



Returning Youth Sports to the Kids

By Joseph Lovell

We have all seen the overly aggressive coach on the sideline and the opinionated parent in the stands. While these situations were rare in years past, they seem to be the norm in youth sports today. As a society, we are now seeing the fallout of these behaviors and the impact it is having on our youth.

Multiple research studies indicate that only 40 percent of today's youth are participating in sports. This is a sharp decline from a decade ago when youth sports participation was around 60 percent. Additional studies indicate 70 percent of participants are dropping out by the age of 13. These statistics are concerning when you consider the impact not participating in sports can have on the health and wellness of future generations. As John O'Sullivan, CEO of the Changing the Game Project, often states, "This isn't a sports issue. This is a wellness issue." As health and wellness is one of NRPA's Three Pillars, recreation professionals can have a significant impact

on improving youth sports and, thus, improving children's health.

What Kids Want

While some of the decline in participation can be attributed to the rise of electronics and fewer physical activity opportunities in schools, there are internal factors professionals need to consider. For the past 20 years, unstructured play has declined and has been replaced with a highly structured and competitive sports culture. This culture is further cultivated by coaches and parents pushing youth to specialize in a single sport. The idea of playing just for fun is disappearing. This is a direct contrast

to why children want to play sports. According to a recent study from George Washington University, nine out of 10 athletes cite "having fun" as the No. 1 reason for participating in sports. These findings are further validated by a Michigan State University study that found the top two reasons youth drop out of a sport were due to being uninterested and not having fun.

It's time to return the game to what kids want by designing experiences that are fun and engaging. Based on The Aspen Institute's Project Play, what kids want from sports is to create social bonds and have access to the action. The best way for coaches to accomplish these wants is to treat players with respect, provide equitable playing time and have fun in practice with opportunities of unstructured play. Dr. Tom Tutko, professor of psychology at California's San Jose State University and co-director of the Insti-

tute for the Study of Athletic Motivation, states, “If children go to practice, perform painful drills and improve their skills but have no fun, and if the coach constantly hammers at their mistakes, after a while, they are going to think, ‘Do I really want to be here?’”

The Challenge for Parks and Recreation

Recreation professionals are responsible for creating an environment where youth can learn skills, improve their health and have fun. This process begins with an internal analysis of youth sport programs. It’s common for the parks and recreation department to have a general mission statement, but, as youth sports continues to be a polarizing component of society, a mission statement for youth sport programs may be needed. By-laws outlining the purpose and rules of youth sports, a code of conduct, and coach and parent responsibilities should be created to support the mission statement.

As recreation professionals strive to communicate a better purpose in youth sports, slogans such as “More than an Athlete,” “FUNdamental Sports” and “Asset Players” are being developed. These types of slogans and other signage now decorate the entrance of gymnasiums and outdoor athletic complexes as well as T-shirts and car stickers. They serve as reminders to parents, coaches and athletes of the purpose of playing youth sports and encourage those involved to know their role in sports: players play, coaches coach, officials officiate and parents cheer. The challenge for recreation professionals is to help coaches and parents keep the focus on fun and youth development.

There are roughly 3.5 million coaches in youth sports today. The vast majority of them are volunteers who lack the necessary preparation to coach. Volunteer coaches are usually split between those who played the game and were success-



ful or those who don’t know the fundamentals. Coaches who’ve played the game know a lot about it but often know little about children and youth development. Children need autonomy, enjoyment and confidence in order to progress in any activity. Therefore, the coach’s job is to facilitate and allow those elements to exist. This means it is the recreation professional’s job to effectively train volunteer coaches.

In today’s digital age, recreation professionals have unrestricted access to a plethora of coaching manuals, videos and philosophies to implement within the department. It may be as simple as providing coaching manuals with the rules of the game and simple practice drills or just teaching the difference between encouragement and yelling. It may take time to develop, but it may be one of the most important things we commit to doing. Recreation professionals’ responsibility should not end with training coaches but should extend to educating parents. Consider creating a partnership of parents and leaders of athletic youth (PLAY). This is more than just signing a code of conduct. It’s holding parents accountable to help improve the youth sports environment of their child’s team, and by extension, the entire league. When the coach, parents and rec-

reation professional all focus on positive youth development, the athletes are the winners.

When youth sports provide fun and active experiences, the byproduct will be healthy development for children. A recent study on the relationship between youth sport participation and wellness in young adulthood, found adults who engaged in positive youth sporting experiences had significantly higher wellness scores than those who did not participate in youth sports. Youth sports should provide opportunities for children to develop physical activity habits, improve social skills and have confidence in their abilities to succeed.

Being able to succeed in sports is vital, but succeeding does not necessarily mean winning. It also means succeeding in developing friendships, improving athletic skills or being a good sport when the team wins and losses. Recreation professionals have the opportunity to increase participation by helping children develop lifelong habits that embrace physical, emotional and social wellness. It starts by giving sports back to the kids. 🌿

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