

Confessions of a Nasty Sports Mom

I nagged. I yelled. I even heckled the kids on the other team. And then I realized I had to shut up — and get out there myself.

By Sandy Hingston, Prevention

My opponent was talented, a star. I knew that as she ran toward me. She'd scored three times already; she had to be stopped. So: "You're not as good as you think you are!" I bellowed.

Startled, she froze, her concentration broken. Mission accomplished! Then the referee blasted her whistle and strode over to the bleachers. "I'm going to ask all of you to refrain from making personal comments," she said curtly. I knew she meant me. And I didn't care, even though my "opponent" was only 13 years old and playing field hockey against my daughter's team.

That's right. I was an Ugly Sports Mom.

My kids were ashamed of me. "Could you please not scream at the officials?" my daughter would plead. My son, braver, shouted back at me from the basketball court: "I am hustling! Leave me alone!" I couldn't. I just couldn't. They were the ones playing, but I was the one caring.

I've read the same news stories you have, about the T-ball coach who paid a player to bean a subpar teammate, the parents who have done even worse. I clucked my tongue along with you. I abhor the emphasis America places on winning. I know what matters isn't the score but how you play the game. And yet there's a fire that flares up in me when opponents square off. It doesn't matter what they're playing, or at what level competition makes me come alive. ("My wife will watch any sport with me on television," my husband once told an envious colleague. "Even soccer.") I don't know how I got this way. I only know that games mean more to me than they ever have to my kids. "I like to practice," says my daughter, a three-sport athlete in high school, "but I don't like the games." Practice? Who cares about practice? The game is everything.

I played lots of games when I was younger: softball, basketball, volleyball, field hockey. And whether it was a varsity match or pickup at a picnic, I played whole hog. I did it for the rush I got when I stopped a shot on goal or served up an ace. No academic honor, no professional prize, would ever feel that good.

Once my kids came along, though, I stepped aside. It was their turn. And oh, the hopes I had for them! I coached them, rooted for their teams, and waited anxiously to see them blossom into stars. They didn't. They tried hard, and they had moments of glory. But, you know, they never wanted to watch soccer on TV. And it slowly dawned on me that athletic competition meant something to me that it didn't to them. In my mind, sports were life's proving ground the whole *Chariots of Fire* shtick. To my kids, sports were "That Thing That Makes Mom Go Berserk."

As happens so often, I came to this realization too late for it to make a difference. If only I could have stayed in my lawn chair like the other mothers instead of pacing the sidelines, maybe the kids and I would be sitting down together to watch the World Cup. Maybe they'd link sports with joy like I do, instead of with self-consciousness and a sense of expectations unmet. If I could have done that, though, I wouldn't be who I am. Competitiveness isn't something you clear from your psyche when you clean out your locker. At my kids' matches, I could smell the

mown grass, scuff the chalk lines on the field.

I couldn't bear to just watch. I wanted to play. When I raged at the refs, I was raging at the fact that I was stuck on the sidelines.

Then, a few years ago, while dropping my son off for basketball at the Y, I ran into the mom of a kid in his Scout troop. She was there, she told me, for the Wednesday night volleyball game.

"I love volleyball," I said.

She must have heard something in my voice. "Why don't you come along?"

"Oh, I haven't played in years," I said. "My ankles... my shoulder..."

She shrugged and remarked, "Everybody's got something."

That's how I got my game back. The regulars who show up on Wednesdays range from early 30s to mid-60s, and from whippet-lean to, well, not. We're stay-at-home moms, workers at Wal-Mart, engineers, teachers, a preacher, and one writer. What we have in common is this: We need our fix, the chance to prove ourselves and shine. "I'm gonna be a hero!" Dominick crows as he serves up a point. Maybe he will. Or maybe he'll be a goat instead. We revel in that edge of uncertainty, the bright lure of glory heightened by the chance of failing ignominiously.

I am more myself in the company I keep on Wednesday nights than I am at work or even with my family. My fellow players are kindred souls, our games a release for the competitive drives we assumed that age and time would put an end to... but haven't. We are both embarrassed by and proud of our intensity.

Recently, there was a mix-up when we arrived; an employee had borrowed the net — our net — for a beach party. We roiled in the lobby like a lynch mob. The poor desk clerk was cowed enough to get on the phone and find that net now. We paced the sidewalk outside, grumbling, until the truck rolled up with it. We took possession as if we were jonesing.

Then we started in, and all our discontent and ill will dissipated. For 2 hours, life boiled down to this: Sometimes you win, and sometimes you lose.

And you can't do either if you don't play the game.

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