

Who's Killing Kids' Sports?

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Two years ago, when he was still in high school, pro basketball prospect LeBron James inked an endorsement contract with Nike worth between \$90 million and \$100 million. Five days later, the \$1 million contract Nike offered to Maryland soccer prodigy Freddy Adu seemed almost ordinary, except for one detail—Freddy was just 13 years old.

In the summer of 2003, Jeret Adair, a 15-year-old pitcher from Atlanta, started 64 games with his elite traveling baseball team—more than most pro players pitch in an entire season. After the ligament in his elbow snapped, he had to undergo reconstructive surgery, a process once reserved for aging professional pitchers. In 2004, his doctor, James Andrews, performed similar surgery on 50 other high school pitchers.

Last March, Valerie Yianacopolus of Wakefield, Mass., was sentenced to one year of probation, including 50 hours of community service, and ordered to watch a sportsmanship video after she was found guilty of assaulting an 11-year-old boy who was cheering for the opposing team at her son's Little League game. And in June, according to state police, Mark Downs, the coach of a youth T-ball team near Uniontown, Pa., allegedly offered one of his players \$25 to throw a baseball at the head of a 9-year-old disabled teammate so the injured boy wouldn't be able to play in an upcoming game. League rules mandate that every healthy child play at least three innings. "The coach was very competitive," said State Trooper Thomas B. Broadwater. "He wanted to win."

A Sports Culture Run Amok

Across the country, millions of children are being chewed up and spit out by a sports culture run amok. With pro scouts haunting the nation's playgrounds in search of the next LeBron or Freddy, parents and coaches are conspiring to run youth-sports leagues like incubators for future professional athletes. Prepubescent athletes are experimenting with performance-enhancing drugs. Doctors are reporting sharp spikes in injuries caused by year-round specialization in a single sport at an early age. And all too often, the simple pleasure of playing sports is being buried beneath cutthroat competition.

"If I had to sum up the crisis in kids' sports," says J. Duke Albanese, Maine's former commissioner of education, "I'd do it in one word—adults."

Some adults, Albanese says, are pushing children toward unrealistic goals like college sports scholarships and pro contracts. According to National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) statistics, fewer than 2% of high school athletes will ever receive a college athletic scholarship. Only one in 13,000 high school athletes will ever receive a paycheck from a professional team.

“There is a terrible imbalance between the needs kids have and the needs of the adults running their sports programs,” says Dr. Bruce Svare, director of the National Institute for Sports Reform. “Above all, kids need to have fun. Instead, adults are providing unrealistic expectations and crushing pressure.”

As a result, Svare says, at a time when an epidemic of obesity is plaguing the nation’s youth, **70% of America’s children are abandoning organized sports by age 13.** “The only way to reverse this crisis,” Svare argues, “is to fundamentally rethink the way America’s kids play organized sports.”

Is Change Possible?

Many communities are trying to change the way they approach children’s sports. Florida’s Jupiter-Tequesta Athletic Association, facing a rash of violent behavior by sports parents, now requires them to take an online course on how to behave at their children’s athletic events. School officials in Connecticut, concerned about the toll of too much focus on a single sport, instituted a statewide ban on students playing on a private travel team during the same season they play their sport in high school.

But no reform effort is more aggressive than that of the state of Maine, where educators, student athletes and others have teamed up to launch a counterrevolution called Sports Done Right. Led by J. Duke Albanese and Robert Cobb, dean of the University of Maine’s College of Education, and funded by a federal grant secured by U.S. Sen. Susan M. Collins, the project aims to radically remake Maine’s youth-sports culture and provide a model that the rest of America might emulate.

The Maine Challenge

Their first step is a sweeping campaign to dial down the kind of competition that leads many kids to drop out of sports at an early age. “I was a high school football coach—I know how badly communities want their teams to win,” Albanese says. “We’re not saying there’s anything wrong with competition. We’re saying what’s appropriate at the varsity level is out of bounds in grade school and middle school. That’s a time to encourage as many children as possible to play. Period.

”To do that, the Sports Done Right team held statewide summit meetings before producing an action plan. It chose 12 school districts as the program’s pilot sites, but so many other districts clamored to participate that it is now under way in dozens more.

The program has identified core principles that it insists must be present in a healthy sports environment for kids, including good sportsmanship, discouragement of early specialization and the assurance that teams below the varsity level make it their mission to develop the skills of every child on every team, to promote a lifelong involvement with sports.

Sports Done Right’s second task is to attack the two problems it says are most responsible for the crisis in kids’ sports—the behavior of parents and coaches.

Problem #1: Out-of-Control Adults

The behavior of adults has been at the center of the debate about reforming kids' sports ever since 2002, when Thomas Junta of Reading, Mass., was convicted of beating Michael Costin to death during an argument at their sons' youth hockey practice. "I've watched adult civility in youth sports spiral downward since the early 1990s," says Doug Abrams, a law professor at the University of Missouri, who has tracked media reports of out-of-control sports parents for more than a decade. "At one time, adults who acted like lunatics were shunned as outcasts. But today, they are too often tolerated."

The nearly 100 Maine students Parade interviewed recited a litany of incidents involving adults behaving badly, including examples of their own parents being removed from sporting events by police. Nate Chantrill, 17—a shot-putter and discus thrower at Edward Little High School in Auburn and a varsity football player—volunteers to coach a coed fifth-grade football team. "One game, a parent flipped out that we didn't start his daughter," Chantrill recalls. "He was screaming, using bad language and saying she's the best player out there. Parents take this stuff way too seriously. Fifth-grade football is not the Super Bowl. It's a place for your kid to learn some skills and have fun. One parent can ruin it for all the kids."

That's why each Sports Done Right district is holding training sessions to define out-of-bounds behavior at sporting events and requiring the parents of every student who plays to sign a compact promising to abide by higher standards of sportsmanship.

Problem #2: Poor Coaching

Dan Campbell, who has coached Edward Little's track team to two state championships, says he sees too many of his peers pressing to win at all costs and neglecting their primary responsibility—to educate and inspire children. "One coach can destroy a kid for a lifetime," he says. "I've seen it over and over."

"I was at an AAU basketball game where the ref gave the coach a technical and threw him out of the game," says Doug Joerss, who was starting center on Cony High School's basketball team. "Then the coach swung at the ref. The kids ended up on the floor, getting into a huge brawl. You look up to coaches. Kids think, 'If it's OK for them to do it, it's OK for me to do it.'"

A campaign to improve the quality of coaching is at the center of Sports Done Right. "The most powerful mentors kids have are coaches," J. Duke Albanese says. "Coaches don't even realize the extent of their influence." He disparages the national trend to offer coaches salary incentives based on their won-lost records. Instead, Sports Done Right recommends compensation based on their level of training. And each pilot school district is encouraged to send coaches to continuing-education classes in subjects like leadership and child psychology.

Exporting Good Sense

Educators in 30 states have requested more information from Sports Done Right. "We think a small place like Maine is a perfect place to get kids' sports culture under control,"

says Albanese. “And if we can do that, maybe we can export the good sense Maine is famous for to the rest of the country.”

An example of that good sense recently occurred at a Sports Done Right pilot site. “An influential parent, a guy who volunteers to coach sixth-grade basketball, wanted the kids divided into an A and a B team, so he could coach just the elite kids,” says Stephen Rogers, the principal of Lyman Moore Middle School. “I said we weren’t going to separate the kids and discourage half of them. We were going to encourage all of our interested kids to play.”

“But we won’t win the championship,” the parent complained.

“I don’t really care,” Rogers replied. “We’re not talking about the Celtics. We’re talking about sixth-graders.”

How To Be a Good Sports Parent

Fixing the crisis in kids’ sports begins at home. Here are some tips from Sports Done Right to get parents started:

- * Encourage your child, regardless of his or her degree of success or level of skill.
- * Ensure a balance in your student athlete’s life, encouraging participation in multiple sports and activities while placing academics first.
- * Emphasize enjoyment, development of skills and team play as the cornerstones of your child’s early sports experiences while reserving serious competition for the varsity level.
- * Leave coaching to coaches and avoid placing too much pressure on your youngster about playing time and performance.
- * Be realistic about your child’s future in sports, recognizing that only a select few earn a college scholarship, compete in the Olympics or sign a professional contract.
- * Be there when your child looks to the sidelines for a positive role model.

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