

Playing For The Long Run

Helping Parents Navigate Youth Sports & Developing Happy, Healthy & Confident Kids

OPENING PROLOGUE

This book totally supports parents and youth involved in sports. As a reference guide, its purpose is to help parents learn strategies for helping everyone involved, adults and children, to maximize the success of playing a favorite sport in the healthiest, happiest atmosphere.

Parents never receive all the information we need in order to understand our roles completely. Most of us have had only a bit of consultation with child development specialists or seasoned coaches. Having served for years as parent, college coach, and child development specialist, I therefore intend to explain the most effective methods of communicating with children about playing sports, behaving at a sports contest, and creating the best possible learning experiences for our children.

Drawing from nearly thirty years of experience in these arenas, I present this work from the perspective of not only parent and coach, but also from the past nine years of working closely with young children through a dynamic soccer development program. I have approached this work from a holistic juvenile development point of view, believing in the value of a lifelong involvement with athletics. When I learned a few years ago that 75% of all children were leaving sports by the age of thirteen, I was alarmed. Such a waste! Together we need to move towards 75% of our younger athletes staying in sports, with many moving toward college athletics and beyond.

For starters, let's take a close look at one aspect of youth sports. As parents sitting on the sidelines we can look around and see how many parents are screaming and "coaching" during the course of the game. Of course such parents have good intentions, merely wanting their children to be successful, to WIN. However, we can step back and ask ourselves, is this really the best way to steer youngsters toward meaningful experiences with sports?

Let's also ask ourselves what we really want for our children when we sign them up to play soccer or anything else. Probably we want healthful development, new friends, strong bodies, acquired skills, and the ongoing practice of good habits. So far, great. As my own children started out in sports at the age of four and five, I first wanted them to have fun. Plain and simple, their enjoyment assures their involvement. They exercised, gained new friends, and started experiencing some of the terrific lessons sports can teach all of us. As a parent, my main goal for my children meant enhancing their outlook on life. Being truly alive and involved makes such an immeasurable difference, and that difference goes deeper than the simple involvement in sports.

As parents we need to set good examples by being active ourselves. Early on, as our children grew, my wife and I included them in the daily walks and runs with the dogs. We also shared hiking, bicycling, skiing, and swimming. Even earlier, when they were babies, our children rode in a double jogger while we ran or in a cart while we rode our bikes. They learned that exercise is an important, enjoyable part of our lives even before they could walk or run themselves. As they grew, we took them on interval runs in the dead of winter—an excellent way to get out of the house and do something invigorating. Our family enjoys this outside-together time. We start off walking for three minutes, running for one minute, then build up to four miles. The kids enjoyed themselves, pushing extra hard during that one-minute sprint. As they progressed, they pushed us to do two minutes walking, then two minutes running. My wife and I enjoyed watching their drive develop along with their stamina.

At the time of this writing Chloe and Scott are eleven and thirteen years old. Since for several years now the two have shared their parents' lifestyle, we have achieved an important goal. Our children have a profound regard for their own fitness and health. Although having been involved with the game of soccer for almost my whole life, I would not mind if my son or daughter told me he/she had finished with the game of soccer. We all need to choose for ourselves what will become our game. Ironically, they both keep sticking to soccer and becoming more motivated to get better. But what really excites me as a dad is that both my offspring have developed some wellrounded skills that can easily apply to lifelong pursuits. As a microcosm of human experience, sports can allow its players to experience real situations and life lessons in a relatively non-threatening environment.

So what about screaming and yelling at the game? Let's examine this scenario from both the parents' and the children's perspective. I often ask parents to take one game and go sit down in a corner somewhere "out of range." From this vantage point they can often see the game better as well as watch the other parents. If quiet, relaxed, and attentive these parents might discover that they not only enjoy the game more, but also prefer to distance themselves from that band of raving lunatics. From the children's point of view there are so many advantages: without the yelling ("Pass! Shoot!") they can make their own decisions whether to pass or shoot, even learn from making their own mistakes. Without parental distraction they can stay focused on the game and grow confident of their own independence. Loving, well-meaning parents can afford their children this opportunity to learn, grow, and develop in the presence of a civilized audience. What a wonderful, reasonable goal!