

Fixing Kids' Sports

Rescuing children's games from crazed coaches and parents

By Peter Cary

Fred Engh has seen it all. A wiry former college wrestler and father of seven, Engh has been a baseball dad, a coach, an athletic director, and, for nearly 30 years, an evangelist out to fix youth sports. Mention any ugliness at a kids' sporting event, and Engh, the founder of the National Alliance for Youth Sports, can counter with tales even worse. There's the father telling the kid, "You little bastard, you could never get anything right." Or the beefy guy, captured on video, telling his young baseball player, "I'm gonna get you tonight because you let me down, buddy." Or the one that started Engh on his crusade, the kid pitching in a local recreation league, who, after every pitch, grabbed his elbow and winced. When the umpire stopped the game, the boy's father and coach came out to the mound. "What's wrong?" he asked the boy. "It's my arm; it hurts," said the child, crying. "Son," said the coach, "this is a man's game. Now stay in there and pitch."

Cal Ripken Jr., the former Baltimore Orioles star shortstop and a father of two, has his own catalog of youth sports at their worst. He has seen coaches use what he calls the "loopholes" just to get wins. They will, in the younger leagues, tell players not to swing the bat because of the likelihood that the pitcher will throw more balls than strikes. Soon the bases are loaded. "So," Ripken continues, "you exploit the base-running, and you create an environment that is frustrating to the defensive team, especially the pitcher. He starts crying. He's thinking, 'How terrible that all these kids are crossing the plate on passed balls and wild pitches and they are stealing on me. It's not fair; it's not fair.' And they break the kids down emotionally, and that's how you win."

On a plane not long ago, Ripken read Engh's *Why Johnny Hates Sports* and found himself highlighting passage after passage. "I was struck by how the things he wrote about were things I cared about," Ripken recalls. He arranged to meet with Engh, and last week they got together again to talk. The topic: How to give kids' sports back to the kids.

That Ripken, a perennial all-star, would find common ground with Engh, a 68-year-old grandfather of 13, isn't quite as surprising as it may sound. Just about anyone who has spent time around youth sports these days has had a bad experience or has heard of plenty more. A survey of 3,300 parents published in the January/February issue of *SportingKid* magazine last year found that 84 percent had witnessed "violent parental behavior" toward children, coaches, or officials at kids' sports events; 80 percent said they had been victims of such behavior. A survey in South Florida in 1999 of 500 adults found 82 percent saying parents were too aggressive in youth sports, and 56 percent said they had personally witnessed overly aggressive behavior. An informal survey of youngsters by the Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission found 45 percent saying they had been called names, yelled at, or insulted while playing. Twenty-two percent said they had been pressured to play while injured, and an additional 18 percent said they had been hit, kicked, or slapped while participating. Not surprisingly, the dropout rate of all children from organized sports is said to be 70 percent.

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Suffer the family. In the past decade, some disturbing new trends have emerged. Children are starting in sports younger, specializing in one sport earlier, and may play the same sport year-round. The consequences of such activity are not yet fully understood, but sports physicians say stress injuries among kids are way up, and coaches say some of the most talented athletes drop out by their teens. And for many parents the demands of toting kids to practice, travel games, and tournaments are taking a big toll on what used to be called family life. In the past 20 years, says Alvin Rosenfeld, a New York psychiatrist who specializes in adolescents, structured sports time has doubled while family dinners have been cut by a third and family vacations have decreased 28 percent. "There's been a huge growth in youth sports," says Paul Roellig, a Virginia coach and parent. "The question nobody's asking is, is this a good thing?"

Perhaps it all began way back in 1929, when the owner of a Philadelphia factory set out to stop neighborhood youths from breaking his windows. He got a friend to organize a youth football league to keep the kids busy. Five years later, they named their club after the legendary Temple University football coach, Glenn Scobie "Pop" Warner. About the same time, in Williamsport, Pa., a sandpaper plant worker named Carl Stotz decided to organize a league for the little kids left out of sandlot play. It came to be called "Little League." The first pitch was thrown on June 6, 1939.

From those humble beginnings, kids' sports exploded. Pop Warner Football came to enroll more than 225,000 children in 36 states. Little League has 2.5 million kids playing in 50 states. Babe Ruth League baseball, whose younger divisions now bear Cal Ripken's name, has 945,000 players and, like Little League, a World Series of its own.

The real boom in youth sports, however, was driven by soccer. Here was a sport--unlike batting a pitched ball or shooting a basketball through a high hoop--that any tot could play. In 1964, the American Youth Soccer Organization was formed in Torrance, Calif. Its founding principles included the ideas that every kid had to play at least half of every game and that teams had to be balanced in talent to ensure fairness. Soccer leagues grew like kudzu. In 2003, the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association reported that 6.1 million kids from ages 6 to 17 played soccer more than 25 days a year. All told, more than 26 million, or two thirds of America's youth, play a team sport in America.

The boom in youth sports coincided with the suburbanization of America, but it was stoked by the maturing of the baby boom generation and its unprecedented focus on its children. Parenting became "the most competitive sport in America," says Rosenfeld, the psychiatrist. "Soccer mom," meanwhile, came to conjure up more than just the image of a mother shuttling her kids to and from practice. "It's the culture," says Andrew Holzinger, athletic programs coordinator for Palm Beach County, Fla. "Maybe all I wanted to do was have my daughter kick the soccer ball around because she's driving me crazy. But Soccer Mom gets out to the field, and she has a new personality. She gets to bond with the other parents about the lousy call, or 'Why is this an 11 o'clock game; I told them to schedule it earlier.' Soccer Mom, she gets to have her own sport."

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"Child abuse." As parents got more involved, some got *too* involved, and things turned ugly. By the mid-'70s, Engh had seen enough. His daughter played on a softball team whose coach was caught urging his girls to shoplift for him, Engh says. And then, coaching his own son's baseball team, he ran into the father who told his boy with the sore elbow to stay in there and pitch. This was nothing more, Engh says, than "legalized child abuse."

He decided to do something about it. By 1980, he began working out of a tiny second-floor office in West Palm Beach, creating a training manual for coaches. The idea: to make team sports less pressurized, safer, and more child-friendly. Engh still remembers the day when the bank called and told his wife, Michaela, they were \$440 overdrawn. With seven kids to feed, Engh thought it was the end. Then he opened his mail, and in it was his first order for the new manual, a check for \$732. He never looked back.

Today, Engh's National Alliance for Youth Sports has certified 2.1 million volunteer coaches. But that, he says, isn't enough; everyone in youth sports--administrators, coaches, officials, parents--should be trained and sensitized. Indeed, one evening in February 2000, the Jupiter-Tequesta Athletic Association in Florida packed more than 1,500 parents into a stadium to watch a video on how to be a good sports parent, pick up a handbook, and sign a sportsmanship pledge--or their children could not play. Engh's National Alliance has even created a program to teach basic skills to kids as young as 3, so they can enjoy sports from the start. Near Buffalo, N.Y., the town of Hamburg adopted all of the alliance programs. "The coaches used to show up like, 'We're going to war here,' " says Tim Jerome, president of the junior football league. "It was pretty bad." Verbal abuse, shoving matches, parents misbehaving, it's all "changed dramatically," he says.

"The one thing people need to understand," Engh emphasizes, "is that they don't need to put up with this anymore." Mike Murray agrees. "Here in Northern Virginia," says Murray, a high school coach, teacher, and a director of youth baseball training programs, "you've seen a real cultural shift. All the things you'd want, people policing themselves. I think in large part people have bought into this." Murray is a trainer for another organization, the Positive Coaching Alliance. The alliance shares many of the same goals as Engh's organization--and even some of the same tips--but their approaches are different. Engh's organization wants all volunteers trained and certified; the Positive Coaching Alliance is focused more on the Zen of coaching.

The PCA is the brainchild of a soft-spoken former college basketball player named Jim Thompson. While studying at Stanford University Business School in the mid-1980s, he found himself coaching his son's baseball and basketball teams. Seeing too many "negative interactions" between coaches and players, he recalled his earlier experiences working at the Behavioral Learning Center in St. Paul, Minn. There he had learned the power that positive reinforcement had on severely disturbed children. He wrote a book called *Positive Coaching*, which stressed some basic principles: Athletes perform best when they feel good about themselves. The way to keep them confident is with positive comments. Athletes so motivated will be confident, try hardest, take chances, and play "over their heads." And when that happens, the team wins.

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Thompson's manuscript made its way to Phil Jackson, then the head coach of the Chicago Bulls. Jackson, recalling his own trying years in youth sports, was struck: "It fused a lot of my thinking," he said. He decided to test Thompson's theory at the pro level. At the time, Jackson was riding one of his players, Horace Grant, pretty hard, and their relationship had fallen apart. Jackson tried the positive approach, and things turned around. Jackson, now with the Los Angeles Lakers, became the PCA's national spokesman.

Its influence has been sizable. The PCA's 65 trainers have run workshops for 400 youth sports organizations, training an estimated 60,000 coaches and parents. "I can tell you the first year we ran PCA programs the number of coaches being ejected from games was cut drastically," says Tim Casey, former vice president of Chicagoland Pop Warner football conference. The Dallas Parochial League, with 3,500 fifth to eighth graders enrolled in 11 sports, began offering PCA workshops to all coaches. In basketball, "our most volatile sport," says athletic director B. J. Antes, technical fouls dropped from over 100 to 26 in three years. This year, PCA workshops will no longer be optional, Antes says. "It's too darned important not to make it mandatory." Coaches say they like the PCA's "dual goal" approach: striving to win, but using sports to teach life lessons. PCA workshops stress "honoring the game," mastering sports skills, and shrugging off mistakes. "The way I see the world of youth sports," Thompson says, "is that the win-at-all-costs mentality is the root of all evil."

Studies confirm this. A survey last summer at the National PTA Convention in Charlotte, N.C., found 44 percent of parents saying that their child had dropped out of a sport because it made him or her unhappy. These parents were not wimps. In fact, 92 percent of the respondents said sports were either important or very important to the overall development of their children. But 56 percent said that youth sports were too competitive, nearly half said that organized youth sports need to be completely revamped, and half said if they could change one thing, they would want their coach to be less focused on winning. Many surveys support this conclusion: Most kids would prefer to play a lot on a team that loses than sit on the bench of a team that wins.

For all the progress that the Fred Enghs and Jim Thompsons have made, however, they have yet to address a development of the '80s and '90s that has swept up many families. Known as travel teams, they are formed of the best players in a league or a community, may be coached by a volunteer parent or a well-paid coach, and travel to other towns--and sometimes even other states--to play teams of their own caliber. Also known as elite, select, or club teams, they're found in virtually every town in the nation.

At their best, travel teams provide young players with professional-level coaching, better competition, and even family bonding. "The clubs get very tight. They like each other; they travel with each other; they go on trips. It becomes much more of a long-term social thing as well as a competitive thing," says Craig Ciandella, California director of United States Specialty Sports Association baseball, which has 1,300 teams. Many young athletes believe their clubs give them the accelerated development they need to make the high school varsity or go beyond. "It's no longer a myth: If your kid wants to make a high school team, he has to play club ball," says Jim Tuyay, a tournament director with the California Beach Volleyball Association. "They're getting the training and the attention that the normal rec leagues are not providing."

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Pressure. Travel teams can be nothing if not intense. They may practice twice a week and play twice more. They can travel one, two, three hours each way for games, chewing up entire Saturdays or weekends. "It becomes a way of life. It winds up being what you do on weekends. You don't go away; you don't go on vacation; you do baseball. I wouldn't have had it any other way," says Ciandella. And most kids playing on elite teams are encouraged to play the same sport again in one, two, or three more seasons--even if they are playing other sports. Some are told--and believe--that if they don't play, say, soccer year-round, they will fall behind their peers.

One effect is even more pressure in the early years. Children now play travel hockey at the age of 7, and baseball tournaments are organized featuring pitchers as young as 8. "Where we live, travel soccer starts at the U-9 [8-year-old] level," says Virginia father Roellig. If you resist, he says, "you will be told, 'Your kids will quickly fall behind and not make the team when they are 10.' If you want your kid to play in high school, you have to start [travel] at 10, and if you want to travel at 10, you have to play travel at 8." Roellig says his community recently started a U-5 soccer program. Called the "Little Kickers," children can play at age 3 1/2. In 2003 it enrolled 50 kids, he says; now it has more than 150. "It's an arms race," complained one soccer mom in Washington, D.C.

Some wonder whether things have not gotten out of hand. Roellig, who coaches soccer, has three children, ages 10, 15, and 16--all involved in sports. His 15-year-old daughter, a high school freshman, plays year-round soccer and two other sports to boot. In the spring, she plays high school and travel soccer. In the summer she attends camps, does a basketball league, and has August soccer practice. In the fall, she has travel soccer and field hockey. And in the winter, she plays indoor travel soccer and basketball. Most nights she gets home at 7:00 or 7:30 from practice, has to eat and do her homework. She may make it to bed by 10 p.m., but she has to get up at 5:40 for school. "What gives is the homework and the sleep," Roellig says, adding that his daughter often looks exhausted. "If I had to do it again as a parent, I'd definitely scale back sports," he says. "I think I'm doing more harm than good."

He's not alone. Holzinger, the parks administrator in Palm Beach County, oversees 120 athletic fields and issues permits for their use by 65 different youth organizations. Only 2 to 5 percent of children under the age of 13, he believes, qualify as "elite" athletes. But in his region, the proportion of kids being placed on "elite" teams has grown to 25 to 30 percent of the athletic pool in the area. It's not that more kids have become better athletes; more parents are simply insisting that their kids be enrolled on select teams. "As we see these children as elite players, we stop thinking of them as children," Holzinger says. "You're not a child; you're my defensive line that nobody ever gets through. So if someone gets through, you let me down." The 25 percent of kids who shouldn't be on the select teams, in other words, frustrate the team and the coach. Parents get down on the coach because the team isn't winning, and coaches sometimes take it out on the kids. Or some kids simply ride the bench. "You, the kid," Holzinger explains, "are now becoming frustrated with a sport, and it's a sport you loved. Past tense."

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Much of the problem, Holzinger and others say, stems from coaches. "You'd be surprised," Holzinger says, "by how many parents are really impressed when a coach tells them, 'I'll have your child in a scholarship; stick with this program.'" What parents don't understand, and what the coaches don't tell them, are the real numbers. Dan Doyle, a former collegiate basketball player and head coach, is the executive director of the Institute for International Sport at the University of Rhode Island. For his forthcoming book, *The Encyclopedia of Sports Parenting* (to be published in September 2005), Doyle's research team surveyed young basketball players. Using data from nationally affiliated basketball leagues, they estimated that the total number of fourth-grade boys playing organized basketball was about 475,000. At the same time, the team found, only 87,000 teens were playing basketball as seniors in high school. Of the 87,000, they say, 1,560 will win Division I college scholarships, 1,350 will get Division II scholarships, and 1,400 more will play at Division III schools. And of those 4,310, about 30 will make it to the National Basketball Association. An additional 130 will play pro ball in Europe.

In soccer, the odds are even longer, because so many colleges recruit foreign players. "It's not a worthy objective at the fourth- or fifth- or sixth-grade level," Doyle says, "which is what some of these coaches are telling them. You know, 'If you don't play for me you're not going to get to college.'" And tennis? Doyle found that there are approximately 3 million males between 10 and 18 worldwide aspiring to be top tennis players. How many make money on the pro circuit? 175. "The professional aspiration," he says, "it's just crazy."

Equally crazy, experts say, is the idea that child stars can be created by starting early. "It doesn't matter when you start a sport. If you start at 3, it doesn't necessarily help," says Paul Stricker, a pediatric sports medicine specialist in San Diego. "Kids develop sports skills in a very sequential manner, just like they do sitting up and walking and talking. Parents and coaches just don't understand that sequence. They feel that after they're potty trained, if they practice something enough they'll get it." Parents, some coaches say, are often fooled by "early maturers," kids who are big and well-coordinated at a young age. But often it's the late bloomers, who had to work longer and harder at sports, who turn into the stars.

Breakdown. Pushing kids to play sports too early and too often can result in pain and worse. Since he began his specialty practice in 1991, Stricker says, "I've had at least a 30 to 40 percent increase in overuse injuries like stress fractures and tendonitis. Those are things we just didn't see much in kids previously." Stress fractures, which occur when kids overtax their bones, are common. "These only come from forces that are repetitive," Stricker explains. "The bone breaks down faster than it can build up." Tendonitis is also common, especially in pitchers and swimmers, because young muscles aren't strong enough yet to keep up with adult training regimens. In young pitchers, Stricker says, "the growth plate gets pulled apart like an Oreo cookie."

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The American Academy of Pediatrics has taken note. "Those who participate in a variety of sports and specialize only after reaching the age of puberty," the academy said in a statement four years ago, "tend to be more consistent performers, have fewer injuries, and adhere to sports play longer than those who specialize early."

What overeager parents should really worry about, some experts say, is burnout. Jim Perry is director of athletics at La Quinta High School in Westminster, Calif., a public school where club sports are hugely popular. He says he recently read an article about a national power lifting championship for kids as young as 9. "What 9-year-old gets up in the morning and says, 'I want to be power lifting'?" he asks. "That came about because of a coach or a parent." Perry says many kids, so pushed, tire of sports by the time they reach high school. "It's not a matter of [club sports] sucking talent away [from high school]. They're driving high-end kids away from athletics in general," he says. "They're sick and tired of playing 135 travel baseball games a year by the time they're 12 years old. They're sick of playing 100 soccer games a year before they ever set foot in high school. They don't need it anymore."

Besides, it's not yet proven that year-round play, travel teams, and specialization make better athletes. "Most of today's top professional athletes didn't even think to specialize in just one sport until they were in high school, around the age of 15," says Rick Wolff, chairman of the Center for Sports Parenting at the University of Rhode Island. Cal Ripken, for one, attributes his success on the diamond partly to playing three sports into high school. Soccer taught him footwork and balance, he says. Basketball gave him explosiveness and quick movements. "I think athleticism is developed," he says, "by everything you do." For that reason, he tells his 10-year-old son, Ryan, "put down your glove" when spring baseball is over.

All the emphasis on winning, perversely, can make for inferior skills. The Virginia Youth Soccer Association, with 138,000 registered players, recently posted a long note on its website from Technical Director Gordon Miller assailing "overly competitive travel soccer." In their zeal to win games, Miller warned, some Virginia travel teams emphasize the wrong things. Big kids are recruited and taught to kick the ball long down the field instead of being taught to make tight, short passes and ball-handling skills. "You don't encourage flair, creativity, and passion for the game," he says, emphasizing that it is in practice, not games, that young athletes develop their skills. Studies show, Miller says, that in a typical game a player on average has the ball in his or her control for only two to three minutes. "The question is, 'Is playing all of these matches the best way to develop players?'" he asks. "And the answer is, 'No.' "

If we could only start over--that's one of Fred Engh's dreams. Engh has been traveling and speaking abroad, hoping to learn from others and to find countries where it's not too late to fix things. In the course of his travels, he came across the tiny Caribbean nation of Dominica, a place where organized youth sports do not yet exist. The Dominicans agreed to let Engh and his Alliance for Youth Sports start a complete roster of kids' sports there, from scratch. Engh told Ripken of the venture. Ripken says he was intrigued by the idea of starting a youth sports program with the slate entirely clean. "I never thought there was a place on this planet that hadn't played baseball as an organized sport," he says. "Maybe I could help participate in something like that--rebuilding the joy of baseball."

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