

Children, Parents and Sport

Part I

Most of us watched some of the Olympics; we enjoyed the competition, the drama, and the sheer magnificence of the display by the greatest athletes in the world.

We were, in our own way, celebrating sport and what it means to us. Sometimes we forget that sports are just structured play. Even professional athletes recognize this. They may do it for pay but the swing of the bat, the long three-point shot and the beautiful touchdown catch happen in the same way regardless of whether the athlete is getting paid.

What is sport, really? Some say sport is a metaphor for life. Others say that, for children, it is a tool to teach them life's lessons. Still others argue that sports and competition are harmful and that true sport should be noncompetitive by removing the score from the game.

These musings take a much too narrow view of sport and its significance for humans, and its critical importance for children.

It's the joy of movement, the display of the physical—the body meshing with the brain to throw, run and jump—that elevates sport to more than just games.

We are hardwired to move. All life is. To move is our legacy, our proof that we exist. Descartes may have said, "I think, therefore I am," but an animal—and we are animals in our body makeup and our brains—may say, "I act, therefore I am alive."

Action is everything. Rigidity and stasis is death. And sports give our animal, pre-cortical brain a chance to break away from the analytical, the life-inside-the-head world.

The truth is: sport is life. It is the majestic display of life in action and, as such, should be given the greatest respect by schools, parents and coaches.

Children have an innate desire to move: to run, throw, jump high and far, grapple, tumble and—this is the important part—a need to play with others.

All children's sports should allow a space where the expression of these actions can take place. Sports should not be a place where adult egos are allowed to run unchecked, messing with and hindering the natural expression of the participants. Coaches and parents need to be in the background—acting as guides as facilitators, not as drivers of the action.

Everyone has heard of the horror stories about out-of-control coaches in Little League, or youth-soccer parents going nuts over referee or umpire calls, coaches cheating, yelling or acting like drill sergeants and endless arguments over playing time or expectations not to mention children crying, getting discouraged or losing interest.

It all starts with the coach. Good coaches are leaders. They encourage, but are not cheerleaders. They push gently, but do not shove. They teach, but do not coerce.

They assess performance, not judge it; after all, who are we to judge, let's say, a brave 8-year-old who puts herself on the line and says "here I am, ignorant of the rules, scared, and in awe, help me to learn to play."

This is sacred ground the coach is walking on and, if your child is lucky enough to have an understanding coach, the sporting arena can be a place where she can flourish and be nurtured in her striving for body-mind excellence.

We have evolved over the last million or so years with bodies and brains that demand sport and play. It is our nature, and the key thing for coaches to understand and for parents to demand is that the court, field or pool is the child's playground.

Coaches are there to put it all together: the teamwork, the plan, the training, and the development of the athlete. They are there to be a witness, participant, and guide to the unfolding of the human spirit.

They are not there to redress their own wrongs, to discipline or punish, to judge, to mock or to demand.

In part II, I will address issues and concerns parents may have about their child and athletics.

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