

Educational Athletics and Youth Sports Parents

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Youth sports coaches often function as surrogate parents and can bond closely and strongly with the people they coach. Researcher Jan Boxill, noting studies conducted by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA), in partnership with Discovery Education, concluded that coaches, more than parents, teachers, peers, religion, and school, have the greatest influence on youth sport participants (Boxill, 2013). Focus group interviews conducted by the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports (ISYS) in 2007 indicated that sport for children and youth has become more professionalized and that just because society emphasizes a more professionalized focus, adopting this type of approach is not necessarily in the best interest of young people (Gould, 2007). Parents who choose to have their children participate in youth athletics should take note. While parents do play a very important and influential role in their child's athletic education, many are unaware of the degree to which coaches have influence over their children and of the potential dangers to educational athletics and to the physiological and psychological development of their children that the professionalization of youth sports represents. Perhaps most disturbingly for parents is that the USADA study indicated in their findings that many coaches profess an educational and positive philosophy but they often act in a contradictory manner that can create distrust with young athletes (Boxill, 2013). It remains likely that many youth sports parents do not understand the various aspects of educational athletics nor can recognize what characterizes the processes that define the professionalization of youth sports. Any parental self-perceptions of innocence or impotence in this debate should end as quickly as is possible because their children's athletic and educational development is at stake.

This final reflective paper, though far from exhaustive in this limited format, is an attempt to provide the parents of youth sports participants with a brief educational overview of

some of the important philosophical, psychological and sociological principles of both educational and professionalized youth sports environments. Its intention is to help and perhaps inspire parents and the other important stakeholders in youth sports to develop the ethical thinking that will in turn empower them to apply scientific and best-practice knowledge which will help them to better facilitate, problem-solve, and maximize their child's educational athletic development. While there is extensive research being done to help coaches and administrators to become better educated stakeholders in youth sports and athletics, there appears to be less emphasis placed on the study of the process and impact that educating parents might represent in combating the professionalization of youth sport. Furthermore, it is the hope of the author that parents, upon reviewing this brief introduction to educational and professionalized youth athletics, will be more inclined to reflect on these important topics not only internally but within a community of practice which includes coaches, administrators, and other parents. Working reflectively within this community of practice might facilitate better problem-solving approaches to the issues that are regularly faced in the growing and competitive world of youth sports. Armed with this overview, parents and their children will be more likely to gain a better value from their investment in youth sport through developing a more educational, scientific, and community focused mind-set.

The trend in the professionalization of youth sports is characterized by a focus on competitive outcomes and winning, with less emphasis on the educational and developmental gains that come from the athletic experience. Outcome goals are standards based on uncontrollable results or outcomes, such as winning or making an All-Star team (Vealey, 2005). Recent and current professionalized models of youth sport have focused on intense training, single and early sport specialization, and year-round training (Gould, 2007). The respondents in

this study cited above included student-athletes, coaches, athletic directors, parents of athletes, and principals in the state of Michigan. These important stake holders in youth sports indicated concern for the overemphasis of outcome oriented goals such as winning, the increased pressure and expectations placed on young athletes, single and early sport specialization, parental issues such as over involvement and poor sportsmanship, and inappropriate attitudes on the part of participants. These factors were characterized as working against educational athletics and according to the staff at ISYS everything possible needs to be done to combat the professionalization of high school and youth sports (Gould, 2007). These are the constructs that define and can be found in the professionalized youth sports programs.

Parents will play a critical role in this debate. For example, parents can learn that the goal setting literature in sport psychology recommends that athletes should set outcome, performance, and process goals, and know when to use each goal to facilitate their training and performance. However, process goals are preferred and have been shown by the research to improve performance and also enhance confidence, concentration, and help control anxiety (Vealey, 2005). Process goals are standards that are based on controllable thoughts or actions related to performance execution while outcome and performance goals deal more with results and accomplishments that are generally outside the control of the athlete. This knowledge can help coaches, athletes, and parents to better practice SMAART goal mapping by setting goals that are specific, measurable, aggressive yet achievable, relevant, and time bound (Vealey, 2005). Gaining a more educated and research based understanding of what applied sport psychology says concerning goal setting could serve parents well in deciding which sports program to invest their time, money, and children in. It is likely that educationally based programs are more likely to understand the importance of process goals and espouse a

performance development framework which includes an understanding and commitment to SMAART goal mapping. Youth sports programs that seem inclined to focus primarily on outcome goals at the expense of a broader developmental philosophy may be knowingly or unknowingly propagating the professionalization of youth sport.

The study further indicated that the necessary changes of greatest impact will likely come from the local community level by emphasizing parent and coaches' education and having a focused and well thought out program philosophy that is communicated on a regular basis (Gould, 2007). Despite their enthusiasm and wide-spread participation, parents that unknowingly interfere with their child's development is not a surprising fact given that sport parents receive little or no training about how to help their child to develop and are exposed to a youth sports environment that is increasingly professional (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006). In their learning to recognize the differences between educational and professionalized youth sports, parents will be better informed and positioned to work and communicate with both coaches and administrators in developing the philosophies of the sports programs that they choose to participate in. One way this might be accomplished is for parents to regularly attend and become active in their program's board or booster club meetings. The implication is that parents, for better or for worse, can and will play a vital role in the success or in the problems of the educational and professionalized youth sport programs of the future. Likewise, through the educational efforts of coaches and youth sports administrators the parents of young athletes, perhaps more than any other stakeholder, may be far better positioned to understand and counterminimize the dangers to educational athletic philosophies represented by the professionalization of youth sports. Educated parents who encounter sports programs who follow a more professionalized model of youth athletics can recognize the philosophical and

developmental dangers and act by withholding their economic and participative support.

Educated parents, by withholding their support, could potentially have a profound and widespread effect on the business and economic success of programs that continue to follow a professionalized youth sports philosophy.

As stated, coaches have a tremendous influence over their individual athletes. Research has repeatedly shown that talent development is dependent upon the quality of the coaching and that guidance from a competent coach is essential to becoming an expert performer (Mallett, 2005). How coaches and parents motivate their athletes is an important issue in understanding outcomes in a sports environment and in maximizing a participant's athletic returns. As motivational issues can directly affect outcomes, a fundamental understanding of motivation is critical to any sports philosophy. How and which motivational practices coaches implement and utilize with young athletes should therefore be important for parents to be able to recognize and understand. Self-determination Theory (SDT) is a major social-cognitive theory of motivation that focuses on the social factors such as coaching behaviors that influence the various forms of motivation through their influence on perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Mallett, 2005). Parents should understand that motivation is a complex multidimensional concept that can be understood as a continuum that reflects varying degrees of self-determination. At one end of this continuum lies intrinsic motivation, which is characterized by the highest levels of self-determination. At the opposite end of the continuum is amotivation, which is characterized by the least amount of self-determination. Along the motivation continuum between intrinsic and amotivation are several forms of extrinsic motivation which are differentiated by the degree to which they are considered self-determining. There are two broad types of extrinsic motivation, non-self-determined extrinsic motivation (non-SDEM) and self-

determined extrinsic motivation (SDEM). Coercion and obligation characterize Non-SDEM as this broad type of motivation lacks the perception of choice (Mallett, 2005). SDEM is an important form of adaptive motivation associated with many positive outcomes such as persistence in sport and is similar to intrinsic motivation in that there is the perception of choice. Amotivation may lead to decreased participation, a reduced perception of competence, and is associated with a general lack of interest in an activity (Mallett, 2005).

Understanding these conceptions of motivation philosophy is important in recognizing what constitutes an appropriate motivational climate. Intrinsically motivated behaviors generally involve a genuine interest and enjoyment in pursuing particular activities and are associated with the natural tendency to seek unique challenges and to explore and to learn. Competitive sports and coaching philosophies that focus on outcome goal such as winning and the rewards associated with winning have the potential to undermine self-determined forms of motivation. Athletes and people with higher levels of self-determined motivation, compared to nonself-determined motivation, perform at a higher level, have been found to persist longer, use positive coping strategies in stressful situations, and invest more effort (Mallett, 2005). In developing the autonomy-supportive motivational climate, which is more likely to characterize educational athletics, coaches can employ a number of recognized and beneficial behaviors. Coaches can provide choices to athletes with boundaries, provide a rationale for tasks, acknowledge the feelings and perspectives of others, encourage initiative and independence, provide competence feedback, avoid controlling behaviors, and reduce the perception of ego-involvement. Parents should be mindful of any coaching or educational philosophy that countermines the development of an autonomy-supportive motivational climate as this type of environment is one in which the

satisfaction of athletes' needs for self-determination, competence, and relatedness are best facilitated (Mallett, 2005).

It has been suggested that the primary way in which parents influence their child's youth sports experience is by serving as "providers" of experiences and that talented youth require a significant support system of adults in order to turn their potential into accomplishments and they serve the equally important role of influencing how their child interprets their sport experience (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006). Whether that influence is generally positive or negative may depend on having parents and a support system that is better educated and informed. From the same source, a recent national survey of junior tennis coaches was cited and found that an alarming number (almost 36%) of parents were perceived to have hurt the development of their players and that an increase in overuse injuries in young athletes is associated with the parental push to compete at a high level, specialize in single sports, and engage in year round intense training at very young ages (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006). Another research survey has found that winning was very important for 33% of parents, and 29% of players and 20% of parents reported that inappropriate behaviors were exhibited by parents (DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997). These parental inclinations and behaviors are generally associated with a more professionalized approach to youth sports participation and can work strongly against educational athletics and the long-term positive development of their children.

A significant problem in sport is the overemphasis on performance outcomes and the neglect of the essential objectives of development and enjoyment of the sport experience (Vealey, 2005). Focus group interviews conducted in 2006 with Michigan interscholastic coaches described parental issues as one of the least rewarding things that they have to deal with

as coaches of high school sports (Benham, Gould, & Carson, 2006). The responses indicated that many of the problem parents have over inflated views of their children's talent and have unrealistic expectations, that they do not see sport as a place for fun and growth, they display unsportsmanlike behaviors, they pressure their children to specialize in a single sport, they expect coaches to take over the parental role, and they possess an overemphasized outcome focus. Furthermore, parents who overemphasize outcome goals, lose perspective, and/or focus on a future financial return on their investment in their child's sports experience often create uncertainty, psychological problems, a lack of motivation, and high stress levels in their children (Gould et al., 2006). Most important is that many of the behaviors that some parents have engaged in actually have inhibited player development. Parents who exhibit similar types of behaviors may have difficulty keeping winning in proper perspective, and in turn criticize, pressure, or push their child in inappropriate ways (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006). *Hyperconformity* is a rigid code of behavior defined by the sport structure that athletes are expected to follow without question (Vealey, 2005). It is plausible that parents are likely to be as susceptible to engage in hyperconformity as both coaches and athletes. Therefore, it is essential that coaches, athletes, and parents recognize how society and the sport sub-culture create pressures to conform to behavioral codes that are unhealthy and destructive. For example, burnout in athletes typically occurs as a result of culture's desire to push athletes to specialize early at the expense of a balanced athletic philosophy and an enjoyable childhood while other problems such as aggression, violence, and a lack of sportsmanship occur due to similar philosophical imbalances and a cultural obsession with winning and irrational reasoning that violence against others is a part of the game (Vealey, 2005). Likewise, it is conceivable that parents, coaches, and administrators could be influenced by certain *hyper-conformant*

expectations and negative behaviors found in the growing world of professionalized youth sports.

The same investigation also identified many of the positive influences that parents can have on their young athletes as well. Coaches that participated in the survey indicated that almost 60% of parents to have a positive influence on their child's success (Gould et al., 2006). The most extensive parental behaviors were support ranging from providing athletic opportunities and needed logistical and financial support to serving as a source of unconditional love and social-emotional support (Gould et al., 2006). Other important parent behaviors indicated by the survey were holding the child accountable for on-court behaviors, emphasizing a positive attitude, modeling values, and providing discipline. In fact, coaches felt very strongly that positive parental interactions with the child should include appropriate discipline for behavior and that this indicates that parents may need to provide more discipline, especially based on the findings that positive parental actions include instilling core values (Gould et al., 2006). Parents are also critical in developing other key core values such as emphasizing the importance of hard work, having a positive attitude, and keeping success in perspective. These results are consistent with the indication that the primary way a parent influences their child's sport involvement is by serving both as their "provider" and "interpreter" of experiences and their significant support system.

The evidence indicates that parents are perceived to play a significant role in their child's athletic experience and that they play an important role in player development by instilling critical achievement of core values, habits, and dispositions that prepared their children for long term athletic success (Gould et al., 2006). It is clear in the data from these types of surveys that youth sports parents play a highly significant and critical role in their player's development on

and off the playing field. It is therefore essential that coaches and administrators begin working with the parents of youth sports participants in order to instruct them on recognizing both the characteristics of educational athletics and the dangers associated with the ongoing professionalization of youth sports. Likewise, parents of young athletes can and should become more positively involved by avoiding the behaviors that coaches feel are most detrimental while promoting and engaging in the most beneficial behaviors. In this way educational athletics may find traction and continue to gain ground in the fight against the professionalization of youth sport. According to this research the majority of parents do have a positive influence on their child's athletic development but there is far more work to be done in communicating and educating the parents that engage in those behaviors that are most detrimental to educational athletics.

One of the most beneficial ways that parents can participate in their children's athletic experience is found in the part they can play in facilitating a positive climate for young athletes to participate in. Parents have much to gain when the setting in which they and their children choose to proactively participate in works to facilitate the creation of positive experiences in sport. Besides the health benefits that come with being physically active in sport, children also learn valuable lessons about the joy that comes from working hard, supporting friends and coaches in challenging situations, and in improving their skills over time (Fry, 2010). The research is clear that schools and athletic programs should first and foremost establish a caring and supportive environment for their athletes because they will be more likely to enhance their athlete's physical, emotional, and psychological development (Fry, 2010). A caring climate may be the foundation upon which parents and their young athlete can help build an educational athletic experience and optimize their investment in their sports experiences. However, all

stakeholders in a youth sports program should be mindful of what their athletic philosophy chooses to care about, promote, and develop.

Coaches who want to create a positive and supportive environment for their athletes from the very beginning will give their athletes a warm and friendly greeting, make every athlete feel welcome, will set clear expectations, help them to build relationships, and bring parents on board (Fry, 2010). Parents who find themselves in the team's first meeting of the season may help the coach and/or administrator understand that it is their expectation that a caring and supportive environment should be created and maximized. Communicating these ideas in an educational and professional manner is critical. Accordingly, parents can model this behavior to the coach, to the athletes, and to the parents that are in attendance in the meetings and throughout the entire season. Educational athletics can teach parents that their actions and decisions in choosing to help coaches and administrators to create a caring environment may play a key role in addressing critical issues including children's withdrawal and dropout from sport, as well as the obesity epidemic in our country. Coaches and parents who proactively communicate and interact with each other are better positioned to create caring and supportive sports environments and parents who buy in to the benefits of such environments could help to combat the professionalization of youth sports. It has been shown that playing sport in these types of positive and developmental environments can help children have fun, continue to be physically active over time, and develop positive life skills (Fry, 2010).

The concept of positive youth development (PYD) has been defined as the promotion of desirable competencies that lead to positive developmental outcomes for youth (Camire et al., 2011). To facilitate the development of this broad educational concept, stakeholders can emphasize the promotion of various behavioral, cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal life

skill competencies that will help enable participants to succeed in the many different environments that comprise their lives. An athletic skill is generally characterized as a life skill when it can be successfully transferred from a sport setting to non-sport settings. Examples of these types of life skills include communicating effectively, making good decisions, problem solving, goal setting, leadership, and time management (Camire et al., 2011). The strategies that can be used by coaches to facilitate positive youth development include carefully developing a coaching philosophy, developing meaningful relationships with athletes, planning developmental strategies in their coaching practice, talking about and practicing life skills, and teaching athletes how life skills transfer to non-sport settings. These strategies can be used by coaches and parents to help nurture the qualities, skills, and attributes necessary for young athletes to become productive and contributing members of society. However, unless coaches, administrators, and parents commit to teaching and communicating these types of valuable life skills on a regular and on-going basis their value diminishes and important and sometimes essential learning opportunities can be lost and long-term development of youth athletes could be unrealized. Parents can remind their children of these lessons and can communicate with coaches and administrators their desire that these types of positive, broad, and long-term developmental outcomes should be a part of their educational and coaching philosophies.

Establishing positive, supportive, and trusting relationships in sport may be an important prerequisite for successful mental skills training that can include such psychological variables for athletes such as self-esteem, enjoyment, motivation, and anxiety control (Gould et al., 1999). Mental skills training has much to offer in regards to positive youth development. The objective of mental training is to help athletes achieve optimal development and performance, which can maximize their chances of achieving success on the playing field (Vealey, 2005). Mental skills

training may include goal mapping, imagery, P3 Thinking, physical relaxation, attention focus, managing energy, and self-confidence. While the specifics of each of these mental skill aspects cannot be covered in depth within this format, each is tremendously valuable in the development of successful athletes and individuals within the context of youth sports. SMAART goal mapping was briefly mentioned above and is a framework where goals are specific, measurable, aggressive yet achievable, relevant, and time-bound. Imagery is a powerful mental skill that uses all of the senses to recreate or create an experience in the mind that coaches and athletes can learn that will enhance performance (Vealey, 2005). P3 Thinking is likewise a powerful mental skills training platform that is designed to help athletes think better by being more purposeful, productive, and possibility-oriented in their thinking which helps athletes develop the skills to cope with the pressures of competition and performance (Vealey, 2005). Mental training is the use of cognitive behavioral strategies and techniques to enhance athletes' mental skills such as confidence, concentration, and dealing with pressure. Sports programs that utilize and understand the benefits of mental skills training should be very desirable to the parents of youth athletes because of their ability to help athletes learn to manage situations that they will face regularly on and off the playing field.

Parents and coaches alike may not feel comfortable nor understand the reasons behind the need to devote significant practice time to teaching mental skills but mental skills are considered life skills and not only can improve athletic abilities but can also help facilitate an athlete's personal development. Researchers and sports psychologists agree that while mental skills training cannot replace physical training, physical training and physical ability are not enough to succeed consistently (Michigan State University [MSU], 2013). Most often there is an established perception that mental skills training is unfamiliar and uncomfortable to teach, that

these types of skills cannot be learned, that there is a lack of time to devote to teaching and learning them, and that they are for elite athletes only. Coaches and parents should understand that players who experience problems with the mental aspects of their game can experience significant deficiencies in playing up to their potential (Gould, Medbery, Damarjian, & Lauer, 1999). Research supports that mental skills training practices can enhance athletic performance, and that athletes who possess superior mental skills such as confidence, concentration, and relaxation and engage in systematic preparation are more successful than those with less skill and who fail to engage in mental preparation (Vealey, 2005).

Similar to the related issues discussed above, parents can play a vital role in either helping or hindering the development of mental skills in their young athletes. A 1999 study of junior tennis coaches revealed that 80% of the players that these coaches work with experience problems with the mental aspects of their game and that 60% of players' parents were rated as interfering with the mental part of their child's game (Gould et al., 1999). The findings of this study are an indication that there exists a need to not only support sport psychological education for both coaches and players but that parents also need to be better educated as to the influences that they can have on their child's mental game. The implication again is that better mental skills training could lead to better developmental returns and to better relationships between coaches, athletes, and parents. All stakeholders, including parents, should support, encourage, and educate themselves as to the benefits of developing a mental skills philosophy and to the teaching of mental skills in educational athletics.

In a broader perspective, a philosophy is simply the basic beliefs that guide our behavior every day. However, a coaching philosophy focuses on how one's beliefs and values about the role of a coach impacts their behavior towards their athletes and team every day (Vealey, 2005).

A coaching philosophy logically leads one to specific behaviors such as the use of practice and training time, communication with athletes and parents, rewards and discipline, decision making, leadership style, goal mapping, and personal motives. Educational athletics might envision a coaching philosophy that prioritizes the well-being of athletes ahead of the team outcome of winning and that gives equal priority to the coaching objectives of striving to win and teaching life lessons to athletes (Vealey, 2005). Parents, administrators, and coaches can better facilitate the development of educational athletics and combat the professionalization of youth sports by including each other in the development of their own athletic philosophies. These philosophies need not be rigid as philosophy is a work in progress and is something that is constantly developing and changing as we gain additional experiences and new perspectives (Vealey, 2005). Developing an educationally focused coaching philosophy can presumably help all stakeholders keep their educational and athletic priorities in perspective.

Due to the extreme social pressure to win and perform at a high level, a philosophy that embraces a balanced triad of performance, development, and experience, is often ignored due to an overemphasis on performance (Vealey, 2005). The stakeholders in youth sports need to understand that optimal performance in sport is most likely to occur when athletes focus on developmental goals and the enjoyment of optimal experiences in their sport and that the most common source of imbalance in the sport psychology triad is an emphasis on performance outcomes, while ignoring the essential objectives of development and enjoyment of the sports experience (Vealey, 2005). Everyone involved should understand that competitive pressure is most often kept in perspective by focusing on the enjoyment of playing and on the personal development through sport even as they strive to perform well and win. In order to maintain a personal and program-wide educational perspective it is important to have a well thought out and

well communicated philosophy (Gould, 2007). Parents should be willing and able to participate in the ongoing development of their program's coaching and educational philosophies at every step of their child's athletic development journey.

Youth sports coaches play an important role in our society as they help to provide millions of children the opportunity to be physically fit and learn sport skills. The parents of young athletes continue to provide these opportunities for their children because of the perceived benefits of athletic participation and therefore play a critical role in the development of these youth sports environments. Sport is a highly desirable setting in which to facilitate positive youth development because it is a valued social activity that attracts a large number of participants and coaches are in a preferred position to use the power of sport to positively influence the lives of their athletes (Camire, Forneris, Trudel, & Bernard, 2011). Parents play a vital role in the lives of their athletic children and they will influence the development of positive youth sports environments and the educational athletics of the future. Unfortunately, the current reality is that the majorities of coaches do not have formal coaching education and therefore may not have extensive knowledge on how to foster suitable environments for development (Camire et al., 2011). Parents and other important stake holders often lack access to similar knowledge sources. If this continues to be the norm then the professionalization of youth sports will continue. The increased pressure and expectations that are placed on young athletes, the pressure to specialize early in a single sport, the inappropriate attitudes and expectations of athletes, the unhealthy parental involvement, the overemphasized outcome orientation, and the focus on winning and outcome goals will all continue to perpetuate within our country's athletic communities unless all of the stakeholders can better educate themselves and communicate more effectively with each other.

Educated parents will play an important role in the development of educational athletics. This knowledge will help them to maximize their experience and investment in these socially, psychologically, and physiologically beneficial activities and will help them to proactively and systematically combat the spread of the professionalization of youth sports. Simple participation in sport does not guarantee development and initiatives must be undertaken to help both coaches and parents more effectively facilitate positive youth development in the context of youth sport. Youth sports can be great fun to play for its participants and both entertaining and rewarding to watch for parents and coaches. It is a worthy and ethical endeavor not simply because of the physiological, psychological, and sociological benefits it can offer. When sport is properly taught it can provide access and experience to highly valuable lessons that can apply directly to life. These lessons are most often initially taught to children by their parents. These same parents also intuitively recognize the potential wisdom that can be found through the lessons that can be found in sport and they choose for their children to participate in them for the benefits that they can potentially provide. The professionalization of youth sport represents a powerful and growing social impetus of counter momentum that works against educational athletics and the positive development of youth. Without a personal and professional commitment from all of the stakeholders within our youth sports communities to better educate themselves and communicate proactively and professionally with each other, the proliferation of professionalized youth sports will continue. If left unchecked, the expansion of the professionalization of youth sports will continue to harm the naturally occurring and sacred intuition that lives and guides the learning, teaching, and loving relationships that exist between parent, child, and thus, community.

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