

# Youth Sports: A Call to Action & How You Can Help!

by Bob Bigelow - copyright 2006

## What's happening to Our Kids?

Picture the typical youth sports game – a blur of motion and sound. Some parents are busy cheering positively or just chatting among themselves, enjoying the day. Others are prowling the sidelines. The prowlers mean business. These parents become field generals, barking orders and commanding their children to excel.

In this world of high volume and hyperventilating, one parent stands out. You can hear him from the parking lot. "Mark your man," he screams to his little boy. Red-faced and nearly breathless, this father runs up and down the sidelines, keeping pace with every play. "Get to the ball," he growls. The louder he screams, the more he seems to expect from his son. Just then, an opposing player steals the ball from his son, dribbles around him and heads straight toward the goal. Score!

He is the reason his wife doesn't enjoy going to the games anymore. This is too often the case in youth sports. More dramatic and disturbing examples of how far adults stray from their proper roles in youth sports occur every day—from assaults on coaches and officials to brawls among parents.

There is a disconnect between what adults say versus what children want and need to hear. What adults want and need from youth sports is often not what children want and need. Today, over 35 million children ages 4 through 14 participate in some form of organized youth sports. The vast majority of programs are staffed by very well-meaning volunteers. In fact, over 70% of kids drop out of organized youth sports by age 13 – missing opportunities for character development, socialization, character development, exercise and fun (source: National Alliance for Youth Sports). While kids do migrate to other activities as they get older, the number one reason children drop out is pressure from adults, and no longer finding their sports experiences fun. Kids need exercise, and the fun and values participation brings. The high drop out rate only contributes to America's problems of childhood obesity.

The solution to these problems is not for children to figure out how to meet adult expectations. Rather it's for the adults to look at youth sports through the eyes of the children, and to serve their wants and the needs while they are being children at play. This will require not only a change in adult attitudes, *but changes in the very sports systems themselves.*

I don't offer this guidance lightly or without the credentials to back it up. I was a first-round draft pick and played in the National Basketball Association for four years, toe-to-toe and elbow-to-elbow with the stars of the game. I played basketball at an Ivy League college, in high school and in the driveways of my hometown, where children of my generation got the best education in sports there is: from each other.

Today I'm a lecturer, an occasional professional scout, a youth sports coach and an administrator. I'm the father of two sons who have played youth sports since first grade. These days I travel the country talking to parents, coaches and other youth sports administrators about what is wrong and how to give youth sports back to our children.

I also take what I have learned from the best people in physical education, sports science and child psychology. I apply their work to what is happening in the gyms and on the playing fields all over America. I travel to wherever schools and sports organizations can find a room. I look parents and coaches right in the eye and tell them much of what they are doing IS wrong. Not only can the youth sports systems controlling our children's lives ruin their fun, but also they often deny individual children fair opportunities to reach their full potential through excessive use of elite teams. With the cruelest irony, these systems can rob us of young athletes who, had they been given a fair chance as children, might have been terrific players as high school seniors or as adults.

### **The Need for Real Change in Youth Sports**

There are frankly though way too many serious youth sports issues that have been well documented in the major media over the past 10 to 15 years. These include recent articles in Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report, The New York Times, research publications by many organizations such as National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS), and books including *Just Let the Kids Play* (co-authored by Bob Bigelow) and *Reforming Sports: Before the Clock Runs Out* (authored by Dr. Bruce Svare).

#### **Some of the more serious issues include:**

**ADULTS ARE FOCUSED FAR TOO MUCH ON WINNING AT THE EXPENSE OF MEETING CHILDREN'S NEEDS.** Most children are simply concerned with playing and having fun. A landmark 1992 study of 26,000 children by Michigan State University's Institute for the Study of Youth Sports showed kids put fun, socialization and learning new skills as the top reasons for playing. Winning is secondary in importance. Programs that overly emphasize performance and winning put greater pressures on youngsters, and can lead to high drop out rates.

**PARENTS AND COACHES OFTEN BEHAVE IN INAPPROPRIATE AND EVEN DOWNRIGHT ABUSIVE WAYS.** The over-emphasis on winning can cause parents to worry excessively about their children's performance, coaches and referees to yell at each other about calls and at the kids, and even lead to outright violence and abuse.

**CHILDREN ARE OVER-SPECIALIZING AT EVER YOUNGER AGES.** Today, kids who play the same sport risk over-use injuries as the same muscles and joints are used continuously. Pediatric groups report an alarming five-fold or more increase over the past decade in joint, muscle and tendon injuries, and the associated surgeries that are often needed to correct these.

#### **Understanding the Root Causes Provides the Direction for Change**

The root cause is simply too many adults who watch, or are actively involved in youth sports, experience the tension of watching their children perform "on stage" every week. They eagerly hope their child will perform well and succeed (and what parent doesn't), and dread that their child may fail. Parents experience strong and natural parental emotions, in the context of their children in a competitive situation. This often brings to the surface the innate and intense emotions many parents (and parent coaches) feel on behalf of the most precious things in their world, their kids. This is specifically based on my review and analysis of Dr. Shane Murphy's recent watershed book, *"The Cheers and the Tears"*.

I believe that simply overlaying a “veneer” of training and behavior pledges does not reduce the primal feelings that occur as parents and coaches see their children “on stage”. This very consideration is absolutely crucial to identifying the real solution! Rather than “Band-Aid” fixes, the solution lies in changing the way youth sports programs are run. The current focus on using competitive adult sports models for kids is just not in their best interests. More games, tournaments and play-offs do not make for better kids’ sports. More emphasis on learning new skills, participation, fun and *properly managed* competition is what will best meet children’s needs and keep them coming back!

### **The Fundamental Problems in Youth Sports Call for New Solutions**

The vast majority of today’s efforts to improve youth sports involve educating parents, coaches, and administrators, with the hope that education will change behavior. While of value, I believe changes must be made to the *very way youth programs are structured* – that is, by changing the very play models.

This is based on the continued proliferation of problems in the face of over 20 years worth of education and training programs, my review of numerous studies conducted by key youth sports researchers, and pilot programs that I have been involved with. These all provide very insightful perspectives on why parents and coaches become over-involved in youth sports and what the real solutions must be.

I truly believe that by actually changing the way youth sports programs are structured, that adults’ underlying emotions will be minimized, and much of the resulting over-involvement will disappear. In addition, the kids will learn better skills and have more fun!

**My Mission – Improve Youth Sports Participation, Positive Learning and FUN!**