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# Youth Sports: Boon or Bane?

by Paul Dubois

From their modest origins in the 1920s, out-of-school sport programs have become the dominant system of organized play for young people in the United States. Current estimates are that over 25 million youngsters are participating in some type of agency-sponsored sport program.

Despite their widespread popularity, youth sport programs have not escaped considerable controversy and criticism. Frequently heard concerns include the overemphasis on winning, the psychological stress placed on the child, orthopedic injuries caused by excessive training and playing, overzealous parents, and the number of dropouts from such programs. Not surprisingly, such concerns have generated a spate of research which has helped to create an increasing awareness that, when it comes to organized sports for young people, "what the ball is doing to the child" is at least as important as "what the child is doing to the ball".

This article will begin by outlining a framework for the analysis of youth sports programs. The framework will provide a context for the main body of the article which will consist of a review of research in the "what the ball is doing to the child" tradition. Finally, some concluding remarks will be made concerning how one might modify youth sport programs which do not yet fulfill the objective of providing optimal experiences for *all* their participants.

## A Conceptual Framework for Youth Sports Programs

Given the frequent criticism directed toward youth sports programs by sport scientists, one might conclude that they are in favor of their elimination. Such is not the case at all. Rather, what they *do* generally advocate is the substitution of professionalized or "product" oriented programs with more "process" oriented ones. In the context of sport, "process" and "product" are conceived as representing polar opposites of a competitive continuum. A product oriented program emphasizes:

- a) winning as an end in itself;
- b) the pursuit of prizes (trophies, jackets, money);



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- c) the seeking of adulation; and
  - d) the dehumanization of one's opponent: the opponent is viewed as an object, an obstacle to overcome.
- On the other hand, the emphasis in a process oriented program is on:
- a) participating as an end in itself;
  - b) striving for personal (and team) excellence;
  - c) an appreciation for the aesthetic in sport forms; and
  - d) an appreciation for and rapport with the opponent: the opponent is viewed as providing the necessary conditions to achieve a quality performance.

That youth sports programs often tilt toward the product end of the continuum is not surprising: a "product" program is based on professional sport, and it is professional sport that typically is the *only visible model available* to administrators and coaches of youth sports programs. Clearly, more systematic efforts must be made to create an awareness in youth sports leaders of the process end of the competitive continuum.

What of the athletes themselves? Are they in agreement with the so-

called sports programs? Research conducted by several scientists would indicate that they are. For example, let's look at some studies concerning the decision to become involved in sports. These studies found that the most important reasons for becoming involved in sports are to have fun, to improve skills, to become fit, to challenge oneself and to be part of a group. Research I recently conducted on two Massachusetts youth soccer programs provides similar findings. Although the two programs emphasized distinctive competitive orientations, the athletes in both programs were remarkably similar in terms of the relative ranking given to factors they considered important in their decision to participate in sports. As Table I indicates, the top five ranks of both programs include factors which reflect the "process" end of the continuum. Winning is relegated to the lower half of the ranking, particularly when it is considered in the context of unethical conduct.

In summary, it appears that "process" motives dominate the young athlete's decision to *become involved* in





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sports. Similarly, *dropping out* of organized sports is often a consequence of the athlete's perception that too little attention is paid to matters of "process." In a study of young swimmers, it was found that the most important reason for dropping out was to participate in other sports or activities. However, eight of the next nine reasons suggested the existence of a product oriented program philosophy and of coaches who placed an overemphasis on winning. A sampling of these reasons include: was not as good as I wanted to be; was not enough fun; did not like the pressure; did not like the coach. Similarly, Terry Orlick and John Pooley, two noted behavioral scientists, reported that 50% and 33%, respectively, of the child athlete drop-outs they studied withdrew because of the emphasis on winning.

### Physiological Effects of Participation

One of the most frequent criticisms of youth sports concerns the physiological stresses to which the young athletes are exposed. However, there is some question as to what are the most

common athletic related injuries among children and youth. After a rather extensive review of the literature, a recent article on this topic concluded that soft tissue injuries (e.g. contusions, lacerations), sprains and fractures "are a problem in youth sports participation." Other reports, however, have asserted that "overuse" injuries are the most prevalent. It may be that both points of view are correct: soft tissue injuries, sprains, etc. may be the most common *acute* injuries while overuse injuries, although perhaps less frequent, tend to be more *chronic* in nature and thus are potentially more debilitating in the long term.

An overuse injury is one that occurs in the joint area to tendons, ligaments and the epiphyseal plates of bones. The *direct* causes of such injuries are poor mechanics and repetitive stress on the joint. However, the likely *ultimate* cause is the institutionalized aspect of youth sports. That is, youth sports programs are often highly competitive (in order to meet the organizational goal of winning), and involve extensive practice sessions and playing schedules. Compounding the consequences of in-

stitutionalization are coaches without adequate training in conditioning and rehabilitation techniques and with the tendency to place winning and self aggrandizement ahead of the welfare of the child.

Data on emergency room visits in Massachusetts, which tend to reflect more serious injuries, provide a clearer picture of the incidence of injury among young athletes. Among youth 6-12 years old, sports injuries are the second leading cause of emergency room (ER) visits (21% of all visits); among those 13-19 years old, such injuries are the leading cause (31%) of all ER visits.

Another noteworthy Massachusetts statistic is the finding that 17% if *all* injuries to children and youth are related to sports and recreational activities. Leading offenders are those sports most frequently found among non-school programs: football, basketball, baseball, hockey and soccer are ranked 2, 3, 6, 7 and 8, respectively, in terms of incidence of injury. Given these findings on the relationship between sports participation and childhood injuries, it is not surprising that the Massachusetts Childhood Injury Prevention Program of the Department of Public Health strongly recommends the establishment of statewide sports injury prevention and management programs.

### Psychological Aspects of Youth Sports

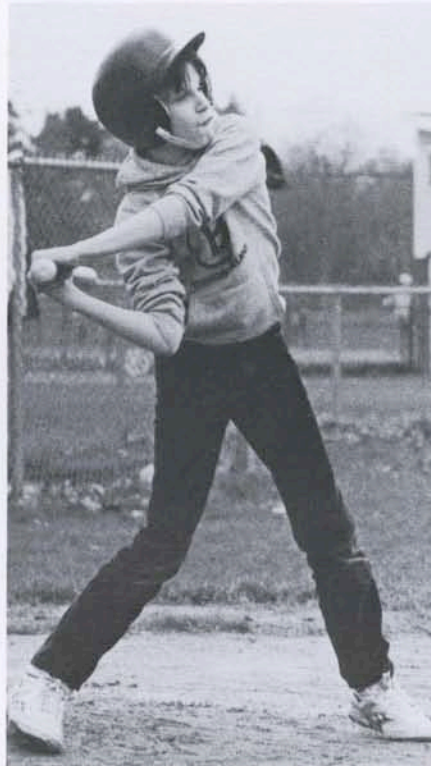
The psychological aspects of youth sports are as important as the physical. For example, the importance of the coach to the psychological development of the child athlete cannot be underestimated. A primary reason is the child's level of dependence on the coach concerning his/her competence as an athlete (and hypothetically as a person as well): since the developing child has little past experience upon which to draw in making an assessment of his/her athletic ability, feedback by the coach serves as an important source of information about performance capabilities. The coach can also influence the young athlete's attitude toward his/her team and toward sports in general.

Scholars generally agree that the



*... coaching behavior that is influenced by wins and losses is less likely to achieve the same positive self-concept and attitudinal outcomes as coaching behavior that is not contingent on a team's performance.*

most important characteristic of a coach's feedback to the child is that it be positive or "success oriented." Such behavior helps ensure a variety of desirable outcomes. First, it develops athletes with positive attitudes toward sports and their teams. Second, it produces a greater liking for the coach. Third, it enhances a player's sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. This latter point is particularly important, because increasing esteem and sense of efficacy promotes greater effort in, and persistence toward, the specific task at hand (e.g. learning a new skill). Further, it promotes an orientation toward, and an appreciation of, the intrinsic value (i.e. the "process" aspects) of sport.



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Table 1

Relative Importance of Factors Considered in Decision to Participate in Youth Sports

Rank	Progress Program	Product Program
1	Improve Skills	Play Fairly
2	Play Fairly	Improve Skills
3	Have Fun	Be Part of Team
4	Good Sportsmanship	Have Fun
5	Improve Fitness	Good Sportsmanship
8		To Win
10	To Win	
13	To Win By Rule Breaking	To Win By Rule Breaking

Not a great deal is known about the behavior or feedback of youth sports coaches toward their athletes. What information we do have, however, indicates that they are not always consistent in this feedback. For example, data I have collected at youth football and soccer games show that, unlike "process" programs, those having a product competitive orientation produced coaching behavior that was contingent on team performance. Table 2 summarizes this data: it indicates that when a team lost, the coach in the "product" program more than doubled the proportion of his/her negative behaviors (from 18% to 37%) as compared to when a team won. Such

behaviors send a message to the child that being successful and being accepted by the coach are contingent upon winning. They also reduce the likelihood of the child gaining a full appreciation of competition-as process. In sum, coaching behavior that is influenced by wins and losses is less likely to achieve the same positive self-concept and attitudinal outcomes as coaching behavior that is not contingent on a team's performance.

A consistent criticism directed at youth sports has been the level of stress placed on its participants. As in most other settings, stress occurs in sports when some situation or condition is perceived as threatening, i.e. when the player is confronted with a stimulus that may endanger the attainment of important goals. There are many potential stress-producing situations in sports (e.g. "Will I make a positive contribution to my team's performance?" "Will I perform with skill?" "Will my coach praise my hustle?").

Much of the stress in youth sports programs is believed to originate primarily with parents or coaches who either (a) have unreasonably high expectations for success, or (b) seek ego enhancement vicariously through the athletic prowess of their players and/or children.

Recently conducted research has found that competitive stress does not adversely affect all child athletes. However, it does impact on a sizeable minority, particularly those who participate in individual sports.\* Crucial situations within a game, the importance of a contest, and final outcome (i.e. winning/losing) also affect the stress level of a young athlete.

What are the consequences of stress for the child athlete? Physiological and psychological discomfort are two outcomes which are generally observed. Of perhaps greater concern are the more practical deleterious effects such as a regression in skill level, an increased likelihood of injury, and dropping out of the activity.

Before providing some suggestions about how youth sports programs can more closely approach the "process" ideal, I need to state initially that there

Table 2

Percentage of Coaches' Positive Behaviors by Program Orientation and Game Outcome

	Progress Program	Product Program
Won	81%	82%
Tied	79%	(No ties)
Lost	85%	63%

are many well run programs. The "horror stories" about youth sports that occasionally turn up in the media sometimes lead to a condemnation of all programs, when in fact the vast majority are doubtless innocent of truly serious transgressions. Nevertheless, even good programs can be improved.

\*Interestingly, the study found that the most stressful situation for a pre-adolescent child was a band recital solo. Competition in an individual sport was ranked second.



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by Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds



Evidence for such an assertion comes from the coaches themselves. For example, several surveys conducted on youth sports coaches demonstrate that they do not rate themselves very high as concerns a variety of behaviors and skills necessary to be a competent coach. Further, one study revealed that nearly half of the coaches surveyed endorsed the idea that coaching clinics or workshops should be required of those who volunteer for youth sport programs. Thus, it appears reasonable to assert that at least some of the suggestions which follow can benefit most programs.

One suggestion is to provide coaches with a variety of educational experiences such as clinics, workshops and/or self-directed programs of study. It is incumbent upon coaches at any level to have a knowledge base in such areas as sports-skill progressions, planning and conducting practices, the coach-player-parent relationship, pre-and inseason conditioning, prevention and care of injuries, and the legal aspects of coaching. A corollary need is for further research concerning the consequences for young athletes of organized youth sports. Particularly needed are studies that investigate the long term physiological and psychological effects of sports participation on young people. Continued research in this domain can only serve to enhance the quality of coaching education programs.

A second suggestion is to reduce the "product" competitive orientation of programs. As I indicated earlier, the verbal behavior of the coach is important in setting the competitive climate for his/her team. Thus, one strategy in this area would be to systematically record a coach's behavior, and finally, to give specific suggestions as to how such behavior can be modified to encourage more of a "process" competitive orientation in his/her program.

A less direct method to reduce the product competitive orientation in youth sports programs is to "deprofessionalize" them, i.e. to eliminate as many elements as possible that make such programs little other than miniature versions of the major leagues. Table 1 provides a number of suggestions in this regard. This strategy may actually be more effective than modifying a coach's behavior insofar as producing a long lasting reduction of a "winning-is-the-only-thing" competitive orientation is concerned: if you change the program structure, you will probably change the coach's behavior as well, but if you only change the coach's behavior and return him to an environment that is not congruent with that behavior, the coach is likely to quickly revert to his/her initial mode of behavior.

The final suggestion concerns the matter of when and how to introduce athletic competition to young people. I

posit the following guidelines:

- a) Concentrate on developing a solid foundation of all the essential skills before placing the child in a competitive situation. When introducing competition do it gradually by teaching one specific competitive situation at a time. This practice will help the child learn the strategy of the sport without experiencing a regression in basic skill performance.
- b) Be sure opponents are as evenly matched as possible. Equal matchups promote optimal performance — and maximum enjoyment — among all participants.
- c) Provide success opportunities for all athletes by rewarding not just winning, but effort, enthusiasm and personal improvement as well.

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Youth sports: boon or bane? At this point in time, the answer to this question is that in general, they are likely neither. If youth sports leaders constantly keep in mind that such programs should be education and fun for the participants, the answer assuredly will be a positive one in the near future. □



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