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Youth Sports

Throughout the younger years of my life, I was never thought to be a true “natural” athlete. Though I did not possess many god-given skills, I had a trait that served me very well, and that skill was work ethic. Coming from a family of athletes, in generations passed, I was always being sub-consciously pushed to make my family proud by pursuing excellence in athletics. My mother was always extremely supportive of me in anything that I did; on the other hand, my step-father was an overbearing parent-coach that pushed me in other ways. Just as my step-father had done to me, many parents have done the same, if not worse, to their precious offspring. Is this right of them to push so hard? Or are they creating holes in their kids’ lives?

The video we watched in class really opened my eyes to the fact that so many kids are being pushed way too hard at such a young age. What is the point of pushing such young kids to their limits day in and day out; to make champions? To get to the Olympics? To make the dreams of the parents come true? Or to create holes in their relationships? Even though the parents think they are pushing their sons and daughters to be the best that they can be, they are just making the gap between parent and coach bigger and bigger. When working with such young kids, it is easy for the adults to replace the love and affection that they need, with fear of disappointment or disapproval and non-stop sport; without even knowing it, many parents are guilty of this. I know this, because this is what happened with me.

At the age of 6 I was finally able to join the youth baseball league and I couldn’t be more excited. For the first time ever I was able to try-out for the travel team in my area. At the tryout, I was the youngest kid there by at least one year; as you can guess, I didn’t make the team. I was devastated and didn’t know what to do, but because I didn’t make the travel team, I was put on a minor league team for my first season. Though I thought this was the worst possible thing to happen to me, it was not. I soon started improving very quickly and was the best one on the team by the end of the season. But it didn’t stop there, I played three sports: soccer, basketball and baseball. During all three seasons I created a hitting and fielding regiment for my little 7 year old self to do. Before I knew it, I was on the travel team the following year.

I really thought that year was going to be different, but I was still the youngest on the team and did not get much playing time. So I worked and worked throughout that season and made little progress. The off season that followed is when my step-father started to intervene with my workouts, which I enjoyed for a few seasons. Soon after this he became the coach of my little league teams (he didn’t stop there because little did I know he was going to become one of my high school coaches). As I got into middle school everything started to change, my sports were more demanding, school work was more important, and now I had social obligations. With the additional baseball workouts (at least 2-3 extra hours a day) I could barely keep up. My baseball workouts included 1,500 hits on a Hit-A-Way, 300 ground balls, and 45 minutes of playing catch. Everyone knew how much time I put into practicing for baseball and that’s why whenever I stepped on a field everyone knew I was the best, and this was true throughout all on my little league career. All throughout my middle school years of baseball I lead the stats book of my league in every category: hits, on base percentage, singles, doubles, triples, homeruns, and fielding percentage.

With this history of stats, the high school coaches (including my step-father) were very excited to have a freshman like me coming in. When the line-ups were posted for varsity and junior varsity, I was

thrilled to see my name on under the varsity side. My freshman year was a struggle for me; it was at such a higher level that I wasn't entirely ready for. The coaches decided to move me down to JV for a tournament weekend. In that tournament, I was the leadoff batter and I hit two homeruns, three doubles and a triple and I never created an out. With this re-establishment of experience I was ready for Varsity again. From that point on I improved drastically until the end of the season. By the end of the season, I was being awarded multiple honors like All-Conference and All-Area. From this point my stats kept going up, and by my junior year I was batting .550 with a .625 on base percentage and 0 fielding errors. I received the honors of All-conference, All-Area, All-district, and All-State. Many colleges were contacting me at this point, but all I knew was baseball wasn't fun anymore. I had spent a little more than 5 hours a night for the last three years practicing baseball, and my passion was gone... I was sick and tired of baseball.

I was reminded of my history in baseball when we watched the section about a young figure skater by the name of Lindsay Agler. In her story, she was introduced to skating and found to have an aptitude for it. After that, her over-bearing mother cracked down on her, just as my step-father did to me. Her mother said, "End all, and be all is winning," and that is the one mindset that parents like this get into; they push/coach their sons and daughters until one day they can't take it anymore. In my situation, I was pushed so hard every day for years and I finally couldn't do it anymore, so I stopped playing my once beloved sport. In most cases like this a gap is made in the relationship between the child and the parent coach; luckily for me my mother was able to take my side and cushion the blow to my step-father, so that our relationship still remains intact.

In my opinion, I think the roles of parents in youth sports are to be the children's number one fans and supporters before being coaches. Don't get me wrong, having a parent as a coach is worthwhile because the child always wants to push themselves as to not disappoint the coach. When the pushing and encouragement of a parent coach becomes shoving is when there is a problem. For one, most youth sports participants are just testing out what they do and do not like to do, so what would be the point in pushing a child that doesn't particularly like that area of activity? Also, those who do go on from youth sports dwindle down throughout the ages leading to adulthood. If thought about this way, it is easy to say that many parents get too involved, because statistically it is less than 1 % of high school athletes ending up in the professionals.

For the parents who coach, I think there should be an unwritten code of ethics to follow. This code would follow a simple correlation between level of play, age of the athlete, and encouragement levels. So, when children are first starting a sport or activity, the parent coaches should focus on having fun, encouragement, and basic skills. As the child progresses as an athlete and in age, the parent coaches should gradually become tougher on the kids and focusing more on skills and less on encouragement. This way, by the time the child gets to high school athletics they have been weaned off of the encouragement phase of athletics and are onto more the skill building phase. By the time they get to high school, there will be few parent coaches and few coaches that will spare their feelings. So with this preparatory transition coaching, the children will be ready for and be more excited to play at the next level if they so choose.

Overall I thought this video was worthwhile, because it made me realize the different difficulties our youth runs into when they get involved with sport or start being physically active. Also, it made me learn and recollect some things about myself and the way my youth sports worked. I wish for no one ever to have to go through what I did, or what the many kids did in the video. Sports and physical activity should be fun for all and the children should feel privileged to participate, not forced.