Youth Sports: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Written by Louise Kuo Habakus, M.A.
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Most Americans love sports. We watch, play and talk about sports, and this passion influences our parenting. We attend sporting events, tune in to ESPN, discuss teams and players, and play sports with our children.

Kids take notice. They rank famous athletes among the most admired people in their lives (73 percent), second only to their parents (92 percent).
Thirty-five million U.S. children play organized sports. When they start, it’s a brave new world for parents. For me and my husband, Ron, it began when our son Nick, who was 8 at the time, declared, “I want to be a Major League Baseball pitcher.”

Cool, right? Athlete, fireman, President of the United States. These are standard, comforting responses to the question we insist on asking our children: What do you want to be when you grow up?

Only we weren’t asking. And Nick was intensely serious. We had just finished watching The Rookie (it’s the true-story, baseball version of Cinderella). I heard Ron say, “Maybe we should start with Little League first?”

My heart dropped a little in that moment. I imagined Nick’s heartbreak when he grasped that it wasn’t so easy to announce his way into baseball glory. Ron had gone to a different place, however, where fathers and sons play catch. Of course. How lovely.

We signed Nick up for spring baseball and he had a ball. (Did you know this expression has nothing to do with sports? A ball was a medieval religious celebration in which choirboys danced and sang while catching and tossing a ball. It must’ve been a great time, because the idiom stuck.) He was indeed pitching, and he was playing other positions, too. His teammates were nice. Their parents were nice. The coaches were terrific.

What was not to like? Then someone asked if we were doing “fall ball.” Nick’s face lit up and that sealed the deal. He was having so much fun that his brother, Ian, signed up, too. In addition to rec ball, Nick made the travel team and was selected for the all-star team. From there, things started to snowball. Let’s start with the good…

**Baseball’s Valuable Life Lessons**

My boys love baseball. They like being a part of a team. They are proud when they play well. They calculate their stats. They eagerly follow other teams and their standings in the league.
When they lose, they're eager to play the team again. When they win, they practically levitate.

Much to my surprise, I enjoy it, too—a lot! My heart is with them. I feel every triumph and misstep of every single kid. I absolutely love watching my sons play.

There is something precious about little boys and baseball—the way they adjust their hats, the serious, baseball-ready stance, their at-bat warm-up rituals. Little League captures some of the perfection of childhood. I appreciate the time and effort that parent-coaches devote to the kids. I see why fans say that baseball reflects real life. Ron and I talk at length about the important life lessons our boys are learning:

- You have to take turns.

- People are counting on you.

- Pay attention!

- Shake it off!

- Umps sometimes make bad calls.

- It's not all about you.
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- Make your contribution.

- You get better with practice.

- Go to the bathroom before getting dressed.

- You don’t always get what you want.

Parents say these things till we’re blue in the face. But it’s different when kids are living it, on and off the field.

The good stuff about youth sports is exceptional: exercise, fresh air, new friends, new skills, playing on a team. So why is baseball keeping me up at night? My parenting antennae are vibrating.

Parenting Macho

Baseball is a huge, time-sucking, money-sucking, energysucking beast. Youth sports can completely overwhelm the family routine.

Rec ball had two practices and two games each week per kid. With travel ball in the mix, Nick had baseball six days a week. The coaches asked us to arrive early and games lasted two hours. After school, we raced home, crammed down dinner, jumped into uniform, dashed outside to warm up, gathered the gear, and sped to the baseball field. Some days, their games
were scheduled on the same day at the same time on the opposite sides of town. Other days, they had back-to-back games: We arrived at 5 p.m. and staggered home close to 10. Sports are the new parenting macho.

I have a friend with four boys, all playing baseball. She seems to hold it all together and has a ready smile every time I see her. Me? I’m doing my best to be gung-ho (isn’t this all grand?) but inside, I am whining.

Brrrrr. Some games are played in seriously cold weather.

Chaos! The house is a disaster. Meals have to be fast and usually eaten in the car. The appropriate garments must be clean, so I am constantly doing laundry.

Uh-oh. Last minute e-mails bring news of field changes, time changes, forfeitures, and cancellations. It’s frowned upon to be late. It’s even worse to show up and realize that everyone got the e-mail except us.

Yikes, I’m complaining! But it’s not the disrupted family routine that worries me…

The Little League Arms Race

For me and Ron, there’s never been any question: Academics come first. Why are we making this huge effort for our kids to play sports? Anyone else wondering the same thing?

It’s time-consuming. Our entire family is doing less of everything except baseball. The kids are happy, but how much is too much?

It’s tempting to “keep up.” Some kids play on three or four teams at the same time. Others practice several hours a day in their own batting cages with automatic pitching machines,
receive private lessons from former pros, and sign up for specialized camps and clinics.

**It’s expensive.** The basics aren’t bad relative to other sports, but the costs start to add up with multiple teams, tournaments, extra gear, and instruction. Where do we draw the line?

**Winning seems awfully important.** The mood is different after a win than a loss, among kids and adults. It’s just a game, right? So why do I hold my breath when my son is at bat?

**Parents can be intense.** Sometimes they yell at my kid: “Whaddya doin’ swinging at that?” I don’t think Nick cares. Does it hurt my feelings? Yes.

Sports have become a way parents prove to the world that our kids—and we, by association—are impressive.

**Under Pressure**

The above gripes are straightforward parenting issues, to assess and resolve. They’re in the job description. What I agonize over is the pressure on our kids to perform. It’s the bottom of the last inning of a really important game (aren’t they all?). The team is down by one, bases are loaded, there are two outs, your kid is at bat, and it’s a full count—three balls, two strikes. Everyone is on their feet. His teammates are cheering him on.

There are two outcomes and one of them really stinks. Failure isn’t just a personal loss; it’s a team loss, too. No one is thinking about the errors in the first five innings. It all comes down to your kid. I hope Nick’s not feeling what I’m feeling. I want to throw up.

On my son’s rec team, all the kids played and rotated through a variety of positions. They placed first in the league and Nick was the lead pitcher. To protect players from injury, officials limit the number of pitches thrown, so it isn’t possible to pitch for rec and travel. This worked out well. Both teams had lots of good players and Nick couldn’t have been happier.
Then he had what people call a growth experience. It was a tournament game for his travel team, and the lead pitchers were bumping up against pitch count limits. To everyone’s surprise, the coach put our son in. This was Nick’s pitching debut on travel, and he…bombed.

Spectacularly.

Nick threw bad pitch after bad pitch, staying in for what seemed an eternity—his full pitch count. He was rattled. His shoulder hurt. He was not having fun.

To his credit, he hung in there and kept it together.

To his utter mortification, the officials terminated the game early, under the mercy rule when the other team leads by 10 runs. Losing is bad. To be “mercied” is humiliating.

Ron and I reminded each other about the great life lessons that kids learn from sports.

It’s character-building.

It’s useful to learn how to perform under pressure.

This is what it means to play competitive sports.

Yes, those things are certainly true. We were also trying to console ourselves. That day, that game, just sucked.
Or Is This All About Me?

When I think about Nick’s pitching episode, I wince. I feel self-conscious around the other parents. I want to tell them that Nick had shoulder pain and didn’t tell anyone. I play a bad game in my head. It’s called “What if?”

What if it happens again?

What if he doesn’t get another chance?

What if he doesn’t make the travel team next year?

My son was devastated for one day and the moment passed. Nick can talk about it calmly. He still loves baseball. He still wants to pitch. I, on the other hand, am perseverating. What does my attachment to Nick’s performance say about me?

When a response is disproportionate to the event, it means there’s something else going on. I get it. Here’s what I now understand. When my boys were little, they were sick. Doctors painted a grim prognosis. I rejected their pat conclusions but I was terrified. I was on my knees. I bargained with God.

This was a long time ago. They’re well now. But the fear never entirely goes away.

When my boys are doing well in sports, it means the 10 doctors who confidently told me that my children would never live normal lives were impressively, fabulously, extravagantly…

Wrong.
Incorrect.

Mistaken.

Wide of the mark.

Boy-oh-boy, does it feel great to write those words.

When my boys are doing well in sports, it is a final affirmation that they aren't sick anymore.

Whoa. That’s a lot to put on a game. That’s a lot to put on a kid. I am grateful it only took me a year to figure it out. Youth sports can become an arena in which parents inadvertently act out their own issues. Knowing this helps me to keep perspective and enjoy my son’s games. I wish I was done but I’m not. There’s more. Some experts are raising important concerns about youth sports.

It can be ugly.

**Something's Not Right**

The sensational media headlines about athletes are harrowing:

- Lance Armstrong Doping Scandal
Cheating Scandal Dulls Pride in Athletics at Harvard

Soccer Violence: Referees Under Attack

Top Ten Pro Athletes Charged with Murder

Doping, cheating, violence, murder? What’s going on?

Bad news about sports is not limited to professional athletes. Educators, social workers, psychologists, and other professionals who work with children have been sounding the alarm:

Steubenville Football Coach Knew Athletes Raped Girl, 16

5 Youths Held in Sex Assault on Mentally Impaired Girl, 17

Kids and Competitive Sports, Too Much Pressure?

Heads Up: Concussion in Youth Sports
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I read a helpful book: Until It Hurts: America’s Obsession with Youth Sports and How It Harms Our Kids. Author Mark Hyman is a former high school baseball player. As coach to his own two sons, he admits to poor judgment calls and outright mistakes.

There’s Reason for Concern

“Are youngsters from 12 years of age sufficiently mature and emotionally stable to the point where they should be engaging in an experience which has the potentialities for traveling 2,000 miles to play a game of baseball before eight or nine thousand spectators?” —New York Times op-ed, 1952

Professionals are highlighting the “dark side” of youth sports, including:

It’s about adults. Youth sports are becoming professionalized. They are increasingly designed to meet the emotional, entertainment, and financial needs of adults. Did you know there’s an official Little League World Series banana, detergent, sugary breakfast cereal, and popsicle? ESPN broadcasts 32 LLWS games from South Williamsport, PA. The stadium and surrounding areas accommodate over 40,000 fans. The top 10 Major League Baseball teams ranked by 2012 attendance averaged 35,899 fans per game.

Adults sometimes teach bad lessons. Parents admit that watching their kids play makes them anxious, irritable and angry. There’s a lot of yelling. Parents yell at their kids. Coaches yell at the kids. Parents yell at coaches. Parents irritate coaches. Coaches yell at officials. Parents assault officials and each other.

It’s elitist. A lot of attention is being paid to a small group of talented children. Less-capable players are benched more often. Many kids don’t play or quit prematurely due to performance anxiety or pressure. In 1958, the American Medical Association warned that catering to talented players “helps to perpetuate physical unfitness among the rest of children.” Seems we missed that admonition.

It’s too intense. Children used to start rec sports at 7 or 8. Now it’s routinely at 4 or 5 and as young as eighteen months. They play year-round. Some coaches demand 3- to 4-hour practices
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a day, six or seven days a week. Kids lose their enjoyment of the sport. They need extended breaks. Sports psychologist Richard Ginsburg cautions that a child that age can't differentiate his performance from who he is as a person. The National Education Association warns that high pressure elements give kids an exaggerated importance of sports.

It's dangerous. Children are getting injured at an unprecedented rate; 3.5 million children under 14 are treated for sports injuries annually. Nearly half are overuse injuries and more than half are preventable. Youth sports concussion clinics are “mushrooming,” says The New York Times. Drastic surgical reconstruction on children is no longer rare, including the “Tommy John” surgery (UCL reconstruction), which was originally intended as an extraordinary measure to prolong a professional athlete’s career.

Parents are aggressive. Some parents spend big bucks and devote hours equivalent to a full-time job to boost their children’s sports careers. As time, expenses and expectations rise, it becomes more difficult for kids to walk away or to switch sports. Adults ignore warning signs and keep injured kids in the game. Parents are afraid to rock the boat with coaches. The Holy Grail is a college athletic scholarship, which is extremely rare.

Children don’t have perspective. In an intense sports environment, there can be distorted relationships and opportunities to exploit vulnerabilities. Parents pursue “the best” coaches, coaches become surrogate parents, and children can be too eager to please. Children see how invested parents are in their success. Hyman says some children even contemplate suicide rather than confront parental disappointment.

Youth Sports Needs Grounded Parents

When it comes to sports, I’m no expert, on or off the field. But the research is pretty clear on some of the basics. Parents should take charge. Notes to self:

Chill out. When anything, including sports, takes on an outsize importance, there’s probably something else going on. It’s probably more about me than I realize. Parents can and should introduce options, but the motivation to play and excel must come from the child. My emotional needs do not matter.
Pay attention. If I think something is wrong, something is probably wrong—even if my child says everything is OK. I need to watch for problems with sleep, food, grades, drugs, friends, teammates, coaches, injuries, depression, anxiety and more. I should talk with others, get input, and ask for advice to help keep things in perspective.

It should be fun. I know when my kids aren’t having fun. Experts recommend that kids play a variety of sports. Obsession is dangerous and burnout sidelines many talented kids.

Tread carefully. When people come together for any purpose, there’s politics, including complaints about “Daddy ball.” Tricky stuff.

Moderation is a virtue. Sometimes less is more. I shouldn’t sacrifice to the point that it creates resentment in other family members or skews our priorities.

It’s always a choice. “Do you want to play this season?” Our kids need to know that we’ll support them either way.

Update: This article was originally published in 2013. Since then, Ian switched to basketball and has discovered longdistance running. Nick continues with baseball and is also adding basketball this winter. There are often tryouts of one kind or another. Regardless of the outcome, my kids will be fine. It’s their mom who must remember some important lessons!