

Further Thoughts about Youth Sports

Part II

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Many people responded to my article last month about youth sports. Parents, coaches, educators, and mental health professionals either e-mailed me or spoke with me during breaks at my workshops and were very supportive of the perspective I advocated about the purpose of youth sports. In some instances the person offering feedback wore several hats including parent, psychologist, and coach. At one of my presentations, a man who had read “Raising Resilient Children,” the book I co-authored with my close friend, Dr. Sam Goldstein, offered an interesting comment. He said that many of the recommendations we detailed for parents were equally relevant for coaches. I agreed and mentioned that Sam and I have both served as coaches in youth sports and believe that coaches are in an excellent position to nurture what we call a “resilient mindset.”

Given the obvious interest in last month’s article I decided to write a follow-up column to share a selection of insights offered by readers as well as some of my thoughts about youth sports serving as a vehicle to promote confidence, social skills, and resilience in children.

Observations of Readers

One reader wrote, “I thought your article on youth sports was right on the money. I agree with your ideas wholeheartedly. I once read something by Stephen Covey where he said something like this after his youth soccer team lost. ‘Boys, when we play we have five goals. First, to get great physical exercise. Second, to learn to play as a team and be with our friends. Third, to develop our athletic skills. Fourth, to have fun. And fifth, to win. Today we accomplished 4 out of our 5 goals. Let’s give ourselves a cheer.’” I am a big fan of Covey, who wrote the highly acclaimed book “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.” Thus, it was a pleasure to learn about his perspective on the goals of youth sports.

Another reader observed, “I agree with your comments and thought I might share an interesting view I once heard Nolan Ryan present. He was asked about pitching and teaching kids the curve ball. He responded that in his opinion Little League should use

pitching machines until the kids are twelve. He stated that every Little League coach selects the biggest, most physically mature kids to be the pitchers. The pitchers then go out there and throw hard either hitting, walking or striking out most of the other kids. In Ryan's opinion this does not teach pitching nor hitting nor make for a fun game. Then as an aside he suggested that doctors, not a former pitcher, would be better qualified to answer the question about how old a child should be before being allowed to throw a curve ball without risking his/her health.” These reflections deserve serious consideration, especially coming from one of the greatest major league pitchers of all time.

A third reader shared his thoughts in the following way. “I agree with this article. Youth sport should always be about three things: making friends, having fun and learning something new. That's it. Striving for excellence is a worthy goal. Striving to win is focusing on the wrong objective.”

I received several communications that I found distressing. They described young children sitting on the bench for most of the game or actually being cut from a team because they were not as athletically gifted as their peers. Children should not languish on the bench or be cut from a team in youth sports. If children sign up to participate in a sport, they should participate. We are not talking about high school or college or professional teams competing. We are talking about teaching children how to play and enjoy the game and to be good teammates.

Although children can learn through observation, true learning must be “hands-on.” To deprive a child of actual game experiences runs counter to the benefits children can derive playing sports. In last month's article I described an article in The Boston Globe that reviewed the findings of research conducted by the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University. It is worth repeating what the researchers discovered. “Winning games is barely on the radar screen. Sure, kids would rather win than lose, but among younger players winning isn't their reason for playing.” Mike Clark of MSU noted, “Preadolescents play sports to have fun, be with their friends, and learn.” In contrast, the MSU study found that for their parents and coaches “winning is a high priority.” Parents and coaches should keep these findings in mind.

Youth Sports and Resilience

In “Raising Resilient Children” we describe the characteristics of youngsters who are resilient, that is, youngsters who handle pressure and challenges with greater self-assurance and skill. Resilient children have a high sense of self-worth; they possess solid interpersonal skills; they treat themselves and others with respect and dignity; they handle both winning and losing with grace, especially feeling that one learns from mistakes; they display self-discipline and self-control; they have realistic expectations for themselves, setting the bar higher with each new achievement; they possess a sense of humor and playfulness; and they believe that adults are available to help them. Youth sports is a wonderful activity through which to reinforce these characteristics. Whether it accomplishes this task rests in great part in the hands of the coach.

Many research studies indicate that when resilient adults are asked what they believe was one of the most important factors in their childhood to help them to overcome adversity and become resilient, invariably the first answer is, “There was one person who believed in me and stood by me.” Psychologist Julius Segal called this person a “charismatic adult” in a child’s life, a person from whom a child or adolescent “gathered strength.” Hopefully, a child has many charismatic adults—parents, educators, other relatives, and coaches. During my workshops I have often mentioned the important role of coaches. When I do, I have been impressed by the number of people in the audience who recount stories of coaches who made a positive difference in their life. Unfortunately, some share accounts of coaches who said or did things that diminished their sense of dignity and self-esteem.

I believe that any individual who assumes the responsibility of coaching a youth team should reflect upon the following questions:

Think of a coach you had when you were a child whom you really liked (if you did not engage in organized sports, you might wish to think of a physical education teacher). What words would you use to describe that coach? Think of a memory you have of something the coach said or did that made playing the sport fun.

Think of a coach you had when you were a child whom you did not like. What words would you use to describe that coach? Think of a memory you have of something the coach said or did that lessened your fun in playing the sport.

Now, imagine if I interviewed the children you currently coach or coached in past years. What words would you hope they used to describe you? What words would they actually use? What memories do you hope they will take from their interactions with you? Or phrased somewhat differently, 10, 15, 20, or even 30 years from now, what do you hope they remember about their experience with you? What life lessons do you want them to learn from what you said and did as their coach?

These questions, which are similar to those I pose for teachers and parents, are used to promote empathy (i.e., to see the world through the eyes of children) and to prompt us to consider what we want children to learn from us. These are questions I not only ask of others but of myself. I would not want a child I coached to describe me as someone who was mainly interested in winning, who did not use certain players because they weren't as talented, who took the team out for a treat only if they won a game, who criticized kids in front of others, and who always seemed very serious, lacking a sense of humor.

I would hope that kids said he taught us how to play the sport and to be a good teammate, he never embarrassed us, he liked to win but that was secondary to learning the game and having fun, he was playful and encouraging, he taught me about fairness and respect, and he made me feel that I was an important member of the team. I would hope no preadolescent who signed up for a sport would remember me as a person who cut them from the team, especially since a main goal of sports for kids is learning to be more proficient and that is impossible to achieve if the child is not allowed to participate.

If someone were to ask me one of my fondest memories as a coach, I would immediately share the following experience that occurred in a basketball game in which we lost. As I mentioned in last month's column, in the league in which I coached all of the coaches involved with elementary school youngsters (through sixth grade) implemented a rule that no child could play more than three-quarters of a game and no child could play less than one-half of the game. Coaches adhered to this rule. However, in one game a coach had played his best player the entire first half. This player was also kept in the game for the first few minutes of the third quarter. All of the kids knew the rule about playing time and one commented to me how much this child was playing.

During a timeout, I spoke privately to the other coach and said if this boy played the entire third quarter, then given the rule agreed upon by the coaches, he would not be eligible to play the fourth quarter. Also, the more he played, the less time was available for some of his teammates. The coach took the child out for about two minutes and then put him back for the remainder of the game, well beyond the time he was allowed to play. The important issue was not that we lost the game by a few points, but rather that a coach had not abided by the rules. I called this coach afterwards and he said that he had lost track of the time. He also heard from one of the two referees of the game who was a coach on another team. This infraction of the rules did not occur again.

However, what I will always remember is the comment one of my fifth grade players made as we left the gym. He said, “We lost, Dr. Brooks, but you played by the rules.” Interestingly, one of this boy’s close friends was on the other team and when he heard what his buddy had said, he commented that he didn’t like winning in the way that they did. It was a pleasure to hear these comments. It reinforced my belief that coaches are in a wonderful position to model and teach important life lessons.

I believe that all coaches should seek to be charismatic adults in the lives of their players. To do so, they must always ask, “What do I want each player to take from his or her experience on this team?” In answering this question, it is my hope that coaches will keep in mind the features of resilience that I described earlier, features that can be reinforced during every practice and game. What greater gift to the kids that we coach than to nurture their self-worth, social skills, optimism, and resilience! To have this kind of impact is also a precious gift to ourselves.

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