

Good Game

How parents can forge character from competition

BY MATT ALDERTON

“When did sports stop being fun?” If your child plays sports, you’ve probably asked yourself that very question. Perhaps after your 5-year-old’s soccer game, when you saw a father berating his son for his lack of hustle. Maybe during your teenage daughter’s high school basketball game, when you realized the mom next to you was literally foaming at the mouth over an unpunished foul. Or possibly at your 12-year-old’s football game, when you witnessed a parental mob surround the losing team’s coach with invisible pitchforks.

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GETTY IMAGES

HELPFUL RESOURCE

Changing the Game offers practical tips for raising happy, well-adjusted athletes.



For Dr. Michael Austin, a philosophy professor at Eastern Kentucky University, the question surfaced in 2013, when recurrent violence — tripping, shoving, even punching — prompted the Kentucky State High School Athletic Association to recommend that schools cease organizing postgame handshake lines.

Although most schools continued the practice, the situation made Austin wonder what youth sports had become. “I thought, ‘This is just ridiculous; we’ve all got to calm down and think about what the point of all this is,’” says Austin, a high school soccer coach and father to three daughters, ages 18, 21 and 22, who each played youth sports.

“I’d seen so many players, parents and coaches doing disrespectful things, and it just really bothered me,” Austin says.

He isn’t alone. According to a 2014 survey by ESPNW and

the Aspen Institute’s Project Play, two-thirds of parents say they’re concerned that youth sports have become too focused on winning instead of having fun.

But it’s not just fun that’s at stake. It’s also fundamentals. “Sport is a great microcosm of life and a great place to develop children’s character,” says John O’Sullivan, author of *Changing the Game: The Parent’s Guide to Raising Happy, High-Performing Athletes and Giving Youth Sports Back to Our Kids*.

Indeed, all children who play sports can learn things like teamwork, respect, personal responsibility and discipline. Only a few, however — just 2 percent, according to the NCAA — will earn an athletic scholarship to compete in college.

“It’s not that performance and skill isn’t important — it is — but it’s only one piece of a really important puzzle,” says Dr. Jennifer Waldron, a professor of kinesiology and physical education at the University of Northern Iowa.

SETTING THE BAR

Parents who want to raise well-mannered athletes should consider how they behave when watching sports on TV with their children. Instead of cursing at quarterbacks and roaring at referees, try praising stellar sportsmanship when you see it. Here are three recent examples that set the behavioral bar for children and parents alike:



During this year’s March Madness, freshman Jordan Poole led the University of Michigan men’s basketball team to a miraculous victory when he sunk a deep three-point shot with only 3.6 seconds left in the game. In the midst of celebrating, Poole’s teammate, Mo Wagner, took a moment to console a member of the opposing team, the University of Houston’s Corey Davis Jr.



Britain’s Kyle Edmund was injured and fell to the ground in pain during a professional tennis match in January. His opponent, Bulgaria’s Grigor Dimitrov, immediately leapt over the net to offer his assistance.



At the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, cross-country skier German Madrazo of Mexico finished last in the 15-kilometer men’s freestyle event. Skiers from Colombia, Tonga, Morocco and Portugal embraced Madrazo and hoisted him onto their shoulders before gold medalist Dario Cologna of Switzerland offered him a personal congratulations and handshake — nearly 30 minutes after finishing himself.

— Matt Alderton

Leading by Example

Experts offer this advice for parents who value youth sports as a way to develop their child's athletic skills as well as their character:



Parents should model good character from the sidelines, according to Jim Thompson, founder and CEO of Positive Coaching Alliance, a nonprofit whose mission is to create a character-building youth sports culture.

"Be a fan," advises Thompson, who says parents should spend games cheering instead of jeering. "Parents should be 'noticers.' Notice the good things your kids are doing and comment on them. Notice the good things his or her teammates are doing. Notice the good things the coach is doing. And for extra credit, notice the good things the other team is doing. A parent said to me once that his goal at the end of every game was for nobody to know which team his daughter was on because he'd cheered for good plays by both teams. I thought that was really beautiful."

Note the difference between cheering and steering, too.

"Screaming instructions from the sideline doesn't help; it just confuses them," author John O'Sullivan says. "Also, it takes away their chance to learn. We don't go to their math test and yell at them to carry the one, and we shouldn't do that in sports, either."



In postgame debriefs with children, emphasize how the game was played, not whether it was won.

"As parents, we are oftentimes the interpreters of the experiences our children have. When 'Did you win?' is the first question we ask after the game, we interpret that experience for the child in a way that makes them think winning is the most important thing," says professor Jennifer Waldron, who recommends withholding opinions about the game and instead asking open-ended questions like: What did you enjoy most about the game? What did your team do really well? How did you contribute to your team? What might you have done differently? "Now they start to understand that what matters is the amount of effort they put forth and whether they're improving," she says.



Leave coaching to coaches, Thompson advises. "There's two groups of people whose job is to win games: athletes and coaches," he says. "As a parent, you have a much more important job: helping your child become a better person."

How you behave toward coaches sets an important example. For instance, Thompson says you should avoid disparaging coaches in front of children so as not to undermine their ability to learn from them.

Professor Michael Austin, meanwhile, recommends waiting 24 hours to confront coaches when you're upset with them. "Otherwise," he says, "things just get heated."

Finally, parents must trust children to learn as much as they trust coaches to teach. "Don't be a helicopter who swoops in every time there's a difficult situation," O'Sullivan advises. "If your child isn't getting as much playing time as they want, don't yell at the coach. Ask them, 'What have you done to earn enough playing time?' ... Parents naturally want to protect their kids from failure. But adversity is part of life. Sports can help them learn how to deal with it."

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