As you read, consider the following questions:

1. Why do children want to play sports, in Gerdy’s opinion?
2. What example does the author use to illustrate the difference between pick-up games and organized sports?
3. What types of administrative tasks, currently handled by adults, does the author believe student athletes should be given responsibility for?

It is no secret that there are significant problems with organized youth sports programs. Incidences of parents screaming at nine-year-old children over a missed basket or a misplayed fly ball are commonplace. Youth-league umpires are regularly abused and increasingly attacked. Brawls have erupted after youth-league soccer games. Obviously something is wrong.

What is wrong with youth sports is the adults. Youth sports programs are no longer about meeting the educational, developmental, and recreational needs of children but rather about satisfying ego needs of adults. Adults have imposed their values and priorities about sports upon their children's games, from the organization of player drafts to the imposition of structure, organization, and rules to a disproportionate emphasis placed on winning. This, despite the fact that children, more than anything else, want to play sports, not to win, but simply to have fun. It is the adults who are destroying youth sports. That being the case, it is time to give youth sports back to the children.

Kids Know How to Make Sports Fun

But how will our children manage without adults supervising their athletic activities? Quite well, thank you! Studies contrasting spontaneous youth play versus youth sport organized by adults indicate that children, if left to their own devices, will successfully organize, administer, and manage their own games. They will choose sides and mediate disputes. They will set their own rules. In some cases, those rules may change from game to game. But they will be rules that work for the children. Children will handicap their games to ensure they are evenly matched, interesting, and fun. Such organizational, mediation, and interpersonal skills are valuable characteristics that children are not permitted to develop when they are forced by adults to play the "adult," supposedly right, way.

A perfect example of the stark difference between "pick-up" and "organized" adult-run youth games is the typical situation where there is one very superior athlete in a baseball game. In the "organized" game, the adult coach will have that child pitch. The child proceeds to dominate the game, striking out most of the batters he or she faces, while the children in the field stand like statues waiting to field a ball that has virtually no chance of being hit to them. By the end of the game, many players have never handled the ball. If left to their own devices, the children in the "pick-up" game will agree amongst themselves that the dominant player either not pitch or pitch with his or her opposite arm. In
Basketball, the dominant player may be allowed only a limited number of shots or may be required to shoot with his or her "off" hand.

Children make adjustments in their games to ensure that the game will be interesting and fun, and thus, continue. Their purpose in getting together to play is, after all, to have fun. If the game is not fun, children will quit playing and, if enough quit, the game will end. That being the case, they must work to make the game interesting and enough fun so everyone will want to continue to play. Without adult-enforced structure, rules, and expectations, there is nothing holding the game together other than the children actually wanting to play it. And what holds the game together is being involved and having fun. In short, the game would not exist if it were not fun. In youth leagues organized by adults, the adult-imposed goal of winning replaces the goal of maximizing fun and participation.

Another significant difference between these two types of games is the way in which the outcome of the game is treated. In adult-organized games, the result of the contest is recorded as a win or a loss, regardless of the closeness of the game or the performances of the individuals involved. In the pick-up game, while the result may be discussed on the walk home, it is usually considered insignificant and quickly forgotten as the children focus more on the actions of the individuals and the fun they had. Clearly, the children have their priorities straight regarding sports as it is the process (participation and having fun) rather than the end result that is most important.

De-organizing Children's Sports

How do we restructure youth sports programs to give the games back to the children? "De-organize" them. Children should not be permitted to participate in structured youth sports programs as we currently know them until they reach the age of thirteen. Prior to that, they should participate only in "de-organized" youth sports activities. In such "de-organized" activities, no more than 25 percent of the playtime should be devoted to fundamental skill instruction. The remaining time should be turned over to the kids for them to play pick-up games ... with no parental or adult involvement! Other than a safety official, adults should not be permitted to coach, instruct, or even watch. The real joy of youth sports comes from playing with friends, far from critiquing and criticizing adults. Leave the kids alone! Let them pick their own teams, make their own rules, and mediate their own disputes. The only rule that they must abide by is that everyone plays.

In other words, to make youth sports "about the kids," athletic activities should resemble "pick-up" games. In my childhood, we organized, scheduled, administered, and refereed our own games. We would meet at a designated time or simply go door to door to see who was interested in playing a game. For safety reasons, parents today are hesitant to allow their children to roam the neighborhood unsupervised, searching for a basketball game. Under this proposal, children would be provided a safe playing environment, but would be allowed to manage their own games and, as a result, begin to develop those personal skills—organization, conflict resolution, leadership, management, and mediation—that make participation in athletics valuable. Other than specific playing skills and techniques, children learn very little from adult-organized athletics. While adults may cringe at denying children their "expert" coaching advice, the fact is, children's interpersonal skills will develop more if they are left to manage their own games. Without adult supervision, the games will be closer, more interesting and, most important, more fun. It is time to get adults out of youth sports. It is time to let the
Adult Domination of Children's Sports

But the games must be returned to the players at all levels of play. For example, why do coaches, from pee-wee leagues to the college level, insist on calling every play and dictating how every minute of every practice is spent? Why not provide the opportunity for a high school or college quarterback to think for himself and exhibit leadership and decision-making skills by calling his own plays? After all, we claim that sports builds those skills. Or, what would be so detrimental in allowing a player to develop and implement a practice schedule or even be responsible for making travel arrangements for a road trip? Before full-time, paid coaches became a fixture in college athletics, students organized and administered all aspects of their programs without adult supervision. Today, other than actually playing in the game, adults perform virtually every task associated with youth, high school, and college athletics.

What are the consequences of the domination of adults over games allegedly designed for young people? There is evidence that athletic participation may not be developing the leadership skills we have long claimed that it does. Again, according to William G. Bowen and James J. Shulman, while those who play college sports feel that leadership is important in their lives and felt this way before college,

Surprisingly, this greater inclination toward leadership is not reflected very clearly in any measure of actual leadership that we can identify.... Overall, College and Beyond (term used to describe students in their study) graduates who were athletes (and who went on to earn advanced degrees) seem slightly less likely than other C&B graduates to work in public affairs. Former athletes are no more likely than other C&B graduates to provide leadership in the marketplace via service as CEOs.... It is not clear what accounts for this disjunction between the subjective importance attached to leadership by athletes and the actual pattern of leadership that is displayed. Perhaps part of the explanation is as simple as the tendency for any group to believe certain "mantras." One such mantra is that athletics teaches leadership. Reiteration of such beliefs may outrun their translation into actual conduct.

The fact is, if organized athletics is ever going to meet its promise of developing the leadership, organization, and decision-making skills of participants, parents, coaches, and administrators must place their egos on the shelf and give the children and young adults the freedom to exercise and develop those skills. Ultimately, what difference does it make whether a junior high school quarterback calls for a pass on a third and three situation when the coach would have preferred to call a draw play? Or, whether a basketball squad comes to a decision amongst themselves during a timeout to set up for a three-point shot rather than dumping the ball into the low post? We claim that sports is for the kids, yet they have absolutely no ownership of the activity because the adults are making every decision for them. It is no longer their game. We need to give it back to them.

Further Readings

Books


**Periodicals**


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