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Emphasizing Sportsmanship in Youth Sport

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Emphasizing Sportsmanship in Youth Sport

**Abstract**
This essay will examine the shift in cultural norms and social expectations surrounding youth sport and how emphases on sportsmanship in youth sport programs can help salvage some of the wholesome values sought after by parents when signing up their children into sport leagues. There is no major overhaul in sight for youth sport organization and certainly little desire to eliminate sports from the young lives of boys and girls across the country, so how can we work to extend some of the virtues of sport craved by parents for their kids? By emphasizing sportsmanship.

**Disciplines**
Sports Studies

**Comments**
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Emphasizing Sportsmanship in Youth Sport

TODD HARRISON

A quick internet search of youth sport leads to a mixture of links promoting youth programming, governing bodies and many stories proclaiming the ills afflicting the games these organizations are producing and protecting. Stories of out of control parents, abusive coaches and demanding schedules are discussed (and complained about) around dinner tables and water coolers yet youth sport participation continues to increase. In 2000, the number of American youth between 6- and 17-years old who played on at least one organized sport team was 54 percent; a number that jumped to 59 percent in a similar study completed five years later looking at a group of kids between ages 10 and 17 (Woods 2011). Similarly, the Sports and Fitness Industry Association (SFIA) completed a study examining youth participation trends and interests and pegged the 2011 participation rate of kids between ages 6 and 17 at 21.47 million kids (Kelley and Carchia 2013).

With all of this attention, and money, being given to organized sport by parents across America, a set of questions arise:

• Why are children so quickly placed into youth sport programs?
• Ideally, how does participation in these games assist in youth development?
• Are the youth sport organizations around the country meeting the needs of their participants?

Discussion of these queries will be advanced in coming sections but there are a number of statistics that focus on the third question and the answers are not often positive. The National Alliance for Sports has reported that while 20 million kids register each year to play hockey, football, baseball, soccer and other competitive sports, 70 percent of them will quit playing these sports by age 13. From burnout and lack of fun, to injuries and attention given to sports, the reasons for dropping out are many. Most of the attention from scholars and practitioners is given to the impact youth sport has on children and this essay will further that examination.

Elena Delle Donne, the 6'5" star of the WNBA’s Chicago Sky, hardly looks like a poster-child for the intensity of youth sport success, as she racks up accolades on the court in America’s only professional women’s basketball league. However, the WNBA’s 2013 Rookie of the Year left the University of Connecticut two days after arriving on campus. She was burned out from basketball after years of camps, summer leagues, AAU
tournaments, high school seasons and other showcases. The pressure on one of the most highly touted women’s basketball recruits ever led her to return to Delaware and a spot on the University of Delaware’s volleyball team, where she excelled before returning to the basketball court after a year absence (Longman 2008). But how does this story speak to sportsmanship? The intensity of Elena’s pre–18 years old basketball experiences speaks to the historical trend of ratcheted expectations of kids across the country, whether they are the best player in the country or trying to earn a spot on a high school football team.

This essay will examine the shift in cultural norms and social expectations surrounding youth sport and how emphases on sportsmanship in youth sport programs can help salvage some of the wholesome values sought after by parents when signing up their children into sport leagues. There is no major overhaul in sight for youth sport organization and certainly little desire to eliminate sports from the young lives of boys and girls across the country, so how can we work to extend some of the virtues of sport craved by parents for their kids? By emphasizing sportsmanship.

How Did We Get to Today?

Belief is widespread that participation in sport, especially among youth, contributes to development physically (through enhancement of motor skills and fitness) and emotionally/socially (increase in self-confidence, self-image or character development). Through the mid–1800s nearly all youth-focused activity engaged in by American youth was through informal play and recreation but that changed in the post–Civil War era (Wiggins 2013). After 1865, youth sport programs primarily serving boys were developed and managed by religious groups, who were the pillars of local communities and were worried that modern life was being made too easy by industrial development and technological advancements.

By 1920, more of the nation lived in urban areas than anywhere else and the number of highly organized, adult-directed youth sport programs exploded. Many of these programs were led by private organizations that existed separate from education centers and proclaimed a desire to support the development of local youth. Instead they laid the seeds for a “competition culture” so pervasive in those youth sport critiques discussed in the essay introduction (Wiggins 2013).

Through the middle of the 20th century, there was a tug-of-war between the private organizations seeking to extend their development of the baby boom generation and professional health and physical educators who fought to pass legislation condemning overspecialization, an overemphasis on competition and poor coaching which was often provided by fathers of team members. There was a growing sentiment within the country linking the growing competitive economy to the youth sports fields where kids (still mostly male) could earn valuable lessons for later in life.

Formal versus Informal Play

After cultural shifts present themselves, researchers often scurry to gain an understanding of decisions being made, and the youth sport debate has been one framed and reframed by scholars for decades, especially since the late 1970s. What emerged, almost immediately, was a conceptualization of the rise of organized sport as a zero-sum com-
petitor to informal play and the debate regarding child development has grown almost entirely within the confines of a one or the other framework. Work is being done by sport scholars like Bowers and Green (2013) that attempts to view youth sport through the combined experiences within structured environments and unstructured settings that offer a more accurate look at how individual participants are being impacted by sport.

Within this section of the essay an attempt is made to paint a picture of both components of a child's sport experience separately, and there is no intention to paint either formal or informal play as free of problems or carrying all of the problems. While informal play may, in many cases, lead to relatively even teams and allow kids to remedy disagreements, there are certainly many instances of bullying, physical altercations and dissent. Without adult supervision to manage dominant personalities or observe social pecking orders, there is an environment capable of excluding unwanted members and being difficult for kids to be in. Likewise, formal play has provided children a forum to participate in peer interactions and to become a part of an extra-familial group, but has also pushed children towards specialization and led to burnout. Here is a quick overview of both sides of the discussion:

Informal play creates an environment of creativity where participants must reach an agreement on what to play, how to play it and what rules will be used to govern the activity if the game is to even be started. Delaney and Madigan (2009) described the significant characteristics of informal sport as

- activity that is player-controlled;
- activity that involves action, especially that which leads to scoring opportunities;
- activity that maximizes personal involvement in the sport;
- spontaneity of play; that is, the plays do not come from a pre-written “playbook”;
- no referees, the youth work out disputes for themselves;
- a close score and relatively even teams, which lead to a competitive sporting activity;
- activity can end at any time, even if it is just because the kids are bored of playing or they are called to dinner;
- opportunities to reaffirm friendships through participation in the sporting activity; and
- seldom impacts the total family life—family schedules are not adjusted so that youths can participate in informal play.

Youth desire to be permitted the freedom to play with little adult interference can be seen in the increase in exposure to extreme/alternative sports. Skateboarding, inline skating and snowboarding have all made marked advancements in participant numbers over the last two decades (600 percent increase since 1990) and led to multiple annual X-Games competitions celebrating the best athletes in those activities. Communities around the country heeded the calls from their local youth and are working to find a balanced use of public spaces that meet the needs of the skaters and will remain viable for a reasonable length of time but also don’t infringe too much on the rest of their residents who see skateboarding and bicycling as a hindrance.

Coakley (2009) outlined five changes that were important to the growth of organized youth sports over the last 50 years. They included

- number of families with both parents working outside the home has increased dramatically;
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• since 1980’s major cultural shift on what it means to be a “good parent” changed to those who can account for their child’s whereabouts 24/7;
• growing belief that informal, child-controlled activities inevitably lead to trouble;
• increased media focus on fear-producing stories have led parents to view the world outside home as a dangerous place; and
• visibility of high performance and professional sports has increased people’s awareness of organized competitive sports as a valued part of culture.

Each of these cultural developments has pushed youth sport away from backyard play where children often play with family members, neighbors or close friends and control the games without intervention from adults. Sport specific organizations like the Little League and Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) have filled that void, recruiting participants as early as age 5, with other programs organizing kids into sports at the age of three. Mike Wagner, Todd Jones and Jill Riepenhoff from the Columbus Dispatch researched the tax returns from groups affiliated with youth sports and reported that the industry saw $5 billion pass through its accounts in 2009, a clear indication of the number of parents who register their kids for formal sport leagues and fully adhere to the trends cited by Coakley earlier in the section.

A consequence, intended or not, of this progression toward formalization is that socio-economic status has furthered its encroachment into the youth development equation. Children from lower-income households are not able to participate at the same rate and notably begin youth sport later in their childhood than those from affluent families. If the household income rises above $100,000, a child’s mean age at entry into organized/team sports is 6.3, with that age rising to 8.1 when the child is born into a family making less than $35,000 per year (Sabo 2009).

Recent Trends

While the 50-year relationship between formal and informal play has swung toward organized programming, there have been a number of trends over the last 20 years that have impacted the emphasis sportsmanship and other “character developments” are given to American youth during their formative sporting experiences. Two of these movements deserve more attention as they are indicative of a cultural shift away from the development of the whole child and toward the development of an athlete. They are the privatization of youth sports as a whole and the specialization of the individuals participating in those programs. Both of these trends are related in many ways and the resulting environment created in many cases de-emphasizes lessons like sportsmanship and are the primary focus of youth sport reformers.

Privatization

Compounding that widening income gap of youth sport participants is the movement toward private or commercial sport organizations. While youth sports may have their organizational roots within religious groups and continued through municipal recreation departments, tightening budgets and the desire by parents for the “best” for their children have led to a recipe of private coaches, physical trainers, top-flight equipment and exclusive travel teams that create a system of financial haves and have nots.
Through the 1970s much of the nation's youth sport programming occurred within the municipal recreation department or was associated with the religiously-affiliated groups that started the organized youth sport movement. However, in the 1980s local governments were forced to make budgeting decisions as their state and federal funds began to dry up. Among the first cuts were ancillary programs like youth sports (Coakley 2009). Into this vacuum filled private organizations, some started by groups of parents and others by entrepreneurs seizing an opportunity. From these early clubs have evolved a smorgasbord of private coaches, highly-selective teams, and strength trainers all playing to a parent's desire to offer for their child what the media, their neighbors and other influencers say are important.

Privatization is an extension of the trend toward more formalized sport and exacerbates the same economic and ethnic problems discussed briefly above. Trainers, coaches and programs all come at a cost and the reduction in publically-funded programs tilts the tables away from the disadvantaged.

**Specialization**

One connection that is not often discussed but plays a role is the impact the prospect of paying for college has on parents' decision-making for their children. Higher education is becoming the national standard, with nearly 90 percent of students hoping to attend college and 75 percent of high school graduates furthering their studies (Ramaley and Leskes 2002). With this trend toward increased college attendance comes increased competition for college acceptances and scholarships. Students must find ways to set themselves apart from their peers, either through academics, community involvement, or sports in order to gain entrance to their desired college. Once and if they make it through admissions, many must find a way to pay the costly tuition. While parents can often help with the burden, most students must still take out loans, work during college, receive grants, earn academic scholarships, or win athletic scholarships.

Many families and students anticipate the expense of tuition and hope to get scholarships, which are very desirable among college-bound students. Many concentrate on obtaining academic scholarships, while others work towards athletic scholarships, often specializing in one sport at an early age with hopes to succeed in high school and to be recruited for college. According to Tom Fakehany, a board chair of the Collegiate Volleyball Officiating Association, early specialization is increasing largely because it is thought to improve the athlete's chances of receiving a collegiate athletic scholarship (1995). Athletes desire to specialize in order to gain more exposure to the sport and to become more advanced more quickly (Susanj and Stewart n.d.).

**From Youth Sport History and Trends to Sportsmanship**

Up to this point, the focus has been on the organizational structures, cultural trends and history of youth sport. Embedded in each of these topics are the impact sport plays in a child's character development and the role sportsmanship plays as part of that development. However, almost from its outset the relationship between sportsmanship and athletics has been cloudy, with the balance between winning and competition and "behavior of a sportsperson" sometimes running at odds (Hinkle Smith 2008). With a review
of youth sport history in our rearview mirror, showing a landscape growing in competitive intensity, the role that an emphasis on sportsmanship plays on youth teams and in gyms and rinks across the country is unclear. The rest of this essay will examine how an emphasis on sportsmanship can play an important role in the sport experience of kids across the country, the challenges a more sportsmanlike field of play face and a specific look at the primary stakeholders who have the ability to create an environment more conducive to the development of sportsmanship.

Sportsmanship as Part of Character Development

Sportsmanship, character development, moral development and training in ethics are all terms to describe the merits of sport participation. However there is plenty of work available questioning whether sports inherently build character and may, perhaps, lead to negative youth development. Many of these observations arise from the difficulty in empirically verifying the “sport builds character” hypothesis which leaves researchers with a handful of anecdotes that link sports and character but do not rule out whether the character traits were already evident in the participants prior playing or why others who display strong character qualities have never played sport before (Sage 2013).

Two social psychologists, David Light Shields and Brenda Light Bredemeier, focused much of their research on the link between character development and sports, and coaches’ and teammates’ influence on children's social development within sport. They stated in their 1995 piece that research does not support either position in the debate over sport building character. If any conclusion is justified, it is that the question as posed is too simplistic. The term character is vague.... More important, sport experience is far from uniform ... the social interactions that are fostered by the sport experience ... varies from sport to sport, from team to team, from one geographical region to another, from one level of competition to another, and so on [p. 178].

The authors continued to discuss their view on the overall importance sport plays in the development of moral character by adding sportspersonship as one of the four virtues of moral character as listed by Shields and Bredemeier (1995). The four virtues include: compassion, fairness, sportspersonship and integrity.

Shields and Bredemeier support the discussion running through this essay that by emphasizing sportsmanship, as part of a focus on a holistic development of youth by sport programs, the greater the likelihood of those children emerging from those experiences as stronger citizens. Coaches and teammates influence children's social development within sport (Coakley 2004; Wylleman 2000); while also playing a key role in whether those children enter or withdraw from participating in sports (Rottensteiner, Laakso, Pihala and Konttinen 2013). As such, a significant amount of influence is laid on these two groups and defining sportsmanship is centered on the pair.

No cut-and-dried definition of sportsmanship has been agreed upon by those who study the topic; however five dimensions have been proposed by experts in child development and sociology and to these scholars, positive sportsmanship should include athletes’ and coaches’ respect and concern for

- one's full commitment toward sport;
- the rules and officials;
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• the opponent;
• the social conventions; and
• avoidance of negative approach toward sport participation [Vallerand et al. 1996; Vallerand et al. 1997].

While the coaches and players are most central to how sportsmanship is conveyed, the way in which sport is structured and framed by all with a hand in the child’s sport experience directly impacts their overall development. Next attention is shifted to the sources of sportsmanship modeling, looking at ways an emphasis on sportsmanship can influence youth development and the overall sporting experience.

Sources of Sportsmanship Modeling

Character development values taught within organized youth sports are not just presented to children through a play diagram or YouTube video. Behaviors are modeled and taught by three primary youth sport stakeholders who work together (sometimes the same person plays multiple roles) and is where an emphasis on sportsmanship as part of a coherent strategy has the potential to reverse the trends of unsportsmanlike behavior seen at all ages of sport. These three groups are supported by many others like referees, who have a vast amount of control on every aspect of the contest and can mitigate the emotion pushed forth by overzealous coaches or parents and enforce the norms of the game with the participants (Arthur-Banning, Paisley and Wells 2007). Here is an examination of those stakeholders (League/Organizational Administrators, Coaches, Parents) and how they influence the assimilation of sportsmanlike actions into a child’s everyday behavior pattern.

League/Organizational Administrators

While parents, coaches and referees may have a hand in emphasizing, or deemphasizing, sportsmanship day to day, the broader organizational structure in which those practices and games are held sets the culture dictating the actions of the other influencers. Duda, Olson and Templin (1991) and Duda and White (1992) examined the relationships between the goals of a sport program and the sportsmanship shown by its participants. The closer a program was to a win-at-all-costs mentality, the greater the unsportsmanlike attitudes such as cheating and using deception to gain an advantage. Alternatively, as the orientation of the program gravitated towards skill and performance improvement, a positive correlation was found with ethical attitudes toward sport.

This research supports Achievement Goal Theory which posits that individuals will possess different meanings that they attach to a particular context and different goals they try to accomplish when faced with making decisions and behavioral choices in a given situation (Lemyre, Roberts, and Ommundsen 2002). More specifically, there are two major goals that guide behavior, ego involvement and task involvement. As they relate to sportsmanship, the more a person is disposed to ego involvement as a goal, the more likely he or she is to view a game as win-at-all-costs, while a task involved athlete participates for the intrinsic benefits and seeks skill development. For adults, our behaviors are likely set and we see games as competitive or not, but youth, for whom sport is
a focal point of their personal development, are much more malleable. Whether the camp or league or team they are playing on is constructed with an eye toward development or toward competition holds great influence over whether that child will see sport as a long-term competitive outlet or as a part of their lifelong development. An emphasis from a camp director or league administrator to their subordinates on the importance of development and sportsmanlike behavior sets the cultural tone of that program and the other influential stakeholder groups are likely to adhere to those boundaries.

Coaches

For many children, their youth sport experiences are modeled by coaches who have not undergone formal training. In fact, less than 20 percent of the 2-4 million "little league" coaches and less than 8 percent of high school coaches have received formal training (Merkel 2013). Coaches who have undergone proper training have been schooled in cognitive development and use of age-appropriate methods, including the balance of competitiveness and development. Using the 2005-2006 Women's Sport Foundation data cited in Kelley and Carchia (2013), 39 percent of boys and 38 percent of girls indicated they quit playing sports because they were not having fun and 22 percent of boys and 18 percent of girls quit because they did not get along with the coach. Additionally, while sport administrators and parents continue to emphasize their desire that coaches exhibit and require sportsmanship, coaches (who are often parents of a player) have been found to be unaware that their actions in the heat of competition could be construed as unsportsmanlike (Barton and Stewart 2005; Stewart 1997; Smith and Smoll 1997).

Much of the foundation for coaching education is built on the Arizona Sports Summit Accord (Stewart 2014). In the agreement, emphasis was given to the need for coaches in training to attain specific skills, including a basic knowledge of the character-building aspects of sport and methods of teaching and enforcing the core values of sportsmanship and good character. Martens (2012) stated that one of the primary functions of a coach is to teach athletes moral and ethical behavioral alternatives, and trained coaches are prepared to instill those lessons in their players, but what about a system where the vast majority of coaches are untrained? This is where the organization and administrators play a vital role in supporting their coaches. Be it through communication with parents, modeling to kids or providing information and training for coaches, the various conduits to the athletes are all important to support coaches who spend 11 hours a week with their teams (Hedstrom and Gould 2004).

Parents

Parents shape their children's psychological development through their involvement in their child's athletic experience, be it as a driver, coach or supporter in the stands (Cote and Hay 2002). Substantial literature suggests that behaviors demonstrated by the significant person in a child's life have a great impact on that person's behavior. Thus, how a parent emphasizes and reinforces winning or skill development can have a major effect on what a child deems as success in sports (Hedstrom and Gould 2004). As such, theory proposes that children's sportsmanship behaviors are correlated to those of their parents (Arthur-Banning, Wells, Baker, and Hegreness 2009).

Parental inclination toward ego or task involvement rubs off on their children, which
in turn impacts the anxiety felt by the kids before and after games. Scanlan and Lewthwaite (1984) indicated that “prematch worries about failure and perceived parental pressure to participate” were predictors of pre-match stress (p. 208). Similarly Hellstedt’s (1988) study on parental pressure on young ski racers found that those who perceived their parents as supportive and positive had more positive reactions to sport participation.

Connections between parental views/actions and the behaviors exhibited by their children are probably the strongest support for the impact an emphasis on sportsmanship can have on youth development. Again, message symmetry between all of these stakeholders toward competition versus development and reinforcing sportsmanship’s place in that relationship is vitally important for it to reach its intended target.

Examples of Good and Bad Sportsmanship

To finalize this overview, it is important to draw these broader, theoretical discussions into examples of bad and good sportsmanship happening across the country. Each of the discussed stakeholders have done right by the children in their care as well as acted in ways that hinder their development and experience. This section will outline one specific occurrence from the last few years where coaches, parents, administrators and referees each demonstrated what happens when youth sport goes wrong as well as when its virtues are accented.

When Youth Sports Go Wrong

Unfortunately, there are plenty of examples to pull from where those in charge of youth sport development have acted in ways that put winning and their own personal interests ahead of the children they are leading. Many of these examples have been thrust into the media spotlight, which has influenced some of these decisions by sensationalizing the win-at-all-costs attitude seen here.

Administrators. The month of August in 2014 saw a group of kids from the South Side of Chicago capture the attention of the country as the Jackie Robinson West team won the Little League U.S. Championship. What was supposedly a celebration of a group of kids from disadvantaged backgrounds overcoming the odds turned into a story of corrupt decision-making when a February 2015 announcement stripped the team of its wins for utilizing players from outside the club’s jurisdiction. It was determined that administrators from Jackie Robinson West falsified the boundaries of their territory, leading the President and CEO of Little League International Mr. Stephen D. Keener to say, “This is a heartbreaking decision. What these players accomplished on the field and the memories and lessons they have learned during the Little League World Series tournament is something the kids can be proud of, but it is unfortunate that the actions of adults have led to this outcome” (Little League 2015).

This decision came 13 years after another Little League team from the Bronx was stripped of their championships for using an overaged player. They are two of dozens of similar stories where grown men and women push the limits of, and exceed, rules and regulations in place to ensure fair play and a level playing field. With the desire to win so great that administrators are cheating to accomplish their goals, one can imagine the pressure placed on the shoulders of the players.
Coaches. Part of any coach's job is to create a strategy that helps put their team into a position to win. Two Tennessee high school teams were banned from participation in the postseason for deliberately trying to lose in order to earn a more favorable seeding (Branch 2015). With a game against the defending state champion awaiting the winner, Riverdale High School and Smyrna High School started the game with their backups on the floor. From there, players on both sides passed the ball around with little to no intent to score and when Smyrna's players were instructed to foul to give Riverdale free-throw opportunities, the Riverdale player purposely missed them. Finally, the referees called the coaches together in the third quarter after a player on Smyrna tried to shoot at the wrong basket and then notified the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association of his experience which lead to the ultimate decision.

Parents. In probably the most publicized story centered on youth sport-related violence, Thomas Junta attacked and killed his 10-year old son's hockey coach Michael Costin in July 2000. After complaining that the youth hockey practice his son was playing in was too rough and Costin responding that hockey was a tough game, Junta rushed Costin in front of the team and hit the coach mercilessly, rupturing an artery in his neck, causing death. Junta was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and has long been the example of extreme parental behavior.

While the example is heinous and sensational in its violence, overzealous youth sport parent stories can be found throughout the media. They range from verbal assaults of parents on their children, coaches and referees as well as threats of legal action against coaches for decisions made and parent vs. parent fights on the sideline of games around the country. Every story of parental fanatical behavior clouds the impact sport can have on youth development and hinders the role of sportsmanship has in that process.

When Youth Sports Go Right

As the normal sport cycle has grown to a never ending, 24/7 race for the next big headline, attention has been swung wildly to stories with negative angles. As such, what is read in newspapers and on websites, and seen on television broadcasts are often those events that are out of the ordinary, i.e., unsportsmanlike behaviors. What isn't shown often enough on SportsCenter and others like it are the everyday sporting acts of decency and the extraordinary events that clearly support the view of sport acting as a character development tool. Below are a handful of real-life examples where youth sport went right.

Administrators. In 1991 a group of local volunteers in Harlem sought an opportunity to engage local youth in sport and allow the inner-city youth to learn the value of teams by offering them opportunities to play and learn. Almost 25 years later, Harlem RBI has a budget of $2.7 million and has evolved to include programs like literacy camps, a regular newsletter and mentoring options (Berlin, et.al. 2007). Harlem RBI's program has many of the principal elements discussed earlier in this essay as vital to maximizing youth development. They include:

- Youth are engaged over many years, not on a seasonal or ad hoc basis;
- programs are group based, providing a support network among peers.
- there are low adult-to-youth ratios, fostering connections between youth and caring role models;
- well-trained staff and volunteers ensure high-quality programming; and
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• expectations for all participants, no matter their personal circumstances are high [Berlin et al. 2007].

The results of the structure provided by these elements are impressive. Harlem RBI set out in 2001 to create benchmarks and evaluate the results of their programs. Here is what they found:

• 86 percent of participants of the reading program maintained their reading levels through the summer;
• 92 percent of the kids reading program reported they read more and enjoyed reading more;
• 75 percent improved their ability to praise, motivate and support their peers; and
• average length of engagement with program was 3.9 years [Berlin et al. 2007].

These numbers, and the program as a whole, demonstrate sports ability to create measurable change in youth behaviors and attitudes if organized and supported well with an emphasis on developmental outcomes, not those on the field.

Coaches. On many occasions, when opposing teams reach a friendly agreement there are improprieties involved, but a 2009 interaction between St. Joseph Benton and Maryville High Schools in Missouri led to a shining example of sportsmanship. After running across the field to talk to his counterpart during a timeout late in the game with his team down 46–0, Maryville coach Dan McCamy inserted a player on his team with Down Syndrome into the contest. Matt Ziesel, who hadn't participated in full-contact drills in practice but had been part of the Maryville team, entered the game, received the handoff, and with the St. Joseph Benton players suppressing their own stats to assist with creating a lifelong memory, ran 60 yards untouched for a touchdown.

The play made headlines and there were many people who were critical of the play, but the emphasis placed by both coaches on the experience and development of their players instead of with the final score epitomizes sportsmanlike action.

Parents. In a story not shown much attention through the media, fans of the Vanguard College Preparatory School in Texas attended their boys basketball game with Gainesville State School wearing the black and white colors of Gainesville State rather than the normal green and white of Vanguard. Beyond the team color switch, these patrons cheered for Gainesville State, a correctional facility whose players were not going to have anyone cheering for them at the game. The movement was generated by a couple of Vanguard’s players who had discussed their desire to not play the game because of the lack of support enjoyed by the Gainesville players and their belief that this wasn’t fair (Branch 2015).

After the contest, Gainesville’s coach spoke of how little support and encouragement his players receive at games and was very gracious and appreciative of the gesture. While a seemingly minute story, the actions of the players and parents of Vanguard speak to the impact an emphasis on sportsmanship can have long-term and how positively modeled behaviors impact youth development.

Conclusion

Youth sport is a topic under great scrutiny as more becomes known of the impacts on society’s increased attention on organized play, winning and specialization among
under-18 kids. Many parents see sports as a means to enhance the physical, emotional and social development of their children and an emphasis on participation and sportsmanship have the potential to meet those parental expectations when signing up their child. However, cultural momentum has trended toward power and performance sports and ego involvement with a prevailing goal on winning rather than that development.

While there are many stories out there chronicling un sportsmanlike behavior, those examples tend to be enflamed by the media and significant research demonstrates those with experiences in sport as youth are equipped with leadership and social skills valuable in an array of careers. How well organizations, their administrators, coaches and referees, as well as the parents of the children model positive sporting behaviors, including sportsmanship, is of great importance to maximizing youth sport's value.

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