



THE SUNDAY OKLAHOMAN

September 08, 2002, Sunday CITY EDITION

SECTION: EDITORIAL; POINT OF VIEW

HEADLINE: Keeping teens involved in sports

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NOW that Labor Day has passed, the autumn youth sports season will begin, and that means thousands more disillusioned teenagers nationwide. These are the boys and girls excluded from local programs or humiliated as bench-warmers.

Earlier this summer, a 14-year-old from a nearby town told me he wanted to join our ice hockey program this fall. He has given up soccer because he and his parents see the handwriting on the wall after two years of bench-warming for coaches paid to develop the top players. His town maintains sports programs open to all elementary school students, but teenagers have only "select" teams or the high school varsity or junior varsity.

Being washed up at 14 is tough. My young visitor questioned me about our hockey program's open-enrollment policy. "You mean, you let everybody play?" "Nobody gets cut?" "Nobody warms the bench?"

In the 1960s, my friends and I would have been astonished if local sports programs turned us away. Today, many kids are astonished when local programs let them play.

Programs controlled by adults have replaced the sandlot and playground choose-up games children once organized for themselves. This "adultification" of children's sports has created a youth-league pyramid. Like any pyramid, the strength is at the middle and bottom, not the top. Select teams are fine for the few top players, but communities fail their youth when they deny equal opportunity for the 80 percent of players lower on the pyramid.

"Equal opportunity" means enrolling every child who wants to play. It means letting children compete against opponents of roughly the same ability level, with select teams for the more experienced players and open teams for the others. It also means guaranteeing meaningful playing time because bench-warming cheats children, who deserve fairness from the adults in their lives.

I know the nearby town whose sports programs shut out most teens like the ex-soccer player who visited me. The local newspaper regularly complains about high levels of teenage drug and alcohol use. The connection is no coincidence. Teens need to "belong," and they seek out peer groups. Nobody should be surprised when many teens shut out of team sports begin running with the wrong crowd. Or when teens denied the chance to "turn on" to sports turn on to something else, often drugs and alcohol.

Until adults stop taking children's sports away from children, we will all be the losers.