



THE OPINION PAGES | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

All Played Out

By RON J. TURKER JULY 27, 2014

PORTLAND, Ore. — PARENTS and doctors may have disparate views on the goals of kids' sports. I know how disparate because I happen to be both. As a pediatric orthopedic surgeon and the dad of a kid who loves sports, I see this world from both sides.

Recently, I told a teenage boy, whom I'll call Lucas, and his parents that he had torn the anterior cruciate ligament (A.C.L.) in his knee. The matching soccer jerseys worn by the entire family were a hint as to how the conversation would go.

"You don't understand, this is his life!" Mom said.

"We need this fixed — he's in the Olympic Development Program! He's elite," said Dad.

Lucas is 13. The next 40 minutes of what had been a 20-minute appointment were spent trying to reset expectations. Lucas would need a minimum of six months to heal the reconstructed graft. On top of that, his bones were still growing, so the surgical technique would have to be altered to a trickier and less tested procedure. And the harsh reality: Any knee that has had a major injury will never be 100 percent "normal." His parents were furious and left for the inevitable second opinion.

These visits are exhausting and more common every year. The question is why.

One reason is that our very young kids play harder, and for more hours, than ever before. As a collective, we, the parents, have bought into a new and lucrative paradigm. Our kids no longer play sports; they are youth "athletes."

The landscape of youth sports has changed markedly in the last 20 years. Free play, where children gather after school, pick a game and play until called in for dinner, is almost extinct. Highly organized and stratified sports have

become the norm. Time, place and rules are now dictated to our kids rather than organized by the kids.

Granted, the stigma of being picked last by neighborhood captains still weighs heavily on some of us, so maybe a neutral “adult coach” is just what’s needed. But these paid coaches need to earn their keep and feel pressure to go for the win, so many kids are excluded from even lining up, or they’re relegated to the “Wreck League” (a derogatory reference to the kids who just want to play for noncompetitive recreation).

Eight- and 9-year-old children are often pressured to choose a single sport and to play it all year or risk showing a “lack of commitment.” Kids are “invited” to play in extra-seasonal leagues, but the invitation comes with a caveat. The implicit message is, show up or don’t expect much playing time during the regular season. Kids sense the pressure and sometimes it seeps out in unexpected ways.

More juvenile athletes are coming in with repetitive stress injuries (both physical and, in a sense, emotional) that were once rare. Now children show up in my office repeatedly with vague aches and pains, usually in different locations and hard to diagnose but often relieved with a few weeks of rest. By the third visit, I catch on and ask whether they truly enjoy their full-time commitment. If given the emotional space, the kids will often reply no. They just want a break.

As parents, we want what’s best for our kids but we’ve abdicated our parental rights and duties to the new societal norm. Youth sports have become big business. Millions of dollars flow to coaches, leagues, equipment, road trips, motels, tournament fees — and the list goes on. We give in to the herd mentality along with our confounded friends so that our kids won’t be seen as outliers.

We buy the hype about scholarships to college, but the numbers don’t support the athletic route to money. Despite what your “professional coach” tells you about your child’s athletic prowess, it isn’t possible to tell if your 12-year-old has the right stuff to be a college athlete. Very few scholarships are full-ride packages; most don’t come close to covering the cost of college. But when I tell parents that their kid’s chance of scholarship money is less than 2 percent, they shake their heads in sympathy for the other 98 percent.

I treated two teenage sisters who had career-ending knee injuries in the same year. Fifteen thousand dollars of their father’s annual income had been

going to three different elite traveling softball teams. His goal was a college scholarship. Now their knees and chances at athletic scholarships were ruined. But \$15,000 a year would have been a great D.I.Y. college fund.

Lucas will be fine. He'll learn how to navigate adversity and that, in and of itself, is a valuable life lesson. In the future, he'll make decisions for his own kids. Maybe by then we will all have relaxed a bit.

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