



Chapter 1

THE GOOD AND BAD THINGS ABOUT SPORTS

“To the art of working well a civilized race would add the art of playing well.”

—George Santayana, philosopher

In 1968, I played on a New England prep school all-star team that toured Europe during spring vacation. The trip took place during the height of the Vietnam conflict and for the first time since World War II, many Europeans treated Americans not as welcome visitors, but as intruders. Our team felt this disfavor in the form of boos during games. We were even confronted with a picket line!

Our coach, Dee Rowe, seized on the harsh reaction to make the tour not merely about games, but also about education beyond the court. He arranged a series of postgame receptions where we met and spoke with our opponents and others in the community, many of whom expressed strong anti-American sentiments. Despite some philosophical differences, it was obvious to me that my teammates and I could develop friendships with individuals against whom we competed and with whom we conversed.

I came away from the experience with a better understanding of Vietnam and a clear recognition that our common interest in sports had brought us together for the spirited discussions. On many occasions since 1968, I have watched sports serve not only as a medium to unite people from diverse backgrounds, but also as a proving ground which can profoundly influence personal qualities such as integrity and self-discipline.

To be sure, sports can have a negative, even dark side, that will be addressed head-on in this book. To help you develop a prudent and disciplined sports parenting philosophy, I begin with a list of the many good qualities of sports, followed by a list of its shortcomings.

Good Things About Sports

“All of those people pushing and protesting to let me play showed that sports has a way to change a whole lot of things.”

—Bobby Grier, the first African American player to compete in the Sugar Bowl

1. Sports can help a child develop a work ethic and a mental toughness, both of which can be useful in later life.
2. Sports can offer repeated opportunities for a child to practice and improve the skills of self-discipline and self-control.
3. Sports participation in childhood can set the stage for a life of physical fitness.
4. Sports can teach a child about fair play, which can serve as an ethical framework throughout life.
5. Sports can encourage the development of self-reliance and self-respect.
6. Sports, as much as any activity, can teach a child about teamwork.
7. Sports can offer varied and increasingly difficult challenges as a child advances in age and skill.
8. Sports can provide a venue for observing and then practicing good leadership skills.
9. Sports can teach a child to listen to and follow directions.
10. Sports can teach a child to face adversity, live with it, and sometimes even conquer it.
11. Sports can teach a child how to win with grace and lose with dignity.

12. Sports can provide a child with a sense of earned accomplishment.
13. Sports can teach a child about human diversity. For many of us, sports was our introduction to diversity.
14. Sports can encourage a child to develop organizational skills.
15. Sports can channel a child's competitive spirit in a healthy direction.
16. Sports can help a child learn to focus amidst distractions, a skill transferable to nonsport learning.
17. Sports can produce utter joy.
18. Sports can teach a child constructive methods for dealing with mistakes, and nurture a resolve to do better the next time.
19. Sports can foster a sense of belonging by offering a child a place on a team and even new friends.
20. Sports can help a child cultivate "competitive self-restraint," a term you will read throughout this book.
21. Sports can be a basis for wonderful conversations, trips, reunions, laughter and, most importantly, enduring relationships.
22. Sports can offer a healthy alternative to idle time, especially for youngsters from at-risk neighborhoods.
23. Sports is the "official headquarters" of positive mentoring in our society, notably by the thousands of firm, fair, and caring coaches who work with children.
24. Team sports provide a child with the opportunity to focus on something bigger than oneself.
25. Sports can strengthen the bonds between parents and children, and it can help bridge a generational gap.
26. Sports can create powerful and lifelong bonds among young athletes and between young athletes and their coaches.
27. Sports can serve as a source of personal, family, and community vitality.
28. Sports can teach a child about the importance of preparation.
29. Sports can help a child learn the value of setting goals, and develop the perseverance to attain the goals.
30. Sports can help a child learn to deal with different types of authority, from the coach, to the captain, to the referee.
31. Sports can provide an athlete with the opportunity to travel and thus learn about different states, countries, and cultures.
32. Sports can help a child learn to deal maturely with unpleasant people and situations.
33. Sports can help a child learn how to manage a passion.
34. Sports can help a child learn that it is okay to resist peer pressure.
35. Sports can help a child learn to build trust, particularly with teammates.
36. Sports can help a child learn the value of delayed gratification.
37. And, at its best, sports can help us believe that anything is possible!

Yet Not All Is Good

As a youngster playing sports in Worcester, Massachusetts, it was common to hear a well-meaning coach say, "If you're a success on the court, you'll be a success in life."

This is not necessarily true!

Years ago, I helped a journalist friend prepare a list of a region's best athletes of the twentieth century. I enjoyed the process, and actually ended up sending my friend ninety-six names. I recently pulled out my list, and reviewed it with an eye toward what these ninety-six successful athletes had done with their lives.

While some on the list enjoyed successful careers and/or personal lives, a surprising number struggled mightily in one or both areas. "I peaked at eighteen, and after that it was all downhill," confided one former star player.

For those unable to transfer athletic excellence to other undertakings, there seemed to be a revealing common denominator: their success as young athletes had given them a false, even delusional sense of self-importance. For many, athletic success was accompanied by the passivity and even complicity of parents, coaches, or teachers who permitted the young stars to take shortcuts and neglect their academic and character development.

When parents encourage balance and perspective, sports can have a wonderful impact on a child. Without such balance and perspective, sports can produce detrimental, sometimes devastating consequences.

Bad Things About Sports

"In all important respects, the man who has nothing but his physical power to sell has nothing to sell which is worth anyone's money to buy." —Author Norman Wiener

1. Sports can encourage a child to focus so intently on becoming a star that the child neglects other essential areas of life.
2. Sports offer the most common avenue to adolescent acclaim, a fleeting journey that will end soon—and often abruptly.
3. Sports can cause a child to fall into a pattern of rationalizing unacceptable behavior. A good example is the athlete who becomes so competitive that he will do anything to win, convincing himself that the ends justify the means.
4. A few sports foster a culture of violence. Such a misguided culture too often spills over into barbaric acts in and out of competition, and also produces a copycat reaction among some impressionable young athletes.

5. Sports can produce an unhealthy level of stress in a child, particularly a child who is pushed to excel and who feels a failure with every loss.
6. Sports can produce irrational, boorish behavior among parents and athletes.
7. Sports can produce many athletes who are negative role models.
8. Sports can produce many coaches who are negative role models.
9. Sports can produce many parents who are negative role models, especially those who overvalue athletic achievement.
10. Sports, even team sports, can promote selfish behavior.
11. Dreams of sports glory can induce some parents to completely lose perspective of the really important things in their child's life, especially that the athlete is a child.
12. Sports can chip away at a child's self-esteem. A child who falls short of athletic goals or who perceives that one is valued only for athletic ability may lack a sense of value and self-worth off the field.
13. The desire to win can lead some young athletes to turn to harmful, illegal substances.
14. Sports can be so time-consuming that it leaves some athletes with little time for studies or social life.
15. Sports can be a distraction from serious academic pursuit. At the highest level of intercollegiate competition, colleges are producing magnificent athletes who, in some cases, are ill-equipped to engage in any meaningful life's work.
16. From blaming referees for poor calls to listening to those who say, "you are being treated unfairly," sports can be a haven for excuses.
17. Sports can allow many who are physically gifted to behave like arrogant bullies.
18. Sports can allow many who are physically gifted to underestimate the real meaning of hard work.
19. The link between sports stardom and arrested development is far too common.
20. The "trample the opponent" philosophy espoused by some coaches and parents sends the wrong message about the core value of empathy.
21. When sports are more important to the parent than the child, it can create distance and resentment, particularly when a child's performance does not live up to parental hopes and expectations.
22. Burnout or injuries from sports can lead to neglect of physical fitness.
23. Finally, sports can teach a child that it is acceptable to cheat or take shortcuts to win, especially if coaches and parents turn a blind eye toward such practices. Gamesmanship tactics such as "orchestrated chatter" in youth league baseball to distract the batter, or flopping in basketball, when a defensive player fakes an offensive foul by falling to the floor, are frequently encouraged by coaches and parents, and employed by young athletes. Acceptance of these tactics fosters a belief that such behaviors are not only acceptable but admirable; to win at any cost is okay.

How can there be so many good and bad things about sports? There are a number of reasons, but they all relate to the fact that sports have an unusual, almost unique capacity to evoke powerful emotions and desires within many of us. When these feelings are channeled in the right direction, sports can be a productive, even ennobling experience. Yet, when strong desires and emotions are allowed to follow an obsessive course, the end product will likely include one or more of the bad consequences discussed.

As a sports parent, you must be prepared to cultivate the positive qualities and firmly confront the negative possibilities. Your job is to maintain your own balanced attitude, while encouraging your youngster to pursue a healthy and balanced approach to school, sports, and character development.

This book will provide you with specific strategies on how to accomplish these objectives.

A Guiding Principle

"Be courageously temperate and temperately courageous."

—Aristotle

A good and simple concept to follow, in sports parenting and other facets of life, is Aristotle's Golden Mean—finding that balance or "golden mean" between deficiency and excess.