to have realistic expectations about receiving an athletic scholarship to play sports in college. Academic, not athletic, achievement is the most reliable path to success in life” (Brand 2008). Research by Sandy Baum of Skidmore College and Luci Lapovsky of Mercy College compiled for the College Board show that of overall scholarship aid given each year to college students, sports awards are a thin slice of the financial pie. Eighteen percent are at public colleges and universities and just 7 percent are at private institutions. Being a gifted chemistry major has much better prospects (Baum and Lapovsky 2006, 5). The climb to the top for a chance at an athletic scholarship is steep.

In addition to unrealistic expectations many parents have related to the number of college athletic scholarships offered, another misunderstanding they have is the dollar amount of aid often given and length of term of the award provided by a school. As it relates to scholarship awards, college sports are divided into two categories: head count sports and equivalency sports. For all intents and purposes, head count sports could be considered full scholarship endeavors up to the limit set for each sport by the N.C.A.A. Football and men’s and women’s basketball are among these sports. Most sports at the college level, however, are equivalency sports. That is, there is a limit on the value or equivalency an institution may award. In these programs, fractional awards are presented to student-athletes to reach the total number of available scholarships. For example, in men’s golf, five players represent a university or college and participate in competition,

yet a maximum of only 4.5 athletic scholarships may be awarded in a given year (N.C.A.A. 2010, 207). Still, men's golf programs generally have substantially more than five student-athletes on their respective golf rosters, meaning scholarship amounts are usually divided into fractional amounts. The fractions do not have to be distributed to student-athletes equally. Not all colleges or universities have the funds available at their schools to provide the maximum awards in each sport. Not all sports programs at all schools are able to afford the full limit of allowable athletic scholarships.

In 2008, the N.C.A.A. estimated the average yearly value of a full scholarship at just less than fourteen thousand dollars at a public school. For an out-of state public institution the value was approximately twenty-four thousand dollars. Full scholarships at private universities were more than thirty-two thousand dollars (N.C.A.A. 2008). "The average athletic scholarship for the 138,216 athletes in Division I or Division II schools in 2003-2004 was \$10,409, about half the cost of attendance at some state universities and a fifth of tuition at pricier private ones" (Hyman 2009, 34). One mother, whose daughter is a University of Delaware swimmer, talking about the lengths to which parents might go in hopes of landing a scholarship, was quoted by reporter Bill Pennington of the *New York Times* in an article published March 10, 2008. The mother said, "They're going to be disappointed when they learn that if they're very lucky, they will get a scholarship worth fifteen percent of the \$40,000 college bill. What's that? \$6,000?" (Pennington 2008) Lehigh University Soccer Coach Dean Koski says parents tell him they want their son to get a scholarship because college is so expensive. He shares with them that with only two hundred Division I programs and twenty thousand to thirty thousand boys coming out of high school each year and each school being able to offer,

at most, about three scholarships. There is only about three hundred total scholarships to be awarded among every kid in the country. He believes parents are chasing dreams for their kids that just are not there (McMahon 2007, 18). In effect, many parents basically end up buying their children scholarships with all the money trying to develop them, and ironically, even with all the money, time, and effort spent, often they do not even earn scholarships. The N.C.A.A. began a multi-media campaign in hopes of shining a spotlight on the financial reality of college sports. The summation of the point is nicely presented in the tag line, “There are over four hundred thousand N.C.A.A. student-athletes and just about all of us will be going pro in something other than sports” (the mad ad man blog, comment posted April 7, 2011).

This delusional fog in which parents operate relative to desired outcomes can often cause the care-givers to direct their children to excel in these competitive endeavors at significant risk to themselves and their kids. Jessica Dubroff, her father, and flight instructor were killed when her plane crashed on take-off near Cheyenne, Wyoming, as she attempted to become the youngest pilot to fly across the United States. She was seven years old (Alter and Glick 1996). The allure of competition can be great for the adults, who in turn, go to extremes with their children. The former head of Northfield Youth Baseball Association in Northfield, Minnesota, said he was asked by a kindergartner’s parent if he was teaching the child to switch hit because the parent wanted the youngster to be prepared for the pros (McMahon 2007, 177). Focus is misplaced by the adults. Instead of enjoying their child’s sports experience, parents are expecting some sort of payoff down the road. The adults spend a great majority of their

time, effort, energy, and money worrying about whether progress is being made on the long-term goal of all their investment.

Youth sports blog writer Bob Cook recounts the stories of a disappointed and swindled group of parents in South Dakota on his, *Your Kid's Not Going Pro*, blog site. More than thirty-three thousand dollars was scammed from parents of youth baseball players by a man claiming to be a former major league player forming an elite travel team to help area youth gain exposure and put kids on a fast track to professional baseball. One mother brought her young athlete and family to a park for a tournament only to find out they were the only ones there (*Your Kid's Not Going Pro* 2010).

All of this misplaced devotion by parents has created a tremendous amount of pressure on both parent and child. Incidents of violence have occurred and crimes have been committed all from the venue of youth sports. Parents take out their frustrations on their children and on other adults. In a 2003 *SportingKid* magazine survey of three thousand, three hundred parents, kids and coaches, 84 percent of the kids polled said they had witnessed violent parental behavior toward children, coaches, or officials in the form of shouting, berating, or using abusive language (*SportingKid* 2003). In August of 2001, a *Sports Illustrated for Kids* survey revealed that 74 percent of the youth who responded had observed out-of-control parents at their games (*Shattered Peace*).

In a well-publicized case in Massachusetts in July of 2000, a hockey father died after a fight with another dad following a confrontation between the two over what one father saw as rough play during a scrimmage game involving their sons. A jury of nine women and three men found Thomas Junta guilty of involuntary manslaughter. Massachusetts' Judge Charles Grabau sentenced the truck driver to six to ten years in

state prison for causing the death of Michael Costin. At six feet-one inch tall and 270 pounds, Junta beat the 156 pound Costin until he ultimately caused Costin's death (Cable News Network 2002).

*New York Daily News* writer Tara George published a story on September 11, 2000, recounting a soccer game between eight- and nine-year-old boys in South Brunswick, New Jersey, that ended in a brawl among dozens of parents and coaches. It began with an argument about whether one coach should have been allowed to stand behind the goal during a tie-breaker shootout (George 2000).

A year earlier, in suburban Swiftwater, Pennsylvania, between 50 and 100 adults became combatants after a football game for eleven to thirteen-year-olds. During a ten minute melee caught on videotape and later shown on local news, the adults kicked, punched, and screamed at each other (Nack, Munson, and Dohrman 2000). The list of incidents similar to these, occurring all over the United States is of staggering length.

While violent parental behavior toward other parents has reached ridiculous levels, there is also a rise in violence against the coaches of youth teams, many of whom are volunteers. In an article which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on January 26, 2001, a Northridge, California, father was sentenced to forty-five days in jail, three years of probation and six months of anger management counseling after being convicted of slamming the manager of his son's youth baseball team against a truck. Prosecutors say Mitchell Craig Gluckman threatened to kill the manager for taking the eleven-year-old out of a game after only three innings. The judge ordered the father to refrain from "any verbal dispute at any sporting event" (Fausset and Rhone 2001).

In Torrence, California, the father and uncle of a high school football player were sentenced to forty-five days in jail for attacking the team's coach in October 2000. Police say the father and uncle were upset the high school student had not been given more playing time (ABC News 2000).

In a report that appeared in the *Stockton Record* on February 4, 2007, Barry Mano, the president of the National Association of Sports Officials said, "The biggest problem isn't really the coaches or the players, it's really the parents/fans. We get reports here every week of an assault against a sports official on some level. The problem has been getting worse and has been getting worse over the last five years." Mano's association reports more than one hundred attacks of violence are recorded against members of the organization each year (Phillips and Sudhalter 2007).

Attacks on sports officials have become so commonplace that in 2007, twenty-three states had adopted laws to protect those individuals. For example, the state of Illinois passed legislation that went into effect in January of 2005 that afforded sports officials the same status as police officers, jail guards, and other public employees in cases of assault and battery. In California the penal code specifies that battery against a sports official carries a maximum punishment of a two hundred thousand dollar fine and a one-year jail sentence (McMahon 2007, 179). No doubt, the law was utilized in May 2005 when the coach of a girl's rugby team was beaten until bloody and unconscious during a championship tournament game in Rohnert Park, California. The violence erupted when the coach came to the aid of a referee after a spectator, the brother of the opposing coach, who, after becoming enraged over a call with which he disagreed, came onto the field and punched the official. The first coach was restraining that man waiting



for police, when the opposing coach and seven or eight men came and began beating and kicking him, sending him to the hospital to receive treatment for his injuries. When an assistant coach came to his aid, he too, was kicked and punched causing the assistant coach three broken ribs. The teenage female players began to fight with one another before police arrived (National Association of Sports Officials).

This incident demonstrates one of the major emotional flashpoints for parental outbursts at youth sports contests. Virginia clinical psychologist Robert Nay suggests in addition to disagreement with calls by the officials, lack of sleep, sustenance, and alcohol can be a factor in how parents act. Incidents during the same month in various states show this to be true when school parents attacked high school coaches. In addition to the factors Dr. Nay suggests might be contributors, each occurrence involved the issue of playing time for their child (Still 2002).

A second trigger is stress and arousal for parents attending events. Parents are very energized and adrenaline flows for them just as it does for the athletes participating in the contest. Still, another item in is what Oliver Ross calls “unmet expectations” (Ross 2002). Parents have extremely high expectations about how things should progress in these environments for their children and when anything occurs to disrupt this, potential to unleash this stored emotional cache in adults becomes high. After an incident involving a violent father toward his own daughter in January of 2011, John Gardner, president of the Greater Toronto Hockey League, said, “It used to be parents got their kids into hockey for the right reasons, to support the team. Now it’s a very singular thing where it’s about my kid, my kid, my kid” (Parent Central.CA).

The extreme levels of parental behavior have seen the National Association of Sports Officials offer assault protection insurance to its members. The organization makes this “Sport Officials Security Program” benefit available when an official becomes the victim of an assault and/or battery by a spectator, fan, or participant (National Association of Sports Officials). It may not be enough to help, though. In 2001, at a youth basketball game between seven and eight-year-olds in Fayetteville, Georgia, police say tensions built during a game to the point an official felt the need to defend himself against some hostile adults. The official slashed a coach with a knife causing a wound that required seventeen stitches to close (Wilcoxon 2001).

A head sports official in Texas told a *Wall Street Journal* reporter the antics of parents had reached a point that before games, he introduces himself to police or security guards at the venue before he starts any game. He tells them from which section of the court or field he will leave. Following the contest, he immediately removes his whistle from around his neck to reduce the chance that someone will grab it and try to choke him (Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall 2001, 89).

In an effort to combat this trend, Florida’s Jupiter/Tequesta Athletic Association became the first league in the country, in February 2000, to require parents to sign a pledge and attend a course on behavior before enrolling their child in youth sports (Nolin 2000). Societal factors are involved, but the boundary would seem clear. When youth sports become lifestyle and not leisure, it affects how adults and parents relate to each other.

Intensive investment and the accompanying motivations on the part of parents is a cause of this misbehavior toward other adults— however, parental actions are also

increasingly aggressive and even criminal toward their own children and other kids. This manifests in many ways including how parents communicate and interact with their children. Police in East Pennsboro Township, Pennsylvania, arrested the father of an eleven-year-old following the boy's wrestling practice. He was charged with harassment of his son. The man became angry because his child cried during the workout. As the pair sat in their car outside a Wal-Mart store, police say the man struck his son in the face and punched him in the chest. Later he ordered the boy to run laps around the car (Hyman 2009, 117).

Authorities in Lincoln, Nebraska, reported that a mother and her fifteen-year-old daughter argued as they returned home from a soccer game. Police said the woman was upset over her daughter's performance in the contest and her attitude after the game. The woman pulled over the car to the shoulder of Interstate Eighty at one of the Lincoln exits and demanded her daughter get out of the car, then drove away. Fortunately for the teenager, a teammate's parent spotted her and transported her to safety (Schnoes 2008, 4).

The national office of Little League baseball recently made an effort through television advertising to communicate the realities of children playing the game with verbose parents in the crowd applying these performance pressures on young athletes. The thirty second spot is done in a parody framework and is chilling in its content. The public service announcement begins with a scene familiar to every youth ball park in the country. A young child, with a bat over his shoulder, walks slowly toward home plate. A very calm, seemingly disinterested voice is heard above the faint sound of a few distant hand claps. It is important to note, the tone of the voice being heard is not aggressive in any manner. What happens next in the scene is anything but commonplace.

Voice from crowd: “Come on son, hit the ball.”

(The ballplayer turns toward grandstands as the camera slowly zooms toward player’s face.

Player: (shouting aggressively) “Come on, dad!! Is that the best you can do?!! That’s pathetic! I don’t even know why you bother showing up! Why can’t you be more like Jimmy’s dad?! All the other parents are gonna laugh at you! You make me sick!”

Two separate graphics are inserted on the screen during the child’s rant. Both are shown on a black background with a simplistic white-colored font. The first reads: “Now you know how it feels.” The second graphic comes on screen immediately following the first. It reads: “Just Let Them Play” (Little League). After the final graphic disappears showing just the child staring harshly into the crowd, the Little League web address appears on one line near the bottom of the screen. The message is clear and poignant.

This type of behavior is not confined to what might be considered a sideline-stalking parent. Adults in positions of authority leverage their power against other adolescents to attain their desired results on behalf of their own children. A Little League coach in suburban Pittsburgh allegedly paid one of his eight-year-old players twenty-five dollars to assault a fellow teammate, a nine-year-old autistic boy. He did this so he would not have to let the autistic child play the league-mandated three innings in a playoff game. According to court testimony, the adult, Mark Downs, told Keith Reese two different times to hit Harry Bowers, Jr., first in the groin, and then in the side of the head so he would be too sore to play. Downs was convicted of corruption of minors and conspiracy to commit simple assault and sentenced to one to six years in prison (Ayad 2006).

A high school football game in Albuquerque, New Mexico, was forcibly stopped by referees after they discovered the helmet of Mike Cito contained a buckle that had

been sharpened like a razor. The fashioned instrument had gashed several players during the game. One of the wounds required a dozen stitches to close. Cito was dismissed from the team and expelled from the school following the incident. His father, a dentist, admitted he had been the one who had sharpened the buckle because of unfair treatment he felt his son received from officials the previous week (Thomson 1996, 5).

Overzealous parents come in all shapes, sizes, and from professions of all kinds. Those making our laws are not immune from the behavior the laws are intended to curb. Daniel Foley, the Republican whip in the New Mexico House of Representatives, was arrested at a high school basketball game for disorderly conduct, resisting arrest, and obstructing a police officer in the line of duty. The politician rushed onto the court when his fourteen-year-old son was restrained by a coach after attempting to join in a fight which had broken out on the court. According to police, the older Foley was screaming profanities and spitting chewing tobacco (Haussamen 2007).

A nationally prominent case of a parent in a position of power exercising influence on behalf of his children occurred in New Jersey. The state supreme court censured one of its own jurists. Justice Roberto A. Rivera-Soto improperly used his influence to settle a score between his sons and the captain of their high school football team. When his twin sons claimed they had been struck by an older teammate, the judge filed a juvenile delinquency complaint for assault and then improperly intervened in the case by contacting two judges and asking a prosecutor to review the case (Lat 2007).

Youth sports experts and psychologists put forward a number of reasons parents might behave in these ways. It might be felt that a child's athletic success or failure reflects on them as a parent. Some parents are simply anxious in a highly competitive

world. Some parents love the attention or glory gained when their kids are successful in youth sports. Still, other parents have become hooked on protecting their kids from failure or discomfort. Madeline Levine, author of *The Price of Privilege*, contends that a parent being involved is good, but overly involved is not good. According to Levine, when a parent says things like, "I know you tried hard, but I can't understand why you're not ashamed to hand in a paper that still has errors," means a parent is mistakenly believing that shame will motivate her child to try harder. Promoting guilt and shame invariably works against progress. More importantly, they weaken the ties between child and parent (Levine 2006, 9).

Parents go to radical excesses to try and aid their children's future success in youth sports. Unfortunate trends are becoming widespread in children's academic lives. Parents are enrolling their children in kindergarten a year later than the age norm in order to give the child greater strength and maturity for youth sports competition. Older children are being made to repeat eighth grade to give them an extra edge in high school sports. Many school districts across the country have established strict transfer regulations to thwart the attempt of adults to move into a particular school so the child will be able to participate in athletics there. Many private schools do not have the same restrictions, which creates problems between public and private schools that may compete against each other, especially in less-populated states in America. Psychotherapist Elayne Savage suggests some parents say they are going to extremes for the benefit of their child, but sometimes it's not in the child's best interest at all. Instead it is in the best interest of the parents or the coach and can be detrimental to the child (Alberts 2008).

The lengths to which parents will go to see their child have success in youth sports seem to know no end. Felipe Almonte was banned for life from Little League baseball after he doctored his son's birth certificate to allow the youngster to pitch for the team from the Bronx, New York, in the 2001 Little League World Series. Prosecutors in the Dominican Republic filed criminal charges against the elder Almonte for falsifying a birth certificate (Wong 2001).

In other instances, it is the parents or even the children who are bringing arguments to court over dashed athletic dreams. The legal genre of these cases, which are becoming less obscure because of their number, is called "disappointment lawsuits." These fascinating cases find young athletes and their parents seeking redress for damage inflicted to their sports reputations and college sports playing prospects. Rarely does a plaintiff win, but it does not seem to dissuade people from arguing their matter in court. In the Texas case of *Rutherford v. Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District*, a high school senior and his parents filed suit alleging due process under the Texas constitution when the high school baseball coach scratched the young man as the starting pitcher for a regional quarterfinal playoff game. The young man had used a student publication to ridicule two school coaches, which baseball coach Archie Hayes judged to be "unsportsmanlike, disruptive, demoralizing, and disrespectful" (Hyman 2007).

Two related state court cases appeared in Missouri in *Wellsville-Middleton School District v. Miles*. In the first case, the school district sued the Missouri State High School Activities Association, claiming its basketball team suffered an unjust defeat because the official scorer made a mistake. In the second case, the aggrieved players sued the head referee asserting that by failing to follow proper procedures in running the game, the

referee harmed their chances of getting college scholarships. The second suit was dropped after the first was dismissed (Feiner 1997).

Nineteen-year old Cheryl Reeves filed a seven hundred thousand dollar lawsuit against her club softball coach alleging his “incorrect” teaching style had ruined her chances to earn a college athletic scholarship. She claimed her personal softball tutor to whom she paid forty dollars per hour for private lessons taught her an “illegal pitch technique,” and when she complained, the man, who was also her club coach, replaced her with other players. The teenager maintained she was gripped by stress and forced to quit the team, unfairly ending her career as an elite athlete (Susquehanna Valley Center for Public Policy 2002).

These varying motivations for parents, which are certainly different from the children, who primarily play for fun, are creating increasingly unhealthy environments for youth sports in America. Whether it is seeing their son with the good arm or great hands as their personal winning lottery ticket or threatening to sue their six-year-old youngster’s coach, like the dad in New Jersey did, feeling his son’s professional baseball future would be diminished because the coach used a non-regulation baseball designed to reduce injuries, these parents are not just wrecking the youth sports landscape; they are also damaging the children who play the sports. They are hurting their own kids.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Cost To Kids

The injuries to children caught in this tornadic activity of organized youth sports in America are occurring on or in several facets of their lives. Adolescents are suffering mentally and emotionally from the toll of their participation in sports. They are also hurting physically in grand numbers. The numbers of overuse injuries to young athletes is frightening. There is tremendous pressure to win or otherwise be successful; however, that pressure is being measured by adults, which often leads to emotional burn-out on the part of the youth. Children are also paying a devastating price developmentally. This loss occurs in the emotional realm of the child, as well as his social and physical development. Because of overcrowded schedules of youth sports, participating young people are losing their childhood play. This is also causing erosion to the fabric of family well-being, which further injures children. Kids become impacted to the point where they lose their sense of fair play and sportsmanship, because of what they are being taught by adults. Children are literally tired and ragged on the inside and out.

A predominant theme encountered among young athletes is that parents are seen as both a tremendous source of support and as a source of great stress. The perception of the adolescent as to whether there is support or stress frequently relates to the current performance of the athlete. Children want to please, and often deeply feel their parent's disappointment, which is interpreted as rejection. One teen described this feeling by stating, "My mother's face turns off whenever I don't play well" (McMahon 2007, 202). This is a central paradox of families of young athletes, according to sports psychologist

Jon Hellstedt. He suggests the greatest strength of these families is their unwavering emotional support of the child athlete including their willingness to make sacrifices for the athletic advancement of the kids; however, it is also their greatest weakness. Parent's deep love and support for their young sports participant may help a talented child reach high levels of success, but may also cause a talented child to rebel or even burn out. Ray Lamb, an award-winning instructor of young golfers, and a member of the Professional Golfers Association, related the story of one of his top teenage female students who quit her sport in dramatic fashion at a Texas high school state championship tournament. The young prodigy had previously won a state title and finished as runner-up in another in her prep career. She had apparently accomplished these feats with the full emotional and financial support of her mother and step-father. Spectators at her senior year championship tournament witnessed an outburst aimed directly at the parents complete with profanities and the young woman purposely hitting her golf ball the wrong direction in order to sabotage her score and further sink her chances of winning. According to Lamb, "...it was her theatrical way of saying, 'I've had all I want and I'm done! I think it was a combination of rebellion against her parents and emotions of potentially not winning her last high school tournament'" (Lamb 2006).

Although not as dramatic, but every bit as final, a top soccer recruit at LeHigh University in Pennsylvania told Coach Dean Koski on the third day of preseason practice, "I don't want to do this anymore....because I've been playing since I was five and I thought this was going to be fun, but it's not fun anymore. I'm sorry" (McMahon 2007, 138). Playing sports becomes increasingly stressful for children because they often want to quit, but feel they cannot because it will anger or disappoint their parents. In an article

which appeared on December 10, 2000, in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, former professional baseball player Erik Johnson said, “I see a lot of burnout. It used to be high school, but now it’s ten-, eleven- and twelve year-old kids. The kids get fried. They quit. They resent the game. They don’t want to see the game” (Nevius 2000).

A crucial change in perspective for a young athlete can occur when sports ceases to be what the youngster does for intrinsic pleasure and becomes something done for a reason. The child does not need a reason to do gymnastics. She loves it. There is nothing she would rather do than tumble, perform cart-wheels, or do somersaults. When her gymnastic practice must be done for a reason, like to win a meet, or impress a college coach in order to receive a scholarship, then often the fun is suddenly sucked away from the activity. If the intrinsic drive is predominating, then the athlete stands to remain healthy in participation. When the external reasons for playing begin to take over, the sport becomes more of a chore. Some experts refer to this as the externalization of sports, and when this occurs, burn-out becomes more likely. Coach Kirk Mango, a former Division I gymnast, contends that many athletes do seek external rewards from their respective sports endeavors, like trophies, popularity, scholarships, admiration from parents and coaches. He says the problem occurs because of what he calls an “outside-in” mindset. The rewards are fleeting and they do not sustain young athletes. Mango says, “When you value something from the inside, when you’re striving to reach your potential, master a skill, or do well, regardless of whether you win or lose, you’re climbing that ladder and reaching achievement or a level of accomplishment.” He suggests if adults want kids to be properly motivated and sustain sports participation for a

long period of time, then internal rewards must be promoted, not external rewards (Cohn and Cohn 2010).

Children do not lose interest if they are learning and being challenged appropriately. Psychologist Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi captures this idea in his theory of “flow”. His supposition is that people are happiest when the challenge they are facing is equal to the skills they have. Young athletes should be provided with challenges that are commensurate with their sporting ability. Anxiety is a likely outcome for those who are confronted with undertakings beyond their athletic ability. There is a balance to be struck, however. If the challenge is not great enough for the skill set present for a youngster, then boredom may occur. As kids develop their athletic prowess they gain confidence. As these characteristics grow, greater challenges must be given to them so they may have the opportunity to stay in the flow (Csikzentmihalyi 2008). Children, like adults, desire to be good at something. This desire is a significant motivator and determinant in whether young athletes stay in sports. Sport psychologists call this notion, “competence” motivation (Murphy 1999, 62).

In early phases of sports participation, outcome is among little interest to young athletes. They are much more inclined to want to invest in the process. They want to improve. They want to develop and become better. As young people continue playing sports though, almost every step forward brings more externalization. Development stops for young athletes because the reason for playing has somehow changed for them. Sports sociologist Jay Coakley determined from interviews with fifteen adolescent athletes who had been champions in their age group for their particular sport and suddenly quit, that they did so because they felt little control over their lives. This

situation was worsened for these young people because they had made a strong commitment to their sport and the sport almost had become their whole life. In addition, it was discovered the manner in which the high level sports played by these young people was organized contributed to their decision to quit (Coakley 1992, 271-285).

Healthy development does not naturally occur in environments where children are overly stressed or pressured. Psychologist Steve Danish defines successful development as helping a child become personally competent. The three essential features of personal competence are the abilities to do life planning, to be self-reliant, and to seek the resources of others when needed” (Danish 1983, 221-240). Development of these characteristics is important as adolescents grow into adulthood. Through participation in organized youth sports the values of fair play, sportsmanship, and ethics may be instilled into children and will carry into their adult lives. Societal leaders are often people with a competitive spirit. Young athletes lose the opportunity to develop these traits through organized youth sports when their developmental needs are no longer being met at an appropriate level. Dr. Thomas Tutko, a professor of psychology at San Jose State University who has authored multiple works on the subject, believes if children go to practice, perform painful drills, and improve their skills, but have no fun, and if the coach constantly hammers at their mistakes, after awhile, they’re going to think, “Do I really want to be here?” Dr. Tutko also suggests kids who reach that stage and decide they really do not want to participate are conditionally labeled. They are called quitters. The children do not have fun and are insulted with a derogatory term. He suggests that what is being communicated to the children is that they are not worthwhile. He contends that

kids quit because their needs are not being met. In fact, they are meant to feel miserable (Tutko 1976).

Results of these conditions are manifested in the offices of physicians across America each year. Medical specialists for both the mind and the body are confronted with young athletes that have been hurt emotionally and physically. Dr. Lewis Youcum, a team physician for a Major League Baseball team, who also treats hundreds of youth athletes each year, presents a commonplace scene in his practice. He says in a typical situation, a teen patient arrives at his office to discuss a sports injury and options that might return him to his team as quickly as possible. When the parent is not present with the young person, the adolescent patient will open up and explain he is very unsure about any medical procedures, and further, even if he wants to continue to play his sport. The youth communicates that he has more interest in girls or computers and while baseball is okay, he does not quite know what to do because the fear of disappointing his parents by not playing baseball is overwhelming. His participation is incredibly more important to his parents than it is to him. Dr. Yocum says, "If I've heard that once I have heard it a hundred times. There's no sense in doing a big operation on those patients. There's a whole psychological quagmire for the kids to deal with" (Hyman 2009, 24). In a story that appeared in *The Boston Globe* on August 9, 2004, Michael Thompson echoed the larger sentiment present stating development without all the strings on a child is a must. "Children don't develop because they are pushed, prodded, and pressured to develop for sports teams or 'good' colleges. Development is their biological and psychological imperative" (Thompson 2004).

The extreme pressures placed on children engaged in organized youth sports competition is stunting their development physically and emotionally. Development is also being retarded because of their lack of unstructured play. Kids do not ride their bikes to the park or play in the backyards with other neighborhood children much anymore. Unstructured play time decreased almost twenty-five percent between 1981 and 1997, according to a study conducted by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research. The work also revealed children's time spent playing organized youth sports during the same period increased by twenty-five percent. The research also found that kids have twelve fewer hours of free time per week, eat fewer family dinners, have fewer family conversations, and take fewer family vacations (MacPherson 2002). For many kids, childhood has become its own rat race in which they are rushed from school to practice to home with fast-food dinner in the car on the way to one place or the other squeezing in homework while riding in the backseat in transit. They awaken the next day to do it all over again or multiple times over the course of a weekend while traveling to a tournament or other competition. Jeff Green, an assistant coach of the California State Girls Under 16 soccer team, says "the biggest crime is there's too much organized sport and not enough kids going out into the yard and kicking the ball around. Things are out of balance in that regard. Kids don't think about it. They'd be much more inclined to pick up their PlayStation than to grab a ball, call up some friends and say, "Hey, let's go to the school yard," and play basketball, football, or soccer. If it's not an organized game, they don't do it" (McMahon 2007, 98).

Scientific study gives credence to this common observation. Going out of the house to play is no longer the first choice of children. Many kids are only going outdoors

when they are headed to an organized sports endeavor. With a particular spike in the new millennium, children's activities have been declining since the mid-1990s. The 2004 survey conducted by the National Sporting Goods Association revealed while even organized Little League participation has dropped twenty-one percent since its peak in 1997, leisure participation in the sport of baseball, like general pick-up games and playing catch, had declined almost twice as fast. The same study showed that bicycle riding has declined thirty-one percent since 1995 (National Sporting Goods Association).

University of South Alabama leisure studies and therapeutic recreation instructor Cathy O'Keefe suggests some kids have never played a pickup game of any type. She states, "I don't know if it's a result of our excessive obsession with safety and that's what parents want— to make sure their children are always supervised by an adult and never on their own...and then the kids don't get a sense of what they're able to do, and so they lose confidence in their ability to do anything and just keep looking to adults" (McMahon 2007, 105) Sports and play for children are too ready-made with adult organization. Children have begun to expect all they need to do is be present and an adult or coach will take care of everything else. A creative component of childhood has been taken away because of this. Sports psychiatrist Dr. Ronald Kamm sees that kids miss a great deal when adults organize the play for children. In sandlot or backyard games of the past that kids used to play, the children would emerge as leaders by selecting teams, choosing sides, exercising creative improvisation skills by modifying the playing field based on geographical or other constraints. In an article which appeared in the *New York Times* on June 29, 1997, Dr. Kamm said, "The bickering among children in backyard baseball was



often actually constructive, building a sense of competence in handling and solving disputes” (Kamm 1997).

Professional ice hockey great Wayne Gretsky suggested that players in hockey at the highest level have lost their creativity and imagination because super-organized youth systems have taken over control of the game. He surmises the creativity of Hall of Fame players like Bobby Orr, Gordie Howe, and Jean Beliveaus is gone. Gretsky was quoted in a *USA Today* article published on February 7, 2000. According to Gretsky the creativity of those players, “...was basically founded by the fact they would go on ponds and skate for six, seven, or eight hours a day, choose up sides and have two nets and no goalies. We need to get back to the basics of just having fun. That would go a long way toward getting back a lot of the imagination in our game” (Gretsky 2000).

Adult decisions related to the play of children continue to worsen the situation. The 2001 United States governmental legislation called the “No Child Left Behind Act” has effectively killed recess and physical education in public schools. Results released in May, 2006, of a United States Department of Education study found that seven to thirteen percent of elementary schools nationwide had no scheduled recess (National Center for Education Statistics). This is in direct conflict with what professional educators see as important for children. A national survey conducted by the National Parent Teachers Association revealed that nine out of ten teachers believe recess and free time spent with peers is an important part of the school day and crucial to the emotional and social development of children. Three out of four parents believe recess should be mandatory. Two out of three parents also think kids need unstructured play during the day (Pace 2006).

Yet, whether it is at school or at home, the schedule of children and their families continues to be filled with organized activities, especially sports. Kids are simply overscheduled to a point there is no spare time for them to be a child. When asked how they are doing, a common response for the parent in an American youth sports family is, “busy.” A common response for a child in that same family is, “tired.” Michael Thompson, writer of *The Pressured Child* and co-writer of *Raising Cain*, proposes for many American families that going to practices, attending tournaments, traveling out of town for competition, and other items related to youth sports have become the main work of the family. He sees common sports interests of members of the family and the opportunity to spend time together as very positive things, but also believes in a family where children are of differing athletic abilities, have other interests, or simply need recovery time at home, the devotion to organized youth sports is hugely burdensome (Thompson 2004). Parenting expert Mike Riera agrees. He points out the vast number of social opportunities missed by the player and missed opportunities for the whole family to do something together, but does concede, “I know people say there’s a certain bonding that happens when you’re on a trip and sharing a hotel room. And I’m not going to argue with that. But where are the siblings? They’re not getting to spend the time with them. And it’s like you have two different families at that point, so I don’t know how you can measure the losses in this” (McMahon 2007, 48). San Francisco marriage and family therapist Peggy Wynne summarizes aptly the mood of a young person locked in this overly busy lifestyle. “Of all the kids that I’ve worked with, no one has ever complained that they weren’t doing enough. I’ve never had a kid who said, ‘I wish I’d been signed up for one more sport this season.’ I think it is significant” (McMahon 2007, 126).

Wynn also believes parents end up over-scheduling their children because of the competitive nature within adults to prove their kids are the brightest or best. Following an eight month junior high school football season, followed by complete basketball seasons with his junior high school team and select travel squad, a highly physically mature budding twelve-year-old sports star at a private school in a Sun Belt state remarked to his mother, “I don’t know if I want to play baseball this summer. Do I have to play?” (Smith 2008) His summer baseball schedule could have been in excess of 60 games. A sixteen-year-old varsity and Amateur Athletic Union volleyball player echoed, “There’s just no time to sit down and listen to music or hang out. I cherish any free time I have, any time I can just sit down and listen to my favorite songs or watch a show and not have to worry about anything” (Kirkendall 2008).

One successful high school football coach in Oregon spoke out against all of the sports full contact and passing camps held throughout the summer. Tom Smythe emphatically states, “For crying out loud, football at the high school level is supposed to be fun. How is it fun when a kid has to give up a summer job, summer baseball, summer basketball or his family?...My teams at Lakeridge and McNary have never lifted a finger in the summer and between them, we’ve won three state championships and eighty percent of my football games. Well, what does that tell you?” Coach Smythe has urged the Oregon Schools Activities Association to address this issue (Smythe 2005).

Psychologist Diane Ehrensaft of The Wright Institute in Berkeley, California, paints the dilemma for youth in even broader strokes by suggesting that in this context, play has become hard labor and the problem is not just limited to youth sports in our culture. She asserts that in whatever activity kids may participate it is not about having

fun anymore, but rather about doing well and excelling. There has become an absolute devaluing of “nothing-time” where a young person does nothing or is not doing anything productive. “We live in a society that works longer hours and takes fewer vacations than any other industrialized country but Japan. That’s where the mania around sports is embedded. I’m concerned we’re robbing children of the opportunity to play. We’re squelching the creativity. And we’re creating anxiety disorders. Is this what we want for our children?” (Elkins 2003)

Ironically, there are more kids playing organized sports in America than ever before, but the obesity rate for children is higher, too. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the obesity rate among children has tripled since 1980 (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion). This is also the same time period where organized youth sports activity has grown in total numbers as well. A contributing factor for this could well be because children are rushing from one practice to another eating less-healthy meals. They eat from a sack in the back seat of a car. Fast food while traveling from one place to another or eating out in restaurants because of traveling has skewed their entire lifestyle.

Research by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University has found in studies since 1996 that the more often a child eats dinner with his or her family, the less likely that child is to smoke, drink or use illegal drugs. Just a few days seem to make a significant difference. Children who eat family dinners five times a week are more likely to be emotionally well-adjusted and do well academically and socially. Children who eat dinner with family two times a week or less are more prone to

becoming depressed, being in trouble at school and using illegal drugs (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse).

The demands on children as they participate in organized youth sports creates trauma, stress, and other injuries whether or not parents realize they are present for their young athlete. Kids have this tremendous pressure not to let down or disappoint their parents often recognizing the investment their parents have made both emotionally and financially on their behalf. Dr. Joel Fish, the founder and director of the Center for Sports in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, tells the shocking story of a young girl who had stopped eating because she felt she did not “deserve” food. She explained to Dr. Fish that because she had not been performing well at her track meets and her times had not improved as she and her coach had hoped, she had taken this action. Her parents had expressed their disappointment in her athletic results and subsequently she had lost confidence. According to Dr. Fish, she began thinking of herself as “not good enough”. This loss of esteem began a viciously unhealthy cycle for this adolescent. The little girl was ten years old (Engh 2002, 68).

Gilman School athletic director Tim Holley of Baltimore found this to be true in his own child, a child he discovered was carrying emotional baggage he did not even recognize. At the end of a day-long soccer event, Holley was surprised to find his daughter in tears. As he tried to provide comfort to her and determine the cause for her obvious emotional pain he asked what was wrong. “Not a single coach wanted to speak with me. I guess I’m not going to college.” Holley says he communicated to his daughter that if she were playing to go to college, she should quit immediately. She

should play for fun. He stated, “When goals come before everything else, that’s when sports become work. These kids are too young for that” (Hyman 2009, 61).

Dr. Tim Anderson, a Minnesota pediatrician, reports he often has kids coming into his office with headaches and stomachaches. “A lot of them suffer from stress anxiety and they don’t know why. And then we look at their schedules. They have expectations they have to be on the hockey team, the math team, the debate team. The physical [overuse] injuries they receive from playing too much are tragic. But most of those will heal. The bigger concern is what over scheduling is doing to their minds and families” (Smith 2005).

The world of youth sports have become high-stakes on many levels and perhaps the least understood of the injuries to young people might well be those that impact behavior and personality. For instance, high school athletes have been found to be more likely to cheat than classmates who do not play sports. The Josephson Institute of Los Angeles conducted a study in 2007 that revealed 65 percent of both male and female athletes said they had cheated at least once in the past year, compared to only 60 percent of the general, non-sports playing population of youth. Away from their athletic endeavor, football players and cheerleaders showed the highest response to cheating with both groups at over 70 percent (Pugmire 2007).

Young athletes also suffer emotional and physical injuries that are self-induced because of the pressures and strong emotional stress they experience. Another example is the high incidence of bulimia among female athletes. Bulimia is an eating disorder in which those who suffer become caught in a cycle of binge eating followed by purging. Purging is a behavior whereby, typically, bulimics rid themselves of the food by inducing

themselves to vomit. However, they also resort to enemas, laxatives, and fasting to void their bodies of the calories they have consumed. Former United States Olympic diver Kimiko Hirai began struggling with bulimia when she was a teenage college athlete at the University of Indiana. She recalls asking her coach what she could do to prepare for the upcoming season. His reply to her was for her not to get fat (Hellmich 2006).

Psychotherapist Cynthia Ferrari, who specializes in treating patients with eating disorders, observes this malady is emerging across the board in sports. According to Ferrari, the problem is not just occurring in sports where one would think slimness would matter, like with gymnastics or ice-skating. Issues of this variety are becoming increasingly evident in women's track and field, basketball, and soccer. She also suggests that the weight-loss practices of wrestlers may become life-long problems (McMahon 2007, 85). In 1997, the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the National Federation of State High School Associations put in place rules that do not allow for wrestlers to compete when body fat drops below a certain measurement, usually 5 percent. Younger athletes in this sport often have no such checks.

In 2004, an eight-year-old boy in Liberty, Kansas, died while trying to make the one hundred thirty-five pound weight limit for a football team. Ryen Vanden Broeder jogged, sat in a sauna to sweat water weight, and worked out on a treadmill during a two-hour span before he collapsed. The official cause of death was heatstroke. The third-grade student weighed 139, four pounds above the limit to make the team (KMBC 2004).

Implied or otherwise, coaches often powerfully suggest behaviors that can injure impressionable young athletes. In a New Jersey lawsuit, one coach was alleged to have caused one of his players to suffer an eating disorder. Jennifer Besler sued her former

high school basketball coach for insisting she lose ten pounds. She claimed she suffered an eating disorder and stopped menstruating. According to the suit, Daniel Hussong was said to have spewed obscenities at the teenager and created an intensely stressful environment as he belittled her mercilessly. A jury agreed with the young woman and awarded her a 1.5 million dollar judgment from the school district for emotional distress. The case was overturned on appeal when a judge ruled Besler had failed to prove her injuries were permanent as required by state law (Vichko 2004).

Healthy play for children is essential. The concept of play, as well as a practical definition of play, has become very cloudy in recent years, especially as it pertains to organized youth sports. Gary Warner, a staff member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes suggests, “We are competing, not playing, when it begins to hurt, when we must make sacrifices and commitments, when we worry about defeat rather than fun, and when pressure and stress take over” (Engh 2002, 127). Adults often mistakenly believe if their child is participating in youth sports they are developing and enjoying a healthy form of play. The fundamental need for physical, mental, emotional and social amusement and enjoyment is now a great source of injury to children in their young and tender psyches and bodies.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Overuse Injuries and Early Sports Specialization

It should be clearly understood that injuries, especially physical injuries, are an inherent part of youth sports. The United States Consumer Product Safety Commission reported in 2003 that 3.5 million kids under the age of fifteen were treated for sports related injuries. That number represents more than four times the number of injuries reported in 1995 (United States Product Safety Commission). Certainly included in this statistic are common mishaps like the twisted ankle of a basketball player and the sprained wrist of a tennis player, but an increasing percentage of these injuries being suffered by young athletes are considered overuse injuries. Various studies indicate from 30 to 50 percent of these injuries are caused by a schedule of athletic training and play so intense that, basically, a child's body simply cannot stand the strain (Bach and Shilling 2008; McLeod and others 2011). The tissue or structure in a child's body, such as a tendon or bone, becomes worn down by repetitious motion. With rest the tissue can heal, but without rest the body's natural response begins through inflammation which can ultimately lead to damage. The National Athletic Trainers Association (NATA) Research and Education Foundation headquartered in Dallas, Texas, considers youth sports injuries a public health issue and has committed two hundred and fifty thousand dollars toward research on the matter (National Athletic Trainers Association Research and Education Foundation 2011).

Youth sports medicine leader Dr. Lyle Micheli estimates that of the number of young patients he treats each week at Children's Hospital Boston, a startling 75 percent

are victims of overuse injuries, compared to just 10 percent twenty-five years ago (Pennington and Weber 2005). He also suggests the vast majority of these injuries are preventable. According to Micheli, unlike traumatic injuries, like dislocations and hyperextensions, the risk of overuse injuries can be cut to nearly zero simply by introducing variety, moderation, and rest into the sports routines of children. He also adds that parents are the greatest enablers of overuse injuries.

The age of patients suffering from overuse injuries also seems to be falling. Dr. Rebecca Demorest, of New York City's Hospital to Special Surgery, says she treats male and females athletes as young as eight years old. In an article which appeared in the *New York Times* on May 11, 2008, she said, "They ache and they hurt and they use pain medicine and try to keep on playing. When they finally get to the point they can't play, they come in to see me. They have a series of nonspecific, overuse injuries that comes down to being worn out" (Sokolove 2008). Dr. Athony Stans, a pediatric surgeon at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, observes, "We used to see these injuries in the 15 – to 18-year old range. Now we're seeing it in kids as young as 8 or 9" (McMahon 2007, 67).

Dr. John DiFiori, the chief of sports medicine at the University of California-Los Angeles Department of Family Medicine, puts forth a plausible explanation for this trend when he suggests that, "you have a kid who is not capable intellectually of understanding the situation and a parent who is insisting on behavior resulting in an injury" (DiFiori 2002). He notes physicians did not talk about these kinds of injuries in medical literature in the past because until parents showed up there really was not much to discuss. He suggests children entertaining themselves at their own pace, in their own way, did not

play sports until it hurt. Dr. DiFiori now contends injuries like tennis elbow and Little League shoulder do not appear unless kids are playing organized sports.

These overuse injuries to young athletes are exacerbated by what has become a growing trend in youth sports– the early specialization of a child in a particular sport. Club teams, travel teams, select teams, professional training businesses, and other entities have become a norm on the landscape of organized youth sports in America. In many cases, these entities have superseded recreational leagues for children and even school teams, especially for those parents and kids who may want to gain greater notoriety from coaches of older youth teams or even college coaches. In past years, college coaches looked to high school teams for potential athletes for their programs, however, select programs and private club teams seem to offer the highest levels of play. These are places to which more and more parents are planting children for their adolescent sports experiences.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, published a warning statement in the July 2000 edition of the journal of *Pediatrics*, advising against specialization in a sport at an early age, year-round training, and competition on an “elite” level for young athletes. The Academy suggested children be encouraged to participate in a variety of activities so a wide range of skills might be developed. Risks for children who did specialize included overuse injuries, emotional stress, and burnout. While the Academy conceded a need for more scientific research to support the warning, it urged greater awareness citing, “those who participate in a variety of sports and specialize only after reaching the age of puberty tend to be more consistent performers, have fewer injuries, and adhere to sports play longer than those who specialize early” (Pediatrics 2000).

Dr. Robbie DaSilva of Midland Orthopedics in Columbia, South Carolina, agrees with this opinion and contends the easiest way to prevent overuse injuries is to have children playing two or three sports, rather than one sport year-round because they do not strain the same joint or joints the entire year. He explains that children are especially susceptible to these types of hurts because their bones are still growing. “The growth plates at the end of the bones are spongy, rather than the hard bones of adults. In general, bones stop growing in females around age thirteen and males around fifteen. Until those ages, young athletes’ bones need a break from repetition” (Holleman 2005).

Dr. James Andrews, an orthopedic surgeon in Birmingham, Alabama, also believes the highest risk factor for injury is playing a particular sport year-round. He estimates he is treating four times more overuse injuries than he did ten years ago, including chipped bones, torn elbow ligaments, cracked kneecaps, and lower back damage. He and his colleagues have conducted studies on the risk factors for shoulder and elbow injuries in adolescent baseball pitchers (Olsen and others 2006; Flesig and others 2011). Fourteen-year-old Kristie Phillips who was heralded to be the next Olympic star in American gymnastics, trained with a broken wrist, and was consuming twelve Advil pain relievers and six prescribed anti-inflammatory drugs each day, according to author Joan Ryan in her book, *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes, the making and breaking of elite gymnasts and figure skaters* (Ryan 1995).

In addition to the movement of overuse injuries in younger ages, doctors are also beginning to find certain injuries are more common in certain age groups of child athletes. For example, heel problems cluster in young athletes between the ages of nine

and twelve. Elbow injuries tend to occur between the ages of ten and twelve. Knee injuries tend to bunch for athletes ages twelve to fourteen.

One particular devastating knee injury is the tearing of the anterior cruciate ligament, more commonly referred to as the ACL. The anterior cruciate ligament is a strong strand or ribbon of tissue that holds the knee joint together in place. The ACL is located on the outside of the knee and is opposite the band of tissue on the inside part of the knee called the medial cruciate ligament, or MCL. Female athletes are as much as nine times more likely to suffer this specific knee injury than male athletes (Prodromos and others 2007). Many experts point to the physiological or skeletal differences between the male and female body as the greatest reason for the larger numbers of this particular injury in females. The hip structure in females causes additional stress on this particular area creating a higher propensity for this ligament to tear. Each year one out of a hundred high school female athletes suffer this injury and 10 percent of college female athletes suffer this damage (Prodromos and others 2007). The pain, surgery, and rehabilitation to repair this injury are severe.

In an article for *Time* magazine in May of 2005, Dr. Daniel Green, a pediatric orthopedic surgeon, said, "Twenty years ago, it was rare for someone under age fifteen to have ACL surgery. Now it's commonplace" (Gorman 2005). Dr. Eric Small agrees and believes from a composite profile of his ACL patients, that most are young athletes who play nearly every minute of every game. He says many suffer their injuries on national holidays, like Memorial Day for field hockey or lacrosse players, and Labor Day for soccer athletes. These young people had typically been playing in all-day tournaments

and participated in as many as five or six games causing more muscle fatigue after the hours of maneuvering, running, and twisting of the knee (Hyman 2009, 73).

Another very common injury among young athletes is commonly referred to as Little League elbow. This wound relates to young baseball players whose arms endure the stress and whipping motions of thousands of throws over hundreds of games. The surgery to repair this damage is now commonly referred to as Tommy John surgery, named for a professional baseball pitcher on whom the procedure was first performed in 1974, by Dr. Frank Jobe (Dodd 2003). The operation involves reparations in the elbow by using a portion of a tendon from another part of the arm. While the surgery is now more technically sophisticated because of advances in medicine and is commonly performed on young people, even the pioneer of the procedure believes this is not the answer to the problem. Frank Jobe says he believes parents have a responsibility to keep their young players safe and secure. He articulates that there is no excuse for a child to be pitching until his arm is sore. Related to the common phrase of “no pain no gain,” Jobe declares, “I’d like to punch the guy who said that” (Hyman 2009, 84).

Dr. James Andrews, medical director of Major League Baseball’s Tampa Bay Rays, recalls that ten years ago he did the Tommy John surgery to repair the ulnar collateral ligament in a pitcher’s elbow only on adults. In 2004, he reported completing the surgery fifty-one times on children, at a cost of eight thousand dollars each to the athlete’s parents. He also verbalized, “I shouldn’t see any of those. It’s completely preventable” (Hewitt 2005). He also said, of those young athletes on whom he operated in 2004, on average, the adolescent had only the week of Thanksgiving and the week of Christmas off from their sport.

Observations by Dr. Timothy Kremchek, director and chief orthopedic surgeon of Major League Baseball's Cincinnati Reds and professional soccer's Cincinnati Kings reported in 2004 performing thirty-eight Tommy John surgeries on pitchers under age sixteen. "For throwers age fifteen and below it's the most common surgical procedure I see in elbows" (Cannella 2005).

Interestingly, former professional big-league pitcher Tommy John, for whom this surgery has been named, is even more adamant about protecting young people from this type injury. John refuses as many as thirty opportunities per week to give private one-on-one lessons with young children during the winter months at a cost of one hundred dollars per lesson, just with twelve-year-olds. He also firmly believes young players do not need to be playing baseball year-round. Referring to parents, John says, "What they don't understand, and will never understand, unfortunately, is it makes no difference whether you start pitching at eight or eighteen. I can take a kid who has never pitched in his life until he's seventeen. By the time he's nineteen he'll throw as well as or better than the kid who's been pitching since he was eight— and have less wear and tear on his arm" (Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall 2001, 20).

Research published by The American Sports Medical Institute revealed that pitchers who throw more than eighty pitches in a game are at four times greater risk of suffering injury that will lead to surgery than pitchers who throw less than eighty per game (American Sports Medical Institute). Further data related to this matter drives the point even deeper. Using videos from past Little League World Series games, it was discovered that some youth pitchers in the event had higher pitch counts than their professional counter-parts throwing in major league parks. For example, using the 3,798

pitches of the 2006 Little League World Series, it was determined the average pitch count for the youth hurlers in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, the annual site of the Little League World Series, was one pitch more than that of the winning pitcher in the clinching game of the 2007 Major League Baseball World Series deciding game. Boston Red Sox starter Jon Kester threw ninety-two pitches and was credited with the win (Hyman 2009, 75). It may be a fortunate thing that a regulation Little League game is six innings rather than the nine innings professionals play. Little League baseball has since changed its fifty-year-old rule regarding the number of innings a young person may pitch in a week, to a specific number of pitches the young person may throw in games during a given week (Little League 2008).

Dr. Jack Vander Schilden, an orthopedic surgeon in Little Rock, Arkansas, is appalled by the number of games young athletes on a club or travel team may play in a tournament weekend. He says six games, three each two days in a row is entirely too much. He adamantly asserts professional players could not tolerate that amount of work. "You have to realize, pitching is Darwinian," he says. "It's survival of the fittest, and some people are just meant to pitch, and some aren't. Pitching is a very abnormal activity for the arm, so it's very easy to have overuse problems" (Brawner 2008).

With Little League baseball making this important decision for the health and safety of its young participants it seems now the problem lies with children participating in elite, or select team programs, where there is no association with Little League baseball and no oversight as to how much a pitcher may be used. The availability and success of the Tommy John surgery on young arms, while helping thousands through the years, may actually be giving license to parents and other adults to abuse young ball



players by pitching them too much because the surgical procedure is seemingly so routine and successful. Dr. Lewis Yocum has performed the operation often through the years and suggests that some parents of sore-armed children actually view the surgery as a credential that establishes a youth player as an athlete with a future worth protecting. They surmise that their kid must be big league material because he has sustained the injury and now must have the operation. Yocum, who serves as medical director of the Los Angeles Angels professional baseball team, says he performs eighty to one hundred of the surgeries per year, but not on young athletes. He states, “I have a problem doing it on a 12- and 13-year-old to save his career; as far as I’m concerned, he has no career. The surgery is not for everyone who plays baseball. Just because you’ve got a shiny new hammer, everything isn’t a nail” (Longman 2007).

Dr. Keith Meister, orthopedic doctor and surgeon for the Texas Rangers professional baseball club in Arlington, Texas, expresses disbelief at parental attitudes with sports injuries to their children, especially, this particular arm injury. A father and his twelve-year-old son visited his office in 2009 to explore surgical options for the boy’s sore pitching arm. When Meister recommended twelve weeks of rest as the initial preference for treatment, the dad excused his son from the room to explain, in private, just what a special pitching talent his offspring truly was. Meister said, “I listened until he finished and then said he was truly fortunate if his son was as gifted as he’d shared. Then I told him the only problem I saw with all of it, was that the boy was twelve years old and had his butt in my office already because he was hurt!” (Meister 2009) Physician after physician report that children often take the news they need rest from their sport to help with an injury far better than their parents receive the information.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Big Business

This push toward forcing kids to specialize in a particular sport at an early age has now become big business. Millions of dollars is generated each year in America through organizations designed to train and prepare young athletes. Club and select team coaches often receive a salary. The hospitality industry has also become extremely involved in youth sports with cities all over the country marketing youth sports facilities, lodging accommodations, restaurants, and other venues in hopes of attracting regional and national competitions involving adolescent athletes.

Sports performance enhancement businesses are now part of a system designed to better prepare and equip young athletes to compete. Individuals, and frequently select or club teams pay for strength training, speed enhancement, or even sport specific lessons. Often the cost of these sessions is included in the price tag of participating on an elite travel team.

Velocity Sports Performance has modern training centers in one hundred cities in the United States, including multiple sites in major metropolitan areas like Alpharetta, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta, or the San Francisco bay area. BIRTHED in 1999, Velocity Sports Performance utilizes the latest training techniques from professional and university athletic programs to maximize the athletic ability of athletes of all skill levels and ages. Eight year-old Little Leaguers are able to train like pros. Parents of children ages eight to eleven pay four hundred and sixty-five dollars per month for three, one-hour

sessions per week. The monthly fee goes down if packages of three, six, or twelve months are purchased (Velocity Sports Performance).

Participation as a member of a private club team or select elite team can also be very costly. Prices are high financially. Fees often range from five hundred dollars per year to more than five thousand dollars per year for parents to afford what they believe will be the opportunity to receive better coaching and perhaps, greater exposure to college athletic recruiters. This ordinarily does not include costs for uniforms, travel, lodging, meals, private lessons or special trainers. Former award-winning professional baseball pitcher Bob Tewksbury, now a radio show host, states, "The cost of some of this stuff is astronomical." A former standout at Saint Leo and all-star pitcher with the St. Louis Cardinals who now is a sports psychologist for the Red Sox, Tewksbury adds, "It's one of these myths parents buy into that you have to keep up with the Joneses. There's a socialization thing to it that if Johnny and Timmy have hitting coaches, then that's what we need to do" (Putnam 2007). He says that many parents simply overlook the significance of innate talent believing they can create a star athlete by following the proper training steps.

This drive toward early sport specialization through elite or select teams may also be perpetuating the belief that unless young athletes focus on only one sport they may not be able to garner spots on teams as they become older or eventually reach their goals of perhaps receiving a college scholarship or beyond to professional sports. Sports psychologist Lynn Pantuosco-Hensch revealed a strongly related point in her research. She gathered opinions of five hundred male and female college athletes from Division I and Division III programs. Almost 65 percent responded that specializing in a sport

before high school was not necessary to play in college (Pantuosco-Hensch 2006). A South Carolina mother of three sons, and wife of a former college baseball player, Ramona Eubanks was told by her oldest teenage son who was thirteen at the time, “Mom, I know he is three years younger, but you gotta make Austin play select ball or he’ll be in the same place I am trying to make the school team. He’s gotta do it” (Eubanks 2003).

This type of system, which can begin for children as early as age six, also includes try-outs, drafts, and cuts from opportunities to participate on a particular club team. This youth sports organizational structure appears to have originated with parents and other adults believing better adolescent athletes were going to somehow have their progress retarded by participating with children of lesser abilities. Former professional basketball player Bob Bigelow, who now champions the cause to do away with this arrangement for youth athletics before grade seven, deems that once select teams were created, children were stuck with ability rankings, generating a caste system. He recognizes, though, that when the hierarchy of this structure is criticized it creates disagreements and passionate convictions among parents about what might be best for their children. He thinks this issue cuts to the core of arguments over competition levels, identifying talent, try-outs, cuts, playing time, tournaments, trophies, sitting the bench, varsity stars, college scholarships, and professional contracts. Bigelow is not alone with this opinion. At the 1998 National Soccer Coaches Association of America convention, a panel of former coaches and players suggested that a sports system that promotes elite teams for children younger than age fourteen was entirely improper. This age was too young to identify the best players (Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall 2001, 42).

Parents of children who are chosen for these elite-type teams should realize what is considered to be an early identification of their child's talent is no guarantee of success in the sport later in childhood, let alone adolescence or young adulthood. According to an article which appeared in the 1997 issue of *Spotlight on Youth Sports*, a publication of the Institute for Study of Youth Sports, "Parents of children labeled as talented may develop a false sense of potential for the child's success" (Hedstrom and Gould 2004, 34). The article also states there are simply too many intervening variables associated with a child's normal growth, maturation and development, and the sports system itself to gauge future success. When interviewed about his son's incredible college and professional success, the father of famed basketball legend Michael Jordan was quoted in an April 15, 1990, article which appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*. He stated, "I had no idea all of this would happen, and maybe that's better. If I had, I might've pushed him too hard and screwed him up. As it is, everything happened very naturally" (Sakamoto, 1990). It should be noted that Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team as a sophomore.

With few exceptions, young athletes who are more physically mature will consistently have more success than athletes who are less physically mature. Pre-teens are being labeled in the current American youth sports system as good or not good, which is far off base from what should be transpiring. Medical experts generally agree there can be as much as a six-year developmental differential difference between healthy children of the same age. For instance, an eleven-year-old boy might have the physical maturation of an eight-year-old, while his classmate might have the bodily appearance of a fourteen-year-old. That is the difference between a child and grown adolescent.

Through interviewing sixty-three of the world's best athletes in the 1980s, former Olympic gold-medal hurdler David Hemery's research revealed only five of those athletes said they became serious about their sport before age twelve, and those people were athletes in individual sports such as gymnastics and golf (Hemery 1988). Dr. Steven Anderson, a sports specialist at the University of Washington, also says waiting to specialize will help ensure children pursue an activity that really interests them, rather than just their parents (Jet Magazine 2000).

During seven years as the resident psychologist at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado, Shane Murphy observed an evolving trend toward children becoming younger and younger when they began to specialize in their sport. Murphy admits the trend disturbed him because of the high level of commitment required to become an Olympic athlete (Murphy 1999). Yet, those responsible for the high level sports programs are well aware of the need for children to begin training at a young age to achieve international success. President of United States Soccer, Alan Rothenberg, commented on a Nike Corporation-sponsored program to recruit talented young athletes into the sport of soccer by saying, "The average age of a World Cup winning player is twenty-eight, which means that we have to be dealing with nine-to-sixteen-year-olds right now" (Murphy 1999, 13).

These facts create quite a paradox because studies show that very few age-group sports stars ever end up being successful in professional or Olympic sports. It can be clearly seen, however, that select or elite teams have been successful in identifying the best young athletes of a particular age. New York State University at Albany psychology professor Dr. Bruce Savre says the current youth sports system mimics what is seen with

high school, college, and pro sports. He feels there should be much more concern about development of skills, fun, and participation for children— everything the elite sports system is not doing (National Institute for Sports Reform).

In this elite sports structure, the time commitment for a participant and family is elevated, too. Practice sessions may be several times per week to every night of the week with up to five or six tournament games on a weekend, often requiring travel to another city in the region or even across the country. Skipping a practice or a game for any reason might mean a young athlete must sit the bench in future contests. Dr. William Doherty, a professor in the Family Social Science Department at the University of Minnesota and leader of Putting Family First, suggests the rhetoric espoused now is the same that previously only accompanied professional teams. The athlete being away from home for days, weeks, and even months just goes with the territory. Criticized for being an anti-youth sports movement, Doherty says many coaches support his organization. He states simply, “We believe that sports and other community activities can be important positive experiences for children, youth, and families. But we believe that current preoccupation with competition has diminished the rewards of sports at the same time as diminishing the quality of family life for many families” (Putting Families First).

The United Nations’ International Labor Organization reports that United States workers now toil more hours than any other industrialized nation while taking fewer vacations. The vacations they do take are briefer than they took in the past (Anderson 2001).

The hospitality, leisure, and travel industry has certainly taken notice of the trends in organized youth sports. Many families now incorporate their vacation time to

correspond with youth sports teams travel schedules and communities often market themselves accordingly. Organizations that host youth sports events reap income from team or individual registration fees, while the towns or cities where these tournaments or meets occur, also generate income. Having available land on which to build fields or facilities, many smaller, rural areas have now become dependent on this income. Hotels, motels, restaurants, stores, gas stations generate revenue through the presence of their guests. Municipalities do as well via hotel taxes, sales taxes, and facility usage fees. Local chambers of commerce factor in these revenues in their annual financial forecasts.

Located north of Charlotte, North Carolina, America's Park Limited Liability Corporation announced in May of 2010 plans to build the largest youth baseball facility in the United States in the community of Mooresville by 2012 (Marek 2010). The park will host players ages eight to thirteen from around the country. A distinctly collaborative effort, the township of Mooresville, Iredell County, the Mooresville Convention and Visitor's Bureau, the South Iredell Community Development Corporation and the Mooresville South Iredell Economic Development Corporation joined America's Park LLC to announce the undertaking. The baseball park will have twenty-five lighted ball fields, sixty cabins, a laundry facility, dining hall and concession stands. Officials estimate eighty thousand players, coaches, and family members will come to the area during the summer months when the park will host week-long tournaments for twelve consecutive weeks from June through August. An estimated economic impact of eighty million dollars directly related to the park's operation will be felt by area businesses. According to America's Park spokesman Lou Presutti, who founded a similar effort called Cooperstown Dream Parks, "The real winner here is



youth baseball.” Presutti additionally states that three thousand teams of twelve-year-olds are turned away at Cooperstown Dream Parks each year. It should also be noted that Presutti’s Cooperstown Dream Parks are not in Cooperstown, New York, the historic home of the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame, as the name might suggest, but rather in Salisbury, North Carolina, about twenty miles northeast of Mooresville, North Carolina (Marek 2010).

*Sports Travel* magazine publisher Timothy Schneider says the effort to sell cities to youth sports tournaments is a lucrative and rapidly growing trend. The annual trade show called TEAMS, which is short for “Travel, Events, and Management in Sports,” has been named one of the top-50 fastest-growing trade shows in North America four times by Tradeshow Week magazine (Tradeshow Week 2009). Even after Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the Gulf Coast region of the United States, TEAMS booked its 2009 annual convention in the city of New Orleans as soon as it was feasible to do so, according to Schneider. He said, "Given our planning cycle and the availability of convention center space in New Orleans, this year was our first opportunity to return to the Crescent City. Our hope is to showcase all that New Orleans has to offer to event organizers from amateur and youth sports all the way up to the professional leagues" (Stockton 2009).

The Western Regional Little League tournament played in San Bernardino, California, near Los Angeles, over a ten day period in August of 2005 drew fifty thousand people from eleven states and brought in an estimated sixteen million dollars to the community. In 2010, the event was worth twenty million dollars (Edwards 2005).

The community of Waco, Texas, purposely originated a youth golf event in 1999 to attract tourism dollars to the area. The Greater Waco Chamber of Commerce and its title sponsor, Starburst fruit chews candy, a product of Mars Chocolate Company of North America with a manufacturing plant in Waco, began the Starburst Junior Golf Classic. Organizers initially had hopes of eventually attracting as many as five hundred junior golfers to the event. In its twelfth year, with age level divisions for boys and girls, seven to eighteen-years-old, the 2010 version of the event accepted 1,030 players from eighteen states and two foreign countries. There was also a waiting list of two hundred and fifty kids who were not able to participate because of space limitations (Smith 2010). The tournament has become one of the largest youth golf events in the world. Eight different courses, several of which are located in neighboring towns and cities were utilized to accommodate players. Tournament Director Steve Smith of the Waco Chamber of Commerce said, “Generally speaking, the past twelve years have been a huge event for the greater Waco area. We continue each year to make improvements to help us reach our goal of having the best junior golf tournament in the country. We do not keep official figures, but we estimate in each of the last two years the event has generated two million dollars each year” (Smith 2010).

Waco, Texas, is also home of the Texas State Little League baseball and softball complex and headquarters, which hosts multi-day regional and state championships for boys and girls each year impacting the local economy by similar figures as the Starburst Junior Golf Classic (Smith 2010).

The 2009 United States Soccer East Region Championships played in and around Barboursville, West Virginia, was estimated to have provided more than 12.5 million

dollars to the local economy. The cities of Frisco and Plano, Texas, Lancaster, California, and Souix Falls, South Dakota, enjoyed similar windfalls from the other regional soccer events of this same youth sports organization's age level events (Championships.USYouthSoccer).

Utah Sport Commission chief executive officer Jeff Robbins estimates major youth sports events in his state have contributed forty to sixty million dollars per year since 2001. "That tells you people are spending money on sports. And as long as there is that interest, the future of sports in the state is promising. I don't think Utah will sit and wait until one of these [professional] franchises materializes," Robbins said. "Football and baseball will have an opportunity, but we'll evolve in other areas. That will fill the void" (Thach 2011).

These few examples are representative of the amount of money being generated by youth sports all over the country. Considering the numbers of children participating in youth sports across all age levels, the number of sports in which they participate, and the potential economic impact that games, tournaments and other competitive events involving these kids and their families might have on a community and state, it is no small wonder that youth sport has become such big business. The youth sports system is now an integral and an apparently vital part of the national economic system.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion

Corporate America utilizes sports lingo as an everyday, common part of doing business. Workers are called team members. They labor together as part of a unit. Productivity is visually displayed in offices and factories on scoreboards. There is talk of sacrifice and teamwork in order to win victories. It would be difficult to imagine someone growing up in America since the 1950s without having his or her life affected by sports in one manner or another.

This mindset has permeated our culture. Adult-driven motives have set forward an insatiable national appetite for success in organized youth sports in America. This journey occurred because professional educators saw dangers for adolescents involved in athletic environments that were too competitive. Those educators stepped away when they saw warning signs. Untrained parents filled the void and the unhealthiness increased for youth in organized sports. The trend continues to be perilously unhealthy for young athletes. The near disposable approach toward young athletes borders on child exploitation, and is in fact occurring with some youth. Many parents and adults have become blinded by their own personal visions and agendas and have forgotten about the desires and needs of their children.

Author Shane Murphy suggests that people are attracted to watching sports for the same reason they are drawn to television soap operas. Each has drama and significance because each is about life. Sports are not meaningless when a misplayed groundball defines a career as it did in the case of professional ballplayer Bill Buckner. His miscue

while fielding at first base for the Boston Red Sox in a World Series game caused him years of abuse from fans. For years he endured the chastisement, and then ultimately moved away from his home some years after his career ended because of the constant harassment by people over his fielding error (Historical Baseball).

People often treat youth athletes the same way in today's culture. People connect with athletes when they watch their story unfold. The emotional bond is significantly deeper and more meaningful when the connectivity is between a parent and their child. No child is yelled at when they miss a note when playing a piece of music at a piano recital. No child receives verbal abuse from spectators when they miss a word at the regional spelling bee. Yet if a child misses a free throw in the semi-final of a basketball tournament or allows a goal in the soccer tournament, she may draw the scorn of adults and teammates alike, as if the end of the world was near. In these examples the atmospheres may be different because of their inherent nature, and thus some of the harsh reality regarding children playing youth sports are further revealed. It may be that solitary episode that defines a childhood. Certainly it could be that episode defines a youth sports career.

Although American society places great emphasis on winning, it does not so readily apply to kids who play sports. Research involving youth sports participants clearly indicates that the number of wins or losses by their team did not influence how much the players liked the sport or their coaches (deLench 2006). Being placed on a winning or losing team was not nearly as important to the child as the personality and type of coach they had (deLench 2006). Despite this, these same children reported they felt more liked by their parents and their coach when they played on a winning team

rather than a losing team. This would indicate youth playing organized sports recognize winning is more important to adults than it is to them.

Young athletes desire encouragement and skill instruction when playing sports. Good coaches make all the difference for kids. Good coaches make the difference in the success of a youth sports program. In a study entitled “Is Winning Everything?” researchers followed fifty-one Little League coaches over the course of a season and measured the effects on the 542 young athletes playing on their respective teams. Players responded much more favorably to coaches who were supportive by encouraging them after the athlete had made a mistake and taught the players basic skills or how to correct their mistakes (Cumming et.al. 2007).

Organized youth sports programs that recognize why children want to play and what needs should be met for the participants are successful programs. Good programs exceed expectations when skills are imparted that children do not realize they need.

Some youth leagues and programs have modified their tactics in order to address concerns, such as programs being too highly competitive and/or too time consuming for children and their families. Not everyone, however, believes “non-results-oriented” leagues or tournaments for younger children are genuinely beneficial. Columnist John Leo of *U.S. News and World Report* concluded a move by the Massachusetts Youth Soccer Association in 1997 had no merits at all. The association implemented tournaments for children where scores would be kept, but no tournament win-loss standings. Teams would not be eliminated from the tournament competition. In a June, 22, 1998, article Leo ranted the move was political bologna dreamed by those who unrealistically seek to protect children from the heartache of losing. Leo sarcastically

suggested soccer officials could ensure children's happiness by awarding each player a goal when he or she touches the ball for the first time (Leo 1998, 23).

Athletes with the most talent eventually rise to the top in their endeavors. At least for the youngest athletes, sports systems designed to accommodate the greatest number of children, regardless of their potential, would seem to be a wise choice for organizers. Executives of the National Football League (N.F.L.) have taken notice of the unsettling nature in American youth sports and have taken action. The N.F.L. designated one hundred million dollars for thirteen different programs (Cyphers 2000). The programs are designed to show children that football is filled with action and fun, while convincing parents the game is not overly violent or risky for youth. Scott Lancaster, former senior director of youth football development for the N.F.L. commented, "Kids are forced to play adult versions of games to satisfy an 'adult' thirst for experiencing what they watch on television" (Morrison 2000). Lancaster later took aim at systems for youth sports that do not appear to be in the best interest of the children. He cited coaches who exhibit behavior that borders on physical or verbal abuse. He also observed that parents who watch youth sports, have a way of spoiling the fun for the young athletes. He said, "Preconditioning children to value only final results in sports competitions robs them from the joy of spontaneous play and learning new skills in a positive environment" (Morrison 2000).

Other organizations have also taken actions to address concerns in youth sports. Some efforts have focused on unacceptable adult behavior. Others have concentrated on skill development for all participants or time hardships on families with children playing

sports. Training and educational programs for administrators and adult coaches are being stressed by other groups.

One such initiative is the Positive Coaching Alliance. Created as a non-profit entity within the athletic department at Stanford University, the PCA's stated mission is to transform youth sports in order to transform youth (Positive Coaching Alliance). Under the direction of founder Jim Thompson, the PCA was created to transform the culture of youth sports to give all young athletes the opportunity for a positive, character-building experience. While the PCA states three primary goals for its directives, one of the most revealing is a desire to "spark and fuel a social epidemic of positive coaching that will sweep the country" (Positive Coaching Alliance). More than one thousand, one hundred youth sports organizations, leagues, schools and cities nationwide, partner with PCA to conduct workshops for youth sports coaches, parents, organizational leaders and athletes. Jim Thompson points to the influence of professional sports on the youth sports landscape as part of the reasons for problems. He suggests that both adults and kids are imitators by their human nature. He says the model of the professional entertainment business of sports is what is being mimicked. It includes arrogance, bravado, and disrespectful behavior by everyone involved. The efforts of the PCA are not to do away with competition or trying to win, but rather to combat a win-at-all-costs mentality. The organization has conducted more than six thousand workshops nationwide since its inception (Positive Coaching Alliance).

Another endeavor challenging conventional thinking in youth sports was created by a group of parents in a small community south of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The organization called Balance4Success began to gain traction in the fall of 2005. The



collection of adults announced a boycott of Sunday youth sports games and practices to begin June 1, 2006. Their program was entitled, "Take Back Sundays." Parents in this group did not ask coaches or league administrators to change their competition or practice schedules, but merely not to penalize those children who chose not to participate on Sundays (Balance4Success).

Based in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas area, the United Hockey Moms organized in hopes that better education for parents about the rules of ice hockey would help adults behave in a more civilized manner at games. This group also attends mediation sessions when sanctions for adult behavior incidents have occurred at area rinks. Parents of participants are required to take a short educational course and sign a behavioral pledge. A survey conducted one year after the initiative began showed 60 percent of parents who responded said they witnessed a positive change in parental behavior. Sixty-two percent said they felt empowered to confront parents who were acting inappropriately. Additionally, 76 percent of parents indicated they felt more committed to their child's participation (Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall 2001, 257).

Similar efforts to curb the poor behavior of parents have been launched nationally including hundreds of local chapters of Parents Association for Youth Sports (PAYS). The initiative was birthed by the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS) which partners with more than three thousand community based organizations like Boys' and Girls' Clubs, Police Athletic Leagues, Catholic Youth Organizations, and others. NAYS, which was originally founded as a non-profit youth sports coaches association promotes a safe, fun and healthy sports experience for all children. Additionally, NAYS promotes the value and importance of sports and physical activities in the emotional, physical,

social and mental development of youth. The parental education piece offered through PAYS includes practical information to increase the awareness for adults in understanding their role and responsibility in helping the youth sports experience be more positive and rewarding for kids (National Alliance for Youth Sports).

Another successful program offered by NAYS includes aiding youth sports league administrators to better their organizational skills and develop policies and regulations for their respective local programs. A survey conducted by the Alliance studied 320 youth sports administrators and discovered that more than half of local program administrators had no formal organizational training and yet 83 percent had the authority to choose which programs to implement. Two other interesting facts revealed in the study showed 65 percent of these leaders were allowed to establish program principles and philosophies and 68 percent were given power to develop policies and regulations for their programs (National Alliance for Youth Sports).

Ideas addressing the avoidance of a win-at-all-costs mentality has also extended beyond volunteer-based youth sports organizations and found ways into local school systems with federal dollars. University of Maine dean of Education Robert Cobb has utilized the education model rather than the professional sports model as a way to regenerate a healthy sports climate. The Sports Done Right initiative, which is an effort of the Maine Center for Sport and Coaching, encourages skill development, good sportsmanship, and ethics, as well as developmental standards of excellence. Coach, athlete, and parental behaviors are included as well. A report published in January 2005 began to serve as a road map for schools to modify and reorient their existing sports programs. Two federal grants totaling nearly four hundred thousand dollars were initially

received to implement the plan at a dozen pilot sites representing twenty-nine schools in Maine. Just over one year after the programs began, administrators from thirty-nine states had expressed interest and inquired how to begin Sports Done Right in their communities (Sports Done Right).

By directive or of their own initiative, other professional educators have made strides to improve youth sports in their schools. One such reformer is Ed Canzanese in Cherry Hills, New Jersey. As the former assistant principal and athletic coordinator for the Rosa International School, he developed reforms for the school, which enrolled eight hundred students, after observing up to 60 percent of middle school students in his educational system who were trying out for sports teams were ultimately being eliminated or cut. Now principal of this institution, Canzanese applies the concepts of character building and sportsmanship to focus on what he calls “character education” with a vision to educate the “whole child” (Character Education Partnership).

Plainview Community Middle School in Plainview, Indiana, has followed a “no-cuts” policy in its athletics department since the school opened in 1990 under the direction of principal Jerry Goldsberry. Dr. Goldsberry believes educators do more harm than good when they require middle school-aged students to compete against one another for a place on the soccer team or cheerleading squad. He believes students who are turned down begin to question their own worth and whether they are liked by the coach or sponsor of a team. He says by eliminating kids, educators create a problem where none existed. Goldsberry says, “Then you have to undo some of the perceptions that exist as a result of that process.” The fifty-six wrestlers at the school represent students who feel they have a place at their school where they know they are valued (Curtis 2003).

Craig Cox, a former high school and middle school coach in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, metropolitan area, exercised his own brand of innovation when confronted with a larger number of kids than his school teams could support. He developed an intramural program for volleyball players during their school lunch period. Cox was moved to do something when ninety girls showed up for try-outs, and he had only a total of thirty uniforms for two competitive teams. After asking the seventh grade girls who among them happened to be playing volleyball for the first time, and observing roughly two-thirds of the crowd with raised hands, Cox said, "I had only fifteen green uniforms and fifteen white uniforms to give out, and I knew at that point which sixty little girls were going to be going home crying sometime over the course of the coming few days." The varsity softball coach of the school, Cox said he was sensitive to the entire issue because he had an older brother who had enjoyed success in competitive tennis, but had not ever touched a racquet until a coach introduced him to the game in eighth grade. Cox emphatically inquires, "How do we know which of these little girls is going to be any good at volleyball or show an affinity for the sport? They've never even played the game!" (Cox 1998)

Challenging the financial investment of current school system sports programs, former professional basketball player John Gerdy asks educators, taxpayers, and parents to explore whether current approaches in athletics are truly sound. He suggests that if intramural and physical fitness programs were expanded, a greater number of students would have their needs met. According to Dr. Gerdy, if athletic participation were used as a tool by leaders to improve public health, school systems would be strengthened, not weakened. A vocal advocate for The Center for Kids First in Sports, Gerdy, validly

points out that if people were interested in deriving the greatest health return on the money being spent in athletics, decisions designed to cater to a small population of elite athletes would change. More resources would be dedicated to broad-based programs that focus on participation. He feels so strongly the system has failed that he has authored an entire book on the topic, entitled *Air Ball: America Education's Failed Experiment with Elite Athletics* (Gerdy 2003).

A further reminder of the motives for why young people play sports can be easily identified in the city of Woburn, Massachusetts. Located just a few miles north of Boston, the ninth-and tenth-grade intermediate league has been operating for almost three decades, but approximately ten years ago the league all but eliminated adult involvement in the program. The norm for participating adults with children in this initiative merely involves dropping off or picking up players from the gymnasium. The male participants indicate they have a much better experience without their parents being present. Paid league referees also say they look forward to officiating at a gym without adults screaming and yelling from the sidelines (Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall 2001, 299).

Many other examples exist to indicate positive changes in America's youth sports culture can and are occurring in various places through various platforms of focus. What is also clear is a current climate for youth sports that has become overly injurious to participants. With the national population growing, it would seemingly be of great benefit to create new approaches with new children as they come of age and begin to participate in organized youth sports. Simultaneously there should be greater effort made to overhaul some existing youth sports systems, so the tide is turned for adolescent

athletes who have unknowingly been turned into de facto professionals in how they are made to approach and play youth sports in America.

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