



### **Every ball in the air, all the time: That's youth sports**

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Listen up, youth sports coaches: Out there on the field, rink or track, you are developing the next leaders of the free world. Got a barracuda basketball player? Think Sarah Palin. A gifted all-around athlete whose grades aren't so good? A future Joe Biden. Feel no pressure.

Seriously. You know how St. John's University coach John Gagliardi instructs his football players to lay on the gridiron and gaze at the sky?

It works. On his way to the best record in NCAA Division III history, "Gags" -- that Minnesota maverick -- developed many leaders, including at least one who is now coaching a presidential campaign. He did this without scholarships and without beating his players down, all in an hour and a half after classes and before dinner with his family.

But the stakes in youth sports are far higher than they are in NCAA, where only about 2 percent of today's high school athletes will ever play. Like Gags, you do what you do because you want your players to be great leaders, too: of families, communities and corporations, if not the country.

You know that the chubby preteen in short shorts and tall socks might someday be a Barack Obama-style visionary with the promise to unify Team America against special interests and lead a rush to big-picture solutions before our national well-being is crushed. Or she might be a John McCain-like independent willing to throw a few hip checks to try to stop cultural breakaways that threaten our national security, such as when McCain cosponsored legislation with Biden to halt steroid use in Major League Baseball so high school players wouldn't follow its lead.

Coach Gags didn't waste time explaining what kinesiologists, pediatricians and psychologists scramble to articulate: that to develop their full potential, successful athletes need lots of practice, few tournaments, plenty of free time to play pickup games with neighborhood kids, and enough rest to protect their developing bodies and discover their own potential while gazing at the sky visualizing themselves as next Olympian athlete or president of the United States.

Gags got some help from the NCAA, which forces student athletes to take one day off per week, usually Sunday. As does the Minnesota State High School League.

But youth sport coaches aren't getting much help. They are forced to juggle the full-court agendas and presidential-scale politics of a hypercompetitive culture in which anxious parents, referendum-needing schools, budget-justifying communities and profit-driven businesses bombard coaches with demands for more play, more tournaments and more wins. Often for free, in their spare time. Reaching the real goal of developing fit future leaders on this playing field would take a miracle.

You know how Minnesota's Herb Brooks, the visionary coach of the 1980 Team U.S.A. Olympic hockey team, took a bunch of undiscovered, unpolished rink rats to take on a better-trained Soviet Union team? It was the

Miracle on Ice.

But Brooks wanted his legacy to be far bigger than one historic game. Deeply disturbed by the excesses of youth hockey, Brooks started a grass-roots campaign against the lose-lose strategy of what he called "doing too much, too soon, for too few players." He knew that overcoached, overworked players don't win in hockey or in life, and neither do the many more kids who end up underengaged because their families can't keep up with the full-on demands.

Some believe that the hypercompetitive youth sports culture will crash and burn soon. Others believe coaches aren't smart enough to know this -- or worse, in their drive to win at all costs, they are the problem and they don't care. This thinking misses the reality of the many coaches who increasingly recognize the signs: unmotivated players, increasing and earlier repetitive-use injuries and, in some sports, declining registrations. Some maverick coaches are already trying to change the course.

Few believe that even intelligent, caring and brave coaches have what it takes to fix the imbalance in youth sports. They underestimate the determination and vision of coaches -- who are precisely the ones who can.

It would help if parents, schools, communities and sports marketers would stop the full-court press. But Minnesota coaches can't wait. The stakes are too high. It's time to lead a dodge and duck around the obstacles to give overscheduled players a break and underscheduled kids a chance. In other words: Make a miracle happen. And when it does, Minnesota will win big again. The prize will be the success of the future leaders of our world. Minnesota youth sports coaches: How about making some history?

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