



CHILDREN IN COMPETITIVE SPORTS

The question of children being exposed to competitive sports has many opinions associated with it. Children are competing in sports more and more at a very young age. My daughter, several years ago, became involved in figure skating at about the age of three and began competing at about the age of eight. My sons began playing baseball at about the age of six and began competing around the age of seven. I have my own opinions which I will set down in this article based on my own personal experiences as well as on my professional awareness of child development. There are many factors which enter into making judgments and I am attempting to develop this article so that it might be a helpful guide to parents in their making decisions regarding their own children.

First of all, I believe that the nature of the sport in which a child might be enrolled has a great deal to do with that child's ultimate welfare as a result of being exposed to a sport. Here, I will cite the sport of figure skating as an example of one that holds a great deal of what I believe to be harmful stress for children. There are three different focuses of figure skating ... individual and dance. The former involves children performing and competing by themselves in front of a panel of judges who determine their place in their group based on certain criterion. The top three competitors receive trophies and the rest of the group does not. The manner in which the competitions are arranged is based on the level of ability that each competitor demonstrates. Figure skating dance competitions are designed in the same manner except that there are partners dancing to the music rather than individuals.

Now, I'm getting ahead of myself. In the early training that children receive, the coaches attempt to make their learning various moves a good deal of fun. I'm talking about children who have barely learned to walk moving about an ice surface learning the various types of spins, etc. that the professional

skaters are so highly touting in their performances. However, within a relatively short period of time, that sense of having fun moves into some serious training that requires a good deal of practice, frustration, precision and heartache when failure to execute those moves occurs. And when the “fun” becomes frustration that is when the problems begin to arise.

I remember a conversation that I had with a famous hockey coach, Scott Bowman, who was the winningest coach in the NHL with a number of Stanley cups, the ultimate prize in professional hockey, under his belt. He was also coaching his son in little league hockey in Amherst NY where I resided and where I coached as well. His opinion was clear on the age at which children should be competing in any sport. He cited the age of twelve as the number because at this age level, a child’s body has begun to develop in ways that will accommodate some of the rigorous training that competition requires. Previous to that age, he contended, children should be having fun and not be subject to the rules of the game as evidenced in the linesmen and referees that are called upon to govern competitive games when a child is seven or eight years of age. I categorically concur with his premise.

I grew up playing “pond hockey” in my neighborhood. Frozen “ponds” of water found in empty lots served as the foundation for me and my friends having a terrific time. We would begin playing in the early morning ... around 8 a.m. ... and we wouldn’t quit until dinner time. Everyone would bring something to eat ... we’d build a fire ... and just skate and shoot until exhaustion set in. It was marvelous! In fact, when I worked with a group of professional hockey players from the Buffalo Sabres NHL hockey team, I used their visualizing their playing “pond hockey” as a means of re-introducing some fun into their playing that game ... fun that they had lost in the process of their intense need to compete in order to remain viable contenders on their team. By the way, the visualization worked and their performances improved as a result.

Apart from the importance of a child’s body’s development, another major consideration is their emotional development. A child’s emotional development would suggest that although it is important for them to learn to compete in this very competitive world, their perception of that competition needs to be a healthy one. The major “healthy element” is the issue of winning vs. losing. Children are vulnerable and want to gain a sense of control in their dependent lives and so winning usually constitutes that sense

of control. Their sense of dependence is transformed into independence when winning is part of their life experience and losing is a defeat ... not just of a competition but of their ability to experience that sense of control.

I am of the opinion that oftentimes a child's vulnerability is exploited by coaches and parents who forget that they are just children. A parent's living vicariously through his/her child's accomplishments can become a devastating pressure for the child and warp their view of what healthy competition really is all about.

Perhaps I've unfairly chosen a sport that creates a good deal of frustration and anguish for children and parents. However, I have coached three sports (hockey, basketball and baseball) and there are very real stressors and, what I believe to be, harmful effects, on children in other sports as well. However, apart from the prize or trophy that serves up the incentive for children to continue to compete as perhaps being an unreasonable one, there are two other factors which tend to sour me besides the nature of the sport and competition. Of course, the first one that comes to mind is that of pressure coming from parents or parental figures including the coaches themselves whose reputation might hinge on a child's abilities and performance. Although they might deny this point, I know it to be true that oftentimes coaches are in competition with each other for top places in competitions and for more students to be added to their roster of athletes.

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And now, I will include a number of questions and answers to help readers understand some of the implications of children and adolescents playing sports of all kinds. In addition to my perspectives on issues, some of the answers contained the impressions of a former NFL player.

Q-How important is it for a child to have fun while engaging in a sport?

A-The very core of a child's life revolves around the word "fun". It is very critical that from the first introduction of any sport have an element of fun associated with it. The "Fun" part is what the child will look forward to each time it comes around and provide for continued future enthusiasm as well.

Q-What role will having fun have both at the outset of a child's sports' career as well as in his/her later involvement in their particular sport?

A-If the element of fun isn't introduced in a repetitive manner from the outset, it will be difficult to maintain the child in the activity. Once that is introduced, it becomes the enticement to perform the activity to a higher level. The excitement and reward system for achieving at a higher level perpetuates the excitement and the fun continues (professional athletes really do have fun playing even though it's a business).

Q-How could “dedication to a sport” be best defined as a healthy and effective working definition?

A-Maintaining the element of “fun”, having a healthy outlook including reasonable expectations of one's given ability and having a perspective that will add competitive pressure but not an obsessive attitude toward playing or achieving in the sport.

Q-How important is it for children to engage in a sport on their own first (unsupervised) without entering organized training?

A-Basics should be introduced to the child before they are put into a competitive situation. This doesn't have to be organized.

Q-At what age should children begin to engage in organized sports?

A-Children usually let you know when they are ready. It's just an instinct, but you can tell.

Q-What role should sports play in a child's healthy development?

A-I'm really bias on this but I think that competing in sports prepares a solid foundation for the competitive world ahead. Life until retirement is competition.

Q-What should the goal of teaching a particular sport be for a child just entering that sport?

A-Teaching basic sound fundamentals. Also making it a fun activity.

Q-What role does competition play in a child's development?

A-It prepares the child mentally for what is to come. It teaches them how to reach down and get something that they may not otherwise have realized they had. It teaches them how to work a little harder than they might have otherwise.

Q-How can competition become a problem for a child?

A-They have to be taught in the beginning that they should strive to be the best that they can be. Being better than the other person is not the important thing. If this isn't taught, there could always be the possibility that they could develop an inferiority complex.

Q-How can competition help a child to develop and mature into a healthy adult?

A-If a child is taught the work ethic to be the best that they can be, then competition can become a barometer to test that work ethic. Everyone can always do better than previously but that is relative to each person's capabilities and talents. Competition can help bring out the best in individuals as long as it is within a reasonable expectation level..

Q-How important should the mental side of sports be emphasized in a child's training?

A-I think it's as important as the physical side. It's a real risky area and I don't think one should delve too deeply into the mental side if they aren't trained properly.

Q-What should the responsibilities of parents be for children engaged in organized competitive sports?

A-The main area they can have is to be Supportive. That means attending practices and games as much as possible. Parents that have a background in the particular sport will have an edge over others and may be observant enough to make more input. Those who have knowledge of motivation may be able to recognize areas where they might be able to advise the coach with certain input that might help him to motivate their son or daughter.

Q-How active should parents become in their child's training or actual play in a particular sport?

A-This is dependant upon parental experiences and levels that they attained in the sport. The more experience the more involvement. However, parents with little or no experience will be absolutely amazed at the effect they can have by just attempting to play and become involved with their child's activity. Children enjoy parents practicing with them and often times the child becomes the teacher and a different bond is created. However, that having been said, there is EXTREME DANGER in parents living vicariously through their child and exerting pressure for them to do better ... at times beyond the child's real capabilities ... and the effect on the child becomes extremely harmful in that they may end up feeling that their efforts are in vain. All children want to please their parents but a parent who falls into this trap is usually oblivious to the harm being done. I have seen this occur repeatedly in all sports that I have coached, managed and officiated.

Q-How should a parent handle a situation stemming from emotional or physical abuse by a coach?

A-Emotional abuse should be reported to the league's superiors. Physical abuse should be reported to the Police.

Q-How much emphasis should be placed on winning?

A-If you develop a good work ethic and always do the best you can, winning will take care of itself. If losing motivates you to work harder the work is rewarded by winning. Clearly, however, winning and losing are an essential part of life and must be considered similarly in sport as well. I would recommend a balanced emotional perspective be experienced and taught by both parents and coaches so that children can learn this vital and valuable lesson.

Q-How should parents and coaches help children deal with losing?

A-Losing is a part of life. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. Maintaining a good work ethic helps teach a balanced perspective as well as serve as an incentive to do better. Correcting mistakes made in the course of competition in practice sessions improves overall competitive performance.

Q-Should incentives be used to improve a child's performance (bribery, etc.)?

A-Only if those incentives do not take on a bribing nature. Good natured competition in the form of games, etc. to improve performance will always bring about enthusiastic play as well as helping to maintain the important facet of continuously having fun playing a sport.

Q-What should the responsibilities of coaches be for children engaged in organized competitive sports?

A-Coaches should realize that they are only in the child's life for only a brief period of time. This is a one time opportunity to make a positive impact on the child's life. They should do all they can to help produce a healthy and productive outcome realizing that coaching a sport is also coaching a child's life as well.

Q-What might a healthy perception of "winning and losing" be?

A-WINNING: Knowing that you gave the best effort you could have given under the given circumstances.

LOSING: Knowing that you can analyze and correct mistakes and look for areas upon which you can improve.

Q-What should the attitude of adolescents be in respect to playing a sport?

A-Realizing that they are doing something that they enjoy rather than having the expectation that they must be perfect or that they are training to go into the professional ranks in order to reduce the stress of competition. It has been clearly shown that the more relaxed an athlete is, the more successful their performance levels become.

Q-Should there be a different goal for a young person engaged in a sport for some time vs. when they first entered that sport?

A-As a youngster remains in a given sport for an extended period of time, their ability and performance levels usually increases. However, the goal should still be one of having fun and not having undue expectations that produce unwanted and unnecessary stress on the individual.

Q-How can training take place for maintaining focus?

How can training for “staying in the zone” take place?

A-The methods that I employ is an athlete’s learning relaxation methods in order to experience the art of visualization and imagery. These methods enable a mental attitude and perspective that tends to insure successful implementation of the techniques necessary in order to perform well.

Q-How important are athletes’ feelings in performing their athletic role?

A-In Individual sports as well as Team sports an athlete should have a sense of pride when performing. They have devoted a great deal of time and effort to get to where they are. When it’s time to perform, it’s payoff time. It’s time to reap the fruits of their labor. They should be prepared both physically and mentally. If they play a team sport they still have Individual responsibility.

Q-What are some of the emotions that will help an athlete in his/her performance and how can they be trained to recognize them?

A-The biggest emotion to overcome is FEAR. FEAR of failure. It’s going to come no matter what level of competition you are in. It never disappears. When it does, it’s time to hang it up. Remember, very early on we stress developing a good work ethic. Remember, early on we stress learning from our mistakes. Well, this is the payoff. If you learn those two, you can overcome the emotion of FEAR. It goes away once the competition begins

because you realize that you are prepared. If you have not prepared, the fear remains because you are not confident that you will not succeed.

Q-What emotions are detrimental to an athlete's performance and what kind of training should take place to instruct them about the effects?

A-Doubt, fear, unreasonable expectations, focusing on the opponent instead of "playing your game", lack of confidence in one's ability, overcompensating, trying too hard to achieve beyond one's abilities are all emotions that will interfere with successful performance..

Q-What is the correlation between athletes' personal lives and their playing their sport?

A-There is what I call THE CARRYOVER EFFECT which is a direct correlation between the two. Keep in mind that an athlete is the same person he is in his personal life and the issues that surround him/her personally will most certainly affect athletic performance.

Q-How much emphasis should parents and coaches place on a child's playing their sport vs. having a more balanced lifestyle?

A-Balance is the key to life! Apart from sports, I believe that children should be exposed to as many other activities as possible in order that they might be able to gravitate to what they feel comes natural and what they have the most "fun" doing. I have repeatedly seen children, particularly in individual sports such as golf, tennis or gymnastics have no activities or social life outside of their sport which deprives them of a healthy, normal and balanced lifestyle outside of their sport.

Q-What role does an athlete's value system and priorities have in their playing a sport and how much emphasis should be placed on that in their training (both in their families and "on the field")?

A-To me developing a "good work ethic" and "learning from ones mistakes" is a value system and should be carried over in every day life.

Readers of this article are invited to read my book *The Legend of Little League* which was written as a primer for parents and coaches who govern the experiences of children in all different types of little league sports. To order the book, you can go to my webpage (www.charlesmbonasera.com) and click on the heading BOOKS.

A Brief Biographical History

After an over 40 year career as a professional psychotherapist and Director of The Sports Stress Clinic in Amherst, NY, Charles Bonasera came to Florida and decided to use the benefits of his previous professional experiences in his new roles of Consultant in Life Management and Business Coaching as well as his expertise as a Motivational Speaker. He once again became involved with athletes in different sports training them with his techniques to help them develop and maintain focus as well as staying in their zone. Much of his training methods are derived from the CD collection he developed under the heading of WIN-WIN SECRETS as the President of Personal Identity Controls. This collection consists of thirty-six programs dealing with vital issues in the management of stress.

Another role that he adopted to add to his professional career was that of Author. Early in the 1980's he wrote Guide to a Life Management Process which he has re-written as a workbook to successfully help people manage their stress which includes his own Working Model. As a result in his interest in golf and realizing that it was essentially a "mind game", he wrote The Mental Side of Golf which can benefit the beginner as well as professionals playing the game of golf.

He then compiled over five-hundred sayings that he had developed in the course of his professional career as stimuli to help people change patterns in their lives entitled How to Stay Well and Live Life to the Fullest. This was followed by a book documenting case studies around disruptive life patterns including ways to change them under the name of How in the Hell Did This Happen to Me? Both his personal involvement in sports as a participant, coach, manager and in his role in officiating, inspired him to write a primer for parents and coaches entitled The Legend of Little League.

Charles invites you to view his website at www.charlesmbonasera.com as well as to write with your comments and questions to his e-mail address (charles@charlesmbonasera.com). He would also be very happy to communicate with his readers by telephone should they desire. His professional motto is "seeking alternative methods to happiness" and wishes those touched by his words to practice the three secrets to a happy life: "enjoy life and enjoy it thoroughly ... develop and maintain a sense of humor ... bring as much love into your life as possible.