

YOUTH SPORTS: *STILL* **FAILING OUR KIDS** HOW TO REALLY FIX IT



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Youth Sports: *Still* Failing Our Kids, AND How to Really Fix It!
by BOB BIGELOW with DOUG ABRAMS

CHAPTER 1: LESSONS LEARNED SINCE I WROTE “*Just Let the Kids Play*”

I'll begin with a simple, direct statements: youth sports in America are still failing our kids. We adults are still not providing the fun environment, or the potential for true nurtured learning and emotional growth, that should define the core mission of sports activities for children and adolescents. Youth sports in America are simply not meeting the needs of ALL the children whom we as adults have a responsibility to serve.

My name is Bob Bigelow, and I have been a youth sports reform advocate for almost three decades. I have given countless talks in communities throughout America about the need for reform, and about how we can all assure a better experience for young athletes. In 2001, I co-authored a well-acclaimed book, *Just Let the Kids Play: How to Stop Other Adults from Ruining Your Child's Fun and Success in Youth Sports*. I have made dozens of media appearances – TV, radio, online – and I have spoken at many major conventions of youth sports and parks and recreation associations. Over the years, I have collaborated with many other reformers because I hoped that together we could have a greater positive impact on youth sports in America.

Unfortunately I believe that I have yet to succeed in my mission.

Let me digress for a few moments and relate two stories that illustrate important aspects of the problem that still plagues youth sports:

Consider this story about my friend's son. It's not the kind of story that invites newspaper headlines, or that generates footage for TV. But it is a story about a private hurt and its impact on a child's life:

“In my friend's town, like many others, the boys' youth basketball program has teams that combine fifth-grade and sixth-grade boys. Tradition dictates that two groups of players rotate court time throughout the game. Typically, the group of sixth-graders plays the first quarter, the group of fifth-graders the second, and the groups share playing time in the second half.

My friend was the assistant coach of one of these teams and the parent of a fifth-grader. The team's head coach was the parent of the sixth-grader widely regarded as the 'best' player on the team. Throughout the team's so-called 'regular season' games, the head coach rotated the sixth-graders and the fifth-graders. All the boys on the team got pretty much equal time on the court. Then came the playoffs.

Playoffs have a buzz. The kids are excited to play. The adrenaline among players, coaches and spectators is pumping. Coaches are on full alert. Such was the case as the team took to the court and won its first playoff game, all of the boys sharing playing time and sharing high-fives at the end.

The second playoff game was more of a challenge. Things didn't go well from the start. The sixth-graders got behind in the score in the first quarter, and the fifth-graders stayed behind in the second. The coach started to get that panicked feeling that he might lose this one.

Then, with the scoreboard bearing down on him, his adult ego on the line and victory at the top of his grown-up list of priorities, this youth coach turned his back on half his team. He turned his back on tradition and fair play. He benched all his fifth-graders, who watched from the sidelines as the other boys on the team played the rest of the game.

During this period, one of the fifth-graders got off the bench and walked over to the assistant coach with a question: 'We're not good enough to play, are we?' This wasn't about how you play the game. This was about whether you win or lose, and this head coach won his game on the backs of those fifth-grade boys. My friend's son, at age ten, had seen these kinds of things before and he didn't want to see any more. He felt as if he never wanted to play another basketball game. In fact, he never did."

This story is both poignant and true, although I have left out the names for obvious reasons. It's doubtful that anyone besides my friend and his son recognized what happened in that gym that day. The drama was not obvious to those who watched the game, but the consequences of his coach's actions were devastating for that child's spirit. He did not recover from the insult. Many children never do.

Here is just one more story:

"The other day as I lay on the sideline soaking up some fall sun and watching my six-year-old daughter's soccer game, I could not help but smile. As the girls laughed and giggled their way up and down the field, trying and failing, falling and getting up, I was witnessing pure joy and exuberance. The parents clapped and cheered, the coaches hustled to keep the ball in play, and everyone involved doled out high fives and cries of 'great play' to players on both teams. When my daughter's teammate scored, her teammates all gave her hugs. Then all of the girls on the other team gave her a hug. This was youth sports in its quintessential form: pure, unadulterated fun for everyone.

Then I glanced at the field next door, where some ten-year-old boys were playing. As the boys threw themselves about, the parents screamed and yelled to 'get up,' 'get back,' 'pass it,' 'shoot it,' "hustle!" The coaches screamed at the players, everyone screamed at the referee, and no one was smiling. Unless, of course, there was a goal, at which point the goal scorer would glance to the sideline to see if mom or dad approved. At the same time, the guilty party on the opposing team would put his head down and sulk back to the kickoff while receiving the third degree from his coach and the accompanying groans and moans from the 'home fans.'

As I sat there, I could not help but wonder: Where did it all go wrong? How did we get from here to there? When and why did we take the joy and romance out of youth sports between the ages of six and ten? Is anyone here watching my daughter's game, looking across the way and saying 'I want this experience to become like that'?"

The first story is from my first book, published in 2001 (pages 13 and 14).

The second story opens a terrific recent book by John O' Sullivan, *Changing the Game: The Parent's Guide to Raising Happy, High-Performing Athletes and Giving Youth Sports Back to Our Kids* (Morgan James Publishing, 2014). The biography on the back cover establishes his sterling credentials: "John O'Sullivan is a former collegiate and professional soccer player, and has spent the past two decades as a coach at the youth, high school and collegiate level. O'Sullivan speaks nationwide to coaches, parents, and young athletes about developing athletic excellence and leadership within positive sports environments."

If you want to read a more recent book than mine about what's wrong with youth sports and what can be done to begin setting things right, I highly recommend John's. I have personally met John, have seen him speak, and he is a great guy who knows what he is talking about!

These two stories illustrate what we're up against when coaches and parents put winning ahead of kids simply having fun and learning the game. Mine was about youth basketball and John's is about youth soccer, but the same misplaced priorities drive other sports too, youth baseball, football, lacrosse, you name it. There are literally thousands of stories like these in the world of youth sports. If you are reading this book and already know the problems, you very likely have experienced your own stories. I won't belabor you with any more but I hope the key points are made.

Lots of other great books have appeared between mine in 2001 and John's in 2014. This is not a complete list but some of the ones I have read, all good books:

- *Fair Play* (2002) by Scott Lancaster, at the time Senior Director of NFL Youth Football Development. A key theme: making organized sports a great experience for your kids.
- *Why Johnny Hates Sports* (2002) by Fred Engh, founder of the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS). A key theme: why today's win-at-all-costs attitudes have affected many of the original goals of youth leagues, and what can be done about the trend.
- *The Sports Parenting Edge* (2003) by Rick Wolff, media personality and youth sports speaker and reform advocate. A key theme: a practical and comprehensive guide for parents who want to ensure that their children achieve the most from all their sports experiences.
- *Reforming Sports Before the Clock Runs Out* (2004) by Bruce Svare, then Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at SUNY Albany and founder of the National Institute for Sports Reform. A key theme: one man's journey through our runaway national sports culture.
- *Crossover* (2006) by Brian McCormick, well known basketball coach, conditioning specialist and author. A key theme: a new model for youth basketball development.
- *Home Team Advantage* (2006) by Brooke de Lench, Founder and President of MomsTEAM Institute. A key theme: defining the critical role of mothers in youth sports.
- *Revolution in the Bleachers* (2007) by Regan McMahon, then a writer with the *San Francisco Chronicle*. A key theme: how parents can take back family life in a world gone crazy over youth sports.
- *Game On* (2008) by Tom Farrey, then journalist, correspondent and reporter for ESPN. A key theme: examining the all-American race to make champions of children.
- *Until It Hurts* (2009) by Mark Hyman, sports columnist. A key theme: looking at America's obsession with youth sports and how it harms our kids.

In fact, some great books were written before mine, including these:

- *Positive Coaching; Building Character and Self-Esteem through Sports* (1995) by Jim Thompson founder of Positive Coaching Alliance. Key theme: how to balance positive approaches with effective athletic development strategies.
- *Way to Go Coach!* (1996) by Ronald E. Smith and Frank L. Smoll, Professors of Psychology at the University of Washington, with years of studies and research into the effects on players of better coaching behaviors. A key theme: presenting a scientifically-proven approach to coaching effectiveness.
- *The Cheers and the Tears* (1999) by Shane Murphy, PhD, sports psychologist. A key theme: presenting a healthy alternative to the dark side of youth sports today.

So books about youth sports have appeared for decades! The numerous issues addressed in these books include these:

Issues with Parents:

- out-of-control mentality;
- bad sideline behavior (yelling at players, referees, and each other);
- the emotional toll on kids and impact on their development;
- stress on parents and kids;
- competition between parents (bragging rights);
- over-hyping of young athletes (more bragging rights);
- over-focusing on rare college scholarships;
- and even outright violence.

Issues with Coaches:

- desire to win at all costs;
- exercising too much power;
- perpetuating unfair playing time;
- competing with each other through the kids;
- negative coaching behaviors;
- stacking teams;
- unbalanced games creating entitled players; and
- the decline of sportsmanship.

Issues with Over-playing:

- overuse injuries;
- health risks;
- concussions;
- year-around play limiting other activities; and
- negative impact on family time.

Issues at the Organizational Level:

- elite teams and clubs (and their physical, emotional and financial costs) at younger and younger ages
- early/over-specialization;
- disadvantages to late bloomers;
- championships for kids at younger ages;
- politics within youth sports programs;
- too few recreational sports opportunities.

The Result: 70% of kids drop out by age 13!

This astounding figure comes from research conducted by the National Alliance of Youth Sports (NAYS). Of course many solutions are offered. Rather than identify specific ones from each book, here is a representative list. We adults need to:

- recognize that adults' needs differ from kids' needs, and adapt games to kids' needs (parents drive the over-organization);
- use informal play "recess"-style approaches;
- train coaches better in positive approaches (including ones advanced by organizations such as Positive Coaching Alliance, NAYS, and others);
- educate parents to better understand the real meaning of youth sports;
- avoid having travel and elite teams at young ages, and even eliminate travel teams below particularly young ages;
- modify youth games to better fit how kids learn;
- set positive objectives and philosophies at the organizational level;
- return to the fundamentals, and stress development and fun over winning;

- focus on Long Term Athletic Development (LTAD), train coaches in it and urge parents to embrace it;
- establish codes of conduct for parents and coaches;
- promote more silent sidelines and on-field messaging about positive behavior;
- better leverage the role of mothers as parents who can impact the youth sports environment (dads may be more prone to over-competitiveness);
- bring youth sports into the mainstream the U.S. education system (public and private);
- promote broad-based participation at all ages, and more recreational opportunities;
- enact more stringent rules about equitable playing time;
- keep parents from coaching and rely on trained professionals;
- do not keep scores or standings at young ages;
- eliminate playoff and championship games;
- discourage media exposure of youth athletes
- generate better education about the prevention and care of sports injuries;
- enact stronger penalties for poor sportsmanship conduct;
- stress fundamentals, more play activity, everybody plays, and use positive encouragement; and
- press local governments to use the 'power of the permit' to limit access to public fields, gyms and other facilities to programs that commit themselves to provide broad opportunities for play.

This is quite a mouthful. A great many of these proposed fixes focus on better education, structures and rules but generally within the current model of kids playing on fixed teams often with parent coaches, within a defined league (whether “in town” or across multiple communities), and having a traditional schedule of games. This is what I would call a **traditional play model** for youth sports, which occurs in most recreational leagues and nearly all “travel” programs.

Yet despite so many solid books and proposed solutions, have things really improved?

The fact that more books continue to appear just about every year would tend to indicate that the answer is no, or else why would someone spend the time, energy and cost to write? If youth sports were getting fixed, why read yet another book? Why even read this book?

But a better and more poignant indication is given by Douglas Abrams. Doug is a nationally recognized youth sports expert and a law professor at the University of Missouri, specializing in family law, and children and the law. A youth hockey coach for more than 40 years, Prof. Abrams is a prolific author and lecturer on sportsmanship, character development, and community sports programs, and a frequent guest on radio and television. For well over a decade, Doug has sent out a regular email to a list of subscribers (for free) simply titled “Today’s Articles.” Each email is a compendium of three to five news articles from around the country (from traditional as well as social media) which tell an actual local story of a youth sports issue or abuse, or provide a commentary on a recent event or series of events. If you subscribe for just a year, you can read over 1,000 articles – most of which have something to do with a problem in youth sports. And most of the problems are caused by people over the age of 18.

Having subscribed to Doug’s email for over 10 years (and also having known Doug personally for many years), I am sorry to say there is simply no let up in the number or intensity of stories of these problems our kids face. In asking Doug over the years “is it really getting any better based on what you see and read?”, the answer sadly is no. So Doug’s “Today’s Articles” continues on, unabated.

Coming to a New Way of Thinking

As I have re-read many of these solid books over the years, one began to really stand out, namely Dr. Shane Murphy's *The Cheers and the Tears* (1999). Dr. Murphy discussed the "dark side of parental motivation", the key insight being that otherwise good people can fall into very bad habits with their kids "on stage" in over-stressed competitions, creating visceral anxieties that can lead to bad behavior. Here is what I believe are the most important passages:

"What is it about youth sports that can arouse such passions? Why do we sometimes see fights in the stands between parents of youth sports participants?...There are deeper motivations behind the involvement of families in youth sports than those already discussed." (page 49)

Dr. Murphy of course is referring to the many typical issues we see, but what really causes the behavior problems? The key insight he provides is what he calls the "process of identification":

"[P]arents have a deep and powerful love for their children. The power of this love cannot be underestimated. In my experience, this love leads parents to adopt certain attitudes when it comes to their child's involvement in youth sports:

- *They want the best for their child...*
- *They want to protect their child from harm...*
- *They hope their child will excel...*
- *They fantasize about what might be...*

The result of these attitudes is that parents usually become very emotionally involved in the youth sports experience. As a psychologist, I describe this process as identification – the parent experiences strong emotions in response to what happens to the child, because the parent identifies so strongly with the child." (pages 49-50)

I think Dr. Murphy is saying that the adults involved, that is, the parents, coaches, and administrators, all have a HUGE emotional investment (or "identification") in their kids. Youth sports, with their children "on stage" at every game, simply challenge and repetitively test that investment. Dr. Murphy goes on to say that "[i]f youth sports were just about play, they would not be such an emotional topic":

"But youth sports involve competition, and this is what makes them intensely involving. We see our children begin to compare themselves to others, and the evaluations are often favorable. Our children experience failure and loss, and often this is an upsetting experience. Their young desires and hopes are often frustrated by the coldness of reality, and there's not much we can do to change it. Few experiences match youth sports for generating a clash between hopes and reality." (page 50)

Dr. Murphy puts an exclamation point on this by then saying:

"[T]here is little a parent can do but watch once the child pulls on a sports uniform and goes out onto the field to compete with others...[N]aturally this loss of control can generate a great deal of anxiety. There are few life experiences than can generate the anxiety and tension of watching your own son or daughter participate in a sporting contest. There is a strong visceral and emotional connection because of the adult's identification with the child." (page 51)

“This process of identification helps us understand what happens to youth sports parents as they become more involved in their child’s endeavors.” (page 51)

To add my own perspective, I can think about this as parents literally seeing their child “on stage” at the “school play” of youth sports every game. We all feel a bit tense when we go to that school play, see our child on that stage, and truly hope that he or she doesn’t forget the lines, rather looks good! But at that play we are stuck in the audience and are truly helpless. If all goes well, we rejoice! But if something goes wrong, we identify with the “failure” and often want to blame something or somebody – the teacher didn’t get the kids prepared well enough, the part was wrong, the wrong play was chosen, or some other factor.

Youth sports is theater, and the feeling *can* be gut wrenching. But at every game we essentially put our kids on stage, but now also in a directly *competitive* situation. Certainly at the school play, a parent can compare how their child does compared with others in the play. At the game, these comparisons can be even more compelling. Even more things can happen (and “go wrong”): playing time is not fair, the coach yells at the child, another player knocks him down but the referee didn’t call it, and on and on it can go.

So we as adults have really created a system that collectively puts our children on stage every game. The school play may be just once or twice a year, but games happen many times each season, every week or more than once a week. So many times each year – dozens in fact – we expose ourselves to these natural but intensely strong emotions.

Reflecting on the history of organized youth sports, has adult organization really been a good idea? If the adults, who began organizing youth sports programs in earnest after World War II, sensed that they were going to put themselves through a gut-wrenching process every week, might they have done differently?

It’s a moot point now because organized youth sports programs are here to stay. We might long for those simpler times when kids played on the proverbial sandlot – with teams chosen and rules applied by the kids themselves – but that’s just not going to happen. First, many of those sandlots are not around anymore, and second, most people would worry about safety. So we are stuck with organized programs – and with making them work for the millions of children who play each year.

But within the overall construct of an organized program, can we do something else to remove this constant gut-wrenching we put ourselves through every time our kids play a game? I think there is but first let’s look at what’s been tried but doesn’t seem to work – and why.

Why What’s Been Tried Hasn’t Worked

If we look at the previous lengthy list of recommendations that the many books have made over the past 15 to 20 years, nearly all presume an adult-style model -- a program that organizes children into fixed teams that are coached mainly by volunteer parents (with varying degrees of training (usually from none to just a few hours), and that play in a league with a fixed schedule of games.

The adult-style model is very different from the way kids played before youth sports became “organized” beginning with Pop Warner Football and Little League Baseball in the late 1930s and early 1940s, followed later by soccer, basketball, lacrosse and many other team sports.

Visualize again children as essentially being “on stage” at every game for coaches and parents to see, as Dr. Murphy so eloquently explained. “Solutions” that use this adult team/game-based model do not work because they run headlong into the power of the strong, visceral emotions that Dr. Murphy argued are the real root causes of the problems. For example:

- Do preventive measures such as parent education programs (which are usually brief in nature and sometimes just online), meetings, and conduct/behavior pledges, really neutralize these strong emotions, or do they just push emotions below the surface for a little while before they reemerge the next time something seen as bad happens to the child?
- Do coach training programs contain anywhere near enough information about how to serve kids’ emotional needs, or do they provide mostly information about the sport, technical skills and tactical play?
- Do signs on the field reminding folks to behave nicely offset the inner forces at work inside otherwise nice people who sometimes just can’t contain themselves in the heat of the game?

Coach- and parent-training programs have been around for years, offered by youth sports organizations themselves and by outside providers, both in-person and now online. And most of these programs have great stuff! Besides the issue of whether course content can overcome the power of parents’ inner feelings and emotions when their kids compete, the average volunteer coach stays only about 3-4 years and then moves on. So you are continually trying to hit a moving target with training and education. Even if the first one or two attempts for a parent or coach may not stick but the third course does, the individual may soon move on anyway. Then the “next generation” arrives and you have to start all over. It seems you would need a constant barrage of training to keep up, and even that training has no guarantee to really work. What is truly more compelling to parents than protecting their child from a perceived harm or injustice?

Let’s look for just a moment at what I wrote in the introduction to my 2001 book many years ago:

“Except for the most extreme violence or abuse in youth sports, the coaches and the parents are not bad people. They are caught up in, and sometimes corrupted by, youth sports systems that have gone astray. Such systems allow misdirected principles and priorities to take over. These are not bad people in charge; these are flawed systems in control.”

I started really with the same premise that Dr. Murphy did in 1999, which posits that the problems we see aren’t from bad people, but from good people put into bad situations. I know this statement sounds like a “victims-of-their-environment” argument, but I really have come to believe that today’s youth sports systems are analogous to the “bad homes” that can change people and alter their behavior for the worse.

The more I have thought about this over the years, the more I believe that organizing younger kids into fixed teams and leagues, and putting them on stage every week for all to see, is just not a good idea!

The original idea behind organized youth sports was that some formalization of practices and games would help kids to learn skills more systematically and to have more fun, and to be better prepared for sports at higher levels as they grew older. That idea seemed to make sense, but it also paved the way for coaches to adopt adult-style play models where winning trumps learning, and where parents to react strongly to what happens in more formalized games. Some youth sports organizations (the American Youth Soccer Organization [AYSO] is a notable example)

began on the premise that every boy and girl should play. But did this premise wind up as merely an adjustment to a conventional play model that has had built-in incentives for coaches to cheat kids on play time, and for parents to become over-obsessed?

I believe that the evolution of youth sports illustrates an unintended consequence. Adults thought that they would make sports better for the kids, but instead they have made sports worse. *But we can fix it!*

The books written to date really don't go far enough. My first book, despite what I wrote in my introduction, didn't go far enough. We need to change the very MODEL of youth sports itself! What does that really mean?

That's what I will address in this book. Aristotle said that people learn best by doing, and not merely from absorbing instruction about what to do. Books can point parents, coaches and league administrators in the right direction, but key is not what these adults read or hear, but what they do. Books work best when they fall into the hands of doers.

This book *will be* different because I propose a solution that I believe is virtually guaranteed to work IF the adults – the doers – permit its implementation. The solution is simple, straightforward, and easy to understand. No pledges, no tons of special coach training, no expensive outside consultants, no parent pledges, silent sidelines, any of that. (What a relief!).

This is also a *short* book. I won't rehash any more of the stories and prescriptions from my first book in 2001, or from the many other good books since. There is no need to. If you already know there are serious issues, this book is for you, and you very likely already know stories of emotional hurt and injury from your own experience.

However if you don't yet think there are real issues, but you want to learn more, please read one or more of the books I have mentioned so far, whether my first one or another author's. These books present lots of stories and details on the problems, as well as prescriptions for a cure.

THEN come back and read this one!

This book is written particularly for adults who are in positions to implement true change: boards of youth sports organizations and leagues, including local affiliates and programs; park and recreation directors; heads of agencies such as the Y, PALs, CYOs and many others. But even if you're just a regular mom or dad, coach or parent, this book may help you too. Read it, talk about it, and perhaps also get it into the hands of one or more folks who you think can make meaningful changes.

If I ultimately succeed in changing the landscape of youth sports with this book, I probably will also have written myself out of a job giving talks. *Short of that, I hope at least to start a very different national conversation about solutions!*