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Local

Are parents ruining youth sports? Fewer kids play amid pressure.

By Michael S. Rosenwald October 4

The number of children playing team sports is falling, with experts blaming a parent-driven focus on elite travel clubs, specialization in one sport and pursuit of scholarships for hurting the country's youth sports leagues.

Baseball, basketball, softball, soccer and touch football — long staples of American childhood — have all taken hits, worrying public health advocates, league organizers and professional sports organizations.

More than 26 million children ages 6 to 17 played team sports in 2014, down nearly 4 percent from 2009, according to a widely cited survey by the Sports and Fitness Industry Association. Total sports played have plummeted by nearly 10 percent.

Some of the drop-off is attributable to the recession, particularly in low-income urban areas. But experts fear larger socioeconomic forces are in play, especially in the suburbs, where the shift to elite competition over the past two decades has taken a growing toll: Children are playing fewer sports, and the less talented are left behind in recreational leagues with poor coaching, uneven play and the message that they aren't good enough. Seventy percent of kids quit sports by age 13.

"The system is now designed to meet the needs of the most talented kids," said Mark Hyman, a professor of sports management at George Washington University and the author of several books on youth sports. "We no longer value participation. We value excellence."

And those studying the issue say they know whom to blame: parents.

"The adults have won," Hyman said. "If we wiped the slate clean and reinvented youth sports from scratch by putting the physical and emotional needs of kids first, how different would it look? Nothing would be recognizable."

The Aspen Institute, the Clinton Foundation, and several amateur and professional sports organizations are working on solutions. Officials came together last month for a roundtable at the U.S. Open tennis tournament in New York and earlier this year at a Washington summit attended by the U.S. surgeon general. Dick's Sporting Goods is appealing directly to customers, asking for donations at the checkout counter for Sports Matter, its new program to pump money into underfunded youth sports teams.

The toughest problem, Hyman said, is that no parent wants to "unilaterally disarm" and acknowledge that the system is broken.

"It's just about impossible to stand up to it if you want your kids to play competitively," said Elizabeth Pelcyger, a Washington mom whose son felt pressure even from his baseball teammates because he wasn't playing year-round. "They could somehow point out that he hadn't been playing since he was 4."

Many of the adults trying to fix the problem remember a simpler, less competitive, less expensive time in youth sports. There were no travel teams, no faraway tournaments — now a $7 billion industry. There were pickup games with friends and leagues at neighborhood parks, with the focus mostly on fun. All of the kids in the neighborhood played together: the stars, the stalwarts, the daisy pickers. One of the most popular movies in the 1970s: "The Bad News Bears."

Amazingly, kids still made it to the major leagues.

"Sports was everything in my life," said Dick's chief executive Edward W. Stack, who played baseball and football. "I don't remember every teacher I had, but I remember every coach I had. If I didn't have those things, I don't know what I would have done."

Although Wall Street analysts have expressed some concern about how participation drops could affect the sporting goods business, Stack says: “The whole problem is very personal to me. This is not about business. I saw how my life was impacted through sports.”

Parent bragging rights

There is little debate over the value of playing sports for children, although the risk of concussions in contact sports, particularly football, has become a concern for parents, pediatricians and coaches. Still, active kids are less likely to be obese and are more likely to have higher test scores, attend college and have higher incomes. And when active kids become parents, they start the process again with their children. Built on Gatorade and shin guards, it is a virtuous, wholesome loop.

That is the idea. It is no longer the reality.

In the past two decades, sports has become an investment to many parents, one that they believe could lead to a college scholarship, even though the odds are bleak. Parents now start their kids in sports as toddlers, jockey to get them on elite travel teams, and spend small fortunes on private coaching, expensive equipment, swag and travel to tournaments.

Youth sports is the new keeping up with the Joneses.

“The parents try to one-up each other,” said Tony Korson, founder of Koa Sports, a nonprofit sports league in Montgomery County that tries to provide an alternative to the youth sports status quo, with trained coaches and encouragement of multiple sports. “You get one parent who says, ‘I traveled to

Tennessee for a tournament.' Another says, 'Well I flew to California.' And then, 'Oh my son is going to Puerto Rico.' "

Some parents — usually those on the outside — look at the situation with astonishment.

"What I want to know is why there are so many families that are into travel sports?" asked one poster on DC Urban Moms and Dads, a popular online chat board. Someone answered: "Honestly I think there are many parents who like it," adding, "in their own mind they are thrilled at their son being an 'elite' athlete." Another person replied: "What playing a travel/club sport can do is take a kid who is a decent athlete and give them a leg up."

But nobody bothered to ask the kids what they wanted. Now, researchers are beginning to survey children. Not unsurprisingly, they have a different idea of what youth sports should be.

Amanda Visek, an exercise science professor at George Washington University, recently surveyed nearly 150 children about what they found fun about sports. (Her sample included kids who play travel and recreational sports.) The kids identified 81 factors contributing to their happiness.

Number 48: winning.

Also low on the list: playing in tournaments, cool uniforms and expensive equipment. High on the list: positive team dynamics, trying hard, positive coaching and learning. Whenever Visek presents her findings to win-hungry parents and coaches, there is a lot of pushback.

"They don't want to believe it," she said.

Yet the No. 1 reason why kids quit sports is that it's no longer fun.

Fixing the problem

This is how youth sports looks now: The most talented kids play on travel teams beginning at age 7 (or sometimes younger), even though many athletes bloom much later; the best coaches (often dads who are former college athletes) manage travel teams, leaving rec leagues with helpful but less knowledgeable parents in charge; and coaches of elite teams pressure kids to play only one sport (the one they are coaching), even though studies show this leads to injuries, burnout and athletes who aren't well rounded.

Particularly with specialization, parents believe they are making the right choice in pursuit of a scholarship.

“I’m done trying to tell parents that the odds are against them,” said Hyman, the GW professor. “That’s a loser’s game. They don’t want to believe that. The better approach is to tell them that what they’re doing is not helping you reach your goal.”

Those who study the issue are more worried about the millions of kids who just want to play sports for fun but get the least attention.

“The rec leagues become much less sustainable,” said Tom Farrey, a sportswriter running the Aspen Institute’s initiative on youth sports. “These kids kind of know they are second-class, and they check out quickly. The quality of coaching isn’t as good. The kids fall behind. It becomes a compounding effect.”

With traditional team sports in decline — the number of kids playing touch football is down more than 7 percent, slow-pitch softball down 5 percent, and baseball, basketball and soccer all down nearly 2 percent — niche sports might be benefiting from some of the quitters. Lacrosse is up nearly 12 percent. Field hockey is up nearly 8 percent.

Meanwhile, the race is on to put solutions in place. The Aspen Institute has made eight recommendations, including revitalizing in-town leagues, reintroducing free play, encouraging sports sampling, training coaches and, perhaps most important, asking kids what they want.

The largest organizations in sports are making moves. Major League Baseball is partnering with the Positive Coaching Alliance to train youth coaches. The U.S. Tennis Association is encouraging sports sampling and hosting roundtables on the topic. U.S. Youth Soccer is moving next year from 11-on-11 games to 9-on-9 and 7-on-7, which youth sports advocates believe will be more fun and increase skills development.

“Hopefully, these ideas can help change things,” Farrey said. “You’re not going to change the culture by telling parents to stop acting like fools.”

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