

The pressures of kids' sports

Competition can tax time, patience and integrity

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Youth sports can breed confidence and teamwork, as well as frustration if excess pressures come to bear.

(PORT CHESTER, New York) -- Sam Dresser, 10, came home confused from his Little League baseball practice and told his father, Richard, about his coach's plan to score a run.

A player would look to the bench after reaching base. Prompted by a certain signal, they would not only slide when trying to advance to the next base, but afterwards pretend to be injured, an apparent attempt to circumvent Little League rules restricting use of pinch runners.

"That way, we take out that player, put in a faster runner, and maybe score a run," said a wide-eyed Sam, now 14, recounting what his coach told the team.

The more Richard heard, the angrier he got. What the coach called "strategy," he called cheating.

But the playwright also saw an opportunity to spin this tale of adults putting winning above integrity. The end product, "Rounding Third," hits on themes resonating today, as children join a dizzying number of sports teams under pressure to not merely win, but to please parents and coaches, earn college scholarships or, least likely of all, become a professional.

"A lot of it comes out of the personal frustrations that parents feel in their own lives," Dresser said. "They want to see their own kids win, and it's very easy to go over the line ... The stakes are just a lot higher than they used to be."

Experts cite this mentality as one reason many children give up on sports at an early age. According to "Fair Play," the name of a book and National Football-sponsored outreach group, more than 75 percent of children quit organized sports by the age of 12.

Many student athletes, as well as their parents, say their athletic experience has taught them valuable lessons about teamwork, commitment, hard work, even disappointment. When run properly, sports experts and child psychologists say organized athletics can also help build character and boost confidence.

In many cases, the biggest challenges are putting the games into perspective and finding balance -- between sports and school, playing hard and playing dirty, winning and losing.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to win," said Dan Gould, director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports. "But I think our culture emphasizes winning so much that [if] people that don't win, it's like, 'Why do I do it?'"

A full fill of sports

For 12-year-old Tyler Welence of Ridgewood, New Jersey, the issue was not necessarily winning, but having enough time to play as many as four sports a year.

"Sometimes, I just didn't want to go because it was too cold and I was tired or something," Tyler said.

His parents, Craig and Sarah Welence, grew somewhat concerned and decided to ask Tyler not to play soccer last fall.

That does not mean he's been taking it easy. In the past year alone, Tyler played in 118 baseball, basketball and lacrosse games -- and that doesn't include practices.

In Ridgewood, concern about burnout and driving kids too hard led community leaders to ban extracurricular activity for one Tuesday night each March -- no practices, no games. Still, for many of the other 364 days, the Welences and millions of others like them spend hours each day on the road and on the field.

How will the Welences decide if Tyler and their other son, 9-year-old Riley, overdo it?

"When it completely overtakes the family, then it would be too much," Sarah Welence said.

Tyler says sports has helped him learn to accept that "life isn't always fair," while Riley says he's absorbed his coaches' advice not to get too down. But their parents say that the lessons of youth sports aren't confined to children alone.

"[Sports] teaches them not to take life too seriously. So you lose a game -- there's always another one," said Sarah Welence. "Parents could learn from the kids, they really could."

Outside pressures

WEEKEND SCHEDULE

Sports keep Tyler Welence, 12, and his brother Riley, 9, and their parents busy year-round. The following is a sample weekend schedule for the family -- one representative of the time pressures many sports-centered family's face:

SATURDAY:

- **9 a.m.:** Riley has an in-town recreation baseball game
- **10 a.m.:** Tyler has an in-town lacrosse game
- **2:30 p.m.:** Tyler has an in-town recreation baseball game
- **6 p.m.:** Tyler has an out-of-town travel baseball game
- **6 p.m.:** Riley has an out-of-town travel baseball game

SUNDAY:

- **9:30 a.m.:** Tyler has an in-town travel baseball doubleheader
- **Noon:** Tyler has an out-of-town lacrosse game

- **4 p.m.:** Riley has an in-town travel baseball game

Another reason for burnout, according to sports observers, relates to the fact that U.S. children today begin participating in organized sports earlier than ever before. In some places, 3-year-olds join t-ball, soccer and other athletic leagues.

Many leagues -- particularly those requiring extensive regional, national and international travel -- are increasingly competitive and demanding, a trend that often corresponds with heightened pressures from adults.

"Kids feel trapped. They feel like they've got no life," said Augie Mendoza, associate director of sports for the YMCA of the USA. "They end up getting burned out."

Brittany Perri, 14, has felt that stress. A softball player from Green Brook, New Jersey, she dreams of playing in college. The greatest pressure, she says, came from her coach.

"It's hard enough when you're making errors and you're trying to do your best. And then you have to come into the dugout and have a coach say, 'If you make one more error, then I am going to take you out of the game,'" Perri said.

Her coach was not only tough, but never let her pitch -- choosing instead to put his own daughter in the game, Brittany said. Frustrated, she considered quitting before being swayed by her mother, a high school athletic director and former softball player and coach.

"You really have a choice," Kathy Perri recalled. "Are you just going to deal with it for one summer and teach your kid to get through these hard times? Or are you going to have a confrontation every time you go to the field? Or are you going to have your kid quit?"

Kathy Perri now does homework herself -- checking out the coaches before Brittany, her only child, joins any team -- and encourages other parents to do the same.

"If it's all about winning, that kid could be in for a long summer, a negative summer and may end up never playing again," said Perri, who works at Morristown (New Jersey) High School.

Learning how to win -- and lose

That message is central to Dresser's play, which has appeared off-Broadway and in regional productions.



About 75 percent of children give up organized sports by age 12, according to a research group.

The play, inspired by his son's former coach, features Don, a coach consumed by his desire to win, and Mike, a coach who thinks having fun should be the goal.

Dresser said he was surprised to learn that, as a coach, he was a little like Mike and Don.

"I learn really unpleasant things like I really want to win ... I want the kids to have fun, but it's more fun to win than to lose," Dresser said with a laugh.

At the play's end, Mike -- the one who just wants to nurture the kids -- comes to a similar conclusion.

"That's honest," said Dresser. "I think that's in all of us, the desire to win. We have to acknowledge that ... I actually believe we should be teaching kids how to win -- how to try to win, at least."

That's just one of the many lessons children can get out of sports, said Dr. Al Petipas, director of the National Football Foundation Center for Youth Development.

"It gives young people an opportunity to learn about themselves," Petipas said. "Kids have an opportunity to get immediate feedback on what they do on a regular basis."

On Memorial Day, such perspective came into play for Dresser and his son, whose team -- Hastings-on-Hudson -- lost in the Little League playoffs to Port Chester.

"I talked to [Sam] a little bit. What can you say when you play that well?" Dresser said.

While winning might be more fun, he says, losing can be more valuable in the long run.

"One of the great values of kids playing at this age is that you learn how to deal with both winning and losing. That's what life is: You deal with a lot of disappointment ... Your life will be a lot better if you know how to deal with that."