

Game On-The All-American Race To Make Champions Of Our Children

Written By Tom Farrey

Introduction

It was the same for kids in most other sports. Elite competition only began around the start of middle school, most visibly with the Little League World Series. And even that event had a freak-show quality to it, with victory often going to the team with the most adult-sized pitcher.

Now it's rare to see kids of any age playing sports in any location without the company of a coach.

Allowing Cole to join the team was the result of oddly a conservative impulse-the preserving of an option, the chance to have a chance later on.

No one just takes up a sport in ninth grade and makes the cut anymore, unless they're an incredible raw athlete. Now, we've effectively holding our varsity tryouts in the grade school years.

As Anna floats on the outside of the beehive-the smallest and most timid girl on the field-I know that she's wondering if sports are for her. My fear is that she's asking herself that question too early, before she has had a chance to grow into her body. I wonder why we as parents and as a society would want to have any 7-year old ask that question, given the benefits of playing sports and the hazards of physical inactivity.

Youth sports is an institution at a historic crossroads, one in which performance matters more than participation does. It's less and less accessible to the late bloomer, the genetically ordinary, the economically disadvantaged, the child of a one-parent-household, and the kid who needs exercise more than any other-the clinically obese.

Most team sports have lost participants since the mid 1990's.

Organized team sports tend to emphasize elite players and competition, freezing out millions of children who might like to play for fun.

“Be a Tiger”. In the photo, Woods is hitting bravely into a thick fog. It’s a metaphor that resonates with today’s parents, sold on the notion that champions can be manufactured through faith and early participation.

Even the lesson of Michael Jordan’s success is no match for Woods. The most accomplished athlete of our era only began to focus his energies on basketball in 11th grade, when he finally made his high school varsity team. His experience is not uncommon. Retired NFL tight end Kellen Winslow began playing football in the 12th grade. Current tight end Tony Gonzalez was also a college basketball player. Tim Duncan was a competitive swimmer for much of his youth. Even in tennis, a sport long known for obsessive parents, a study shows that most to American pros walked a multiple-sports path, the way, Andy Roddick, who played basketball through high school, did. The world’s top tennis player, Roger Federer, played soccer into his early teenage years. Each of these athletes can cite the mental and physical benefits of learning other sports while young.

Our doctors should be specialists, not our children.

Participation levels in team sports peak at age 11, then decline rapidly at around age 15. That’s when teenagers reach high school, with it’s limited number of available teams.

How much success are we truly seeing? For all the resources lavished on a limited set of early achievers, the downstream results on the international stage have been underwhelming at best.

On the grassroots level, at the base of the feeder system, too many kids are funneled into too few sports. At too early of an age. With too little emphasis of basic motor development, too much focus on the final score, and too much early specialization. Children are also under the guidance of coaches with too little training in what is and is not age appropriate.

What if sports are made to be fun, and measures taken to keep as many children involved as possible, as late as possible, then more winners will emerge at the top.

Chapter 1-Bonus Babies

Less than half of all American children will play high school sports. Of those, only 1 in 28 will go on to play any sport in college, at any level. Of those, 1 in 75 will get drafted by one of the major professional leagues where a full time job can be found.

Throw in the occasional golfer, tennis player, auto racer, bass fisher, and rodeo cowboy, and perhaps 300 maximum-of the 4 million babies born each year ultimately will pull a paycheck long enough to plausibly say they had a career in pro sports.

Myth NO. 1 The best athletes are those who work the hardest. The truth, the elite often have innate, natural advantages.

Chapter 2-Freak of Nature

Myth NO.2 Early focused skills training makes a Tiger roar. The truth, in golf sometimes, in most other sports, no.

Chapter 3-First Cut

Myth NO. 3 America is the world's athletic superpower. The truth, we're the fattest nation-and it all starts in preschool.

In 1985, the University of Chicago educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom studied the development histories of 150 elite athletes, musicians, artists, and academics going back to early childhood. He found striking similarities in their paths to excellence. He wrote that "no matter what the initial characteristics of the of the individual, unless there's a long and intensive process of encouragement, nurturance, education, and training, the individuals will not attain extreme levels of capability in the particular fields." They worked hard. They benefited from the guidance of high-quality mentors. They were given opportunities to achieve mastery. But before any of that could happen, at the entry phase the sport or activity had to capture their imagination. A wild romance was born somehow. The same development was later found in a survey

of U.S. Olympians, whose affection for their sport would serve as fuel for self-improvement throughout their careers.

How do you spark passion? The impulse of many modern parents—even those with the most modest of hopes for their child athlete—is to attempt to arrange the marriage through early, persistent doses of organized team sports. In many U.S. communities, the process is set into motion around age 4.

(Soccer). By the end of elementary school, the very best child athletes could be playing 100 outdoor and indoor games a year—twice as many as the best French teenagers. This is not the way great players are made, Merelle says. “Everyone wants to win games. That’s good,” he says. “But how do you win? If you’re too focused on winning games, you don’t learn to play well. You get too nervous, because you’re always afraid to make errors.”

The French system recognizes the value of unstructured play. And that innovation and passion bloom when children are given the time and space to create games on their own. Without uniforms. Or league standings. Or game clocks. Or emotionally invested adults. It’s an inspired place in which improvisation rules, rewards are intrinsic, playing personalities are developed—and a child learns to see things that don’t reveal themselves as readily in formal games.

Sports scientists have a name for this seemingly supernatural talent, field sense. It’s the ability to anticipate the movements of people and objects in motion, and takes many forms. It could be the act of finding the open man just before the player breaks free. And while some people may have more of an innate capacity to develop the skill than others, researchers now believe that it’s a talent that can be trained for—through, ironically, free-form play.

One of the leading scientists in this area is Australian skills-acquisition expert Damien Farrow, who, in interviewing elite athletes, discovered the value of loosely organized games in the development of flexible thinking and acute spatial awareness. “We should be molding our programs on that,” Farrow has said.

“And what do we do instead? We put children in regimented, very structured programs, where their perceptual abilities are corralled and limited.”

(Soccer reference). That 7-year-olds shouldn't play in formats any larger than five-on-five, to maximize touches and keep everyone involved. That no child should get slotted into one position until well into his or her teenage years. That individual technique is far more important to teach through age 16 than tactics are. That coaches need to be quality demonstrators, so tht kids can visually lock down the fundamentals. That yelling at players should not be tolerated. And, above all, that training must be fun.

Myth NO. 4 Organized competition breeds success. The truth, unstructured play is often more valuable.

Insert-see the six stages of long term development, developed by Dr. Istvan Balyi I've attached these to the end of the notes.

Kids must be allowed to play before they can be expected to play hard.

We've slotted kids into the Training-To-Compete stage (see attachment) and largely bypassing the FUNdamentals and Train-to-Train stages. Soccer is the worse offender.

Soccer is the first sport that kids get signed up to play. Parents figure, What's it tale? Running? Kicking? Any little kid can do that. They're urged on by the American Youth Soccer Organization, which knocked down it's starting age from 5 to 4 in 2004, for no reason other than to build it's base and keep kids from committing to other sports. Problem is, rarely do volunteer coaches at lower levels have enough knowledge to create a practice session that hits on both fun and fundamentals, so kids get placed in lines and perform drills. And often, formal games are scheduled, which inevitably promotes the assigning of positions, tactical play-and parents on both sides screaming instructions that kids often cannot appreciate.

Scholars who have studied child development have found that most children only begin around age 8 to develop the cognitive and social abilities necessary to

understand the complex relationships in competitive, action-oriented team sports. Parents and volunteer coaches often plead loudly with children to “Stay in position!” or “Get back to where you belong!” without realizing kids brains just aren’t formed that way yet. Understanding the concept of positional play asks that a participant do three things simultaneously: Mentally visualize where his teammates and opponents are on the field at any given moment, assess their relationships to one another and the ball, and decide where he or she needs to be. Most kids don’t fully develop these skills until age 12. Adults mistakenly think that children are not concentrating or trying hard. This frustrates children who are doing the best they can at their level of psychosocial development.

And everyone all the way up the line ends up being effected. The better everyone is with the ball, the tougher it is to stop the team, so defenders get better, and the game evolves in terms of the sophistication. Everything gets ratcheted up.

Coaches can often be more helpful to a young player’s development by organizing less, saying less, and allowing the players to do more, the document advises. Set up a game and let the kids play. Keep most of your comments for before and after practice and during water breaks. Comments should be kept short and simple. Be comfortable organizing a session that looks like pickup soccer.

Detailed recommendations are offered for each age group, being with kindergartners. No organized games through second grade, just three on three scenarios in practice. No lines, no laps, and no discussions about commitment. Just one game a weekend through fourth grade, with no tournaments and rosters small enough to allow for close to 100 percent playing time for everyone. No assigning players to specific positions until the teenage years.

I was at a training session right before Bruce named the final USA team. He had 40 cookie-cutter players to chose from; there was nothing to distinguish one player from another. Most of them were huge, but there was no creativity, no ability to adjust and solve problems. And that’s because since they were young they’ve been told that speed trumps all.

There’s a saying in soccer: Let the game be your teacher.

Youth soccer registrations have more than doubled over the past two decades as programs have been created for kids of increasingly younger ages. The U.S. now has more boys running around in uniforms, 2.3 million, than any nation in the world. But research by the SGMA shows that participation levels peak at age 9, just as kids in Brazil are starting to play organized soccer.

Chapter 5-Bling, Bombs, And The Bible

Myth NO. 5 Children want to win. The truth, they do, but it means far more to adults.

Priorities for children when everyone gets to play and they create their own games are: 1. Action, especially action leading to scoring. 2. Personal involvement in the action. 3. Challenging and exciting experiences. 4. Reaffirming friendships with peers.

The ethic changes when access to the playing arena is limited. When there isn't room for every kid to participate, performance becomes critical. Winning emerges as a priority. Rules get enforced with vigor. Roles get more specialized. And the weak perish. At The Pit in Salem, behavior followed this pattern. "If you weren't good enough, you were brutalized," Jack Welch says. "You were sent home."

While discomfort with the notion of unbridled competition remains in the culture at-large today, the psychic landscape has shifted to such a degree that touting sportsmanship as an ideal has become a sign of weakness in sports circles, a chink in the armor that could open the door to defeat.

A 1989 survey by MI State researchers found that the No. 1 reason children give for playing sports is, "To have fun."

Jack Welch wasn't the only denizen of The Pit from that era who rose to prominence. Zoll became mayor of Salem and the chief justice of the district court system in Massachusetts. Another boy became a major general in charge of the Army's Special Forces. One became a Navy pilot and captain of a commercial airline fleet. Another served for 35 years as, fittingly, superintendent of Salem's

parks and recreation facilities. Teachers, businessmen, and a Carmelite priest emerged from The Pit's gravel. Few of them had the means to go to college, but nearly all did well in life. These were hard knock kids who, the absence of adult coaches, used team sports to help them become not just productive workers-i.e., solid role players-but leaders capable of giving directions. Maybe the robotic children in the Tom Emanski coaches training DVDs will someday find similar success as citizens. But it sure looks like they're honing little more than their baseball skills.

Chapter 6-Follow The Money

Myth NO. 6 Athletic scholarships support amateurism. The truth, the lure of a payoff turns peewees into mini-pros.

Chapter 7-Follow The Money, Too

Myth NO. 7 The poor benefit the most from college sports. The truth, rich kids are far likelier to get roster spots.

Down in the grassroots of what is the easiest, cheapest team sport to play, down in the driveways and musty gyms of America, Luther Gulick's game is fading in popularity. Since 1990 the number of children who play basketball at least once a year has fallen by more than three million. Even with an increase in organized play on the high school and AAU levels in the decade leading up to 2000, there are fewer women of all age playing basketball now than in 1987, before Title IX was enforced. The decline in recent years has been even steeper among males. Casual players are down, frequent players are down, loyalty to the game is down, and first year players are way down. Even so, there's a team of 8-year-olds in Memphis who can call itself the national champions.

Chapter 8-Manifest Destiny

In the U.S., we do sports the other way around, at least when Michael Vick isn't at the helm: The animals get left alone while the children get placed in the ring.

As recently as 1995, 8 was the average age that boys began playing organized sports, it was age 10 for girls. Now 8 is the age at which more than a few of them begin to compete for national titles.

The branding of an event as a “national championship” is effectively a marketing gimmick allowing the AAU to charge a robust tournament fee and sell all manner of merchandise to memorialize participation in the event.

Shooting on regulation 10-foot baskets by children less than half that height also produces absurdity. Even Devin must heave the ball from his chest, using a technique that will have to be broken as he gets older and grows into his body.

There’s just something about those two words-national champions-that engages the competitive impulse and induces fever in the otherwise stable, mature mind.

One of the leading scouting services, Hoop Scoop, has ranked players as young as those in fourth grade, and the AAU championships are where those sorts of judgments are first made. Get on the list early, the belief in AAU circles is, and it’s hard to fall off.

The manic behavior on display in Memphis, while excessive, is effectively encouraged by a system that rewards talent.

One of the reasons so-called national championships have pushed down to increasingly lower ages is that promoters have come to realize that the younger the children are, the greater the money that gets spent. Teenagers often travel to tournaments by themselves, with their teams. But with little kids, whole families come along for the ride, paying for lots of hotel rooms, tickets, concessions and miscellaneous merchandise.

Besides the AAU has grown dramatically under Dodd, who brought a big idea to the ancient organization: When a child plays ball, someone’s going to make money. “Youth sports is a business,” Dodd says. “Across America, it’s a business.”

It’s not that national champions per se are evil, it’s the question of what we lose by focusing on winning when young. Parents and kids think that in order to win,

maybe you need to practice longer and year-around. Then kids get asked, “Are you sure you want to play these other sports and activities?” It’s the coattails that come with a focus on excellence that begin to concern many of us who deal with young athletes. Gradually their world begins to shrink so that all of their achievement, all of their self-worth, all of their confidence at a very young age is from one place. That’s where the danger occurs.

Myth NO. 8 Grade-school travel teams identify future stars. The truth, they reward early bloomers, leaving the rest behind.

For many parents and coaches, we sort of play with words a little bit when we enter kids into these events. We call it encouragement or support or facilitating their interest. Kids call it pressure, and I think that’s the most accurate take on it. Again, it’s not that pressure is negative. But it can’t be pressure all of the time. Everything is not do or die. And the problem as we move through national championships is everything becomes do or die. You win, you advance; you lose, you go home. It’s very immediate. And the problem with that is kids begin to get tense. They begin to fear failure, yet failure is part of the process of achievement. We problem-solve, we learn, we grow through our mistakes. In national championships, we can’t afford mistakes. And when a mistake does occur, you feel as though the entire team outcome is resting on what you did wrong. We want sports to be a fun experience. The focus needs to be on master and developing skills, rather than a focus on beating the other guy. Unfortunately, with many elite programs it’s a case of focused excellence at the expense of individual development. And it’s focused excellence at the expense of broad-based participation.

Chapter 9-Moscow On The Mind

Once the travel squads are formed, the in-town rec league begins to feel second class and shrivels in size. By fifth grade, if you don’t choose to go out for travel or you don’t make the team, your only option might be to cobble together a team from several age grades and play in a rec league run by a larger neighboring town. And the fifth graders who make travel are usually the fourth graders who made travel, who are the third graders who made travel. These are the kids who

survive tryouts because they have some experience, understand the system, and the coach knows them.

He'd have to be a gifted athlete-and have a coach who was willing to interrupt practice to teach him remedial tactics. So, for us, letting Cole try out for the travel team starting in third grade was, oddly enough, a conservative move, the preserving of an option. I suspect that's the rationale for many parents.

Most of the boys who didn't make the team the first year didn't try out the next year. Did they lose interest? No confidence? Hard to know. They weren't around to be asked. But those who work with children will tell you that the earlier kids are told that they're not good enough at an activity, the less likely they are to set out to prove the community wrong.

Premier programs are led by paid coaches with impressive credentials who work with players year-round. They justify their fees by pursuing state and national championships and providing access to the tournaments where college scouts congregate. They also use their connections to help their players gain roster spots on the state's Olympic Development Program teams, an initiative for which the state goal is to identify players of the highest caliber on a continuing and consistent basis which will lead to increase success for the U.S. National teams in the international arena. These kids, in theory, are the best of the best, and inclusion on the team offers exposure to top regional and national team coaches.

They dysfunction in the development process occurs once the genetic outlier can demonstrate that he is coordinated enough to put the ball in the hoop a bit, too. He becomes a commodity to be endlessly recruited by travel-team coaches whose access to sneaker money and goods depends on acquiring and retaining players with potential NBA futures.

Myth NO. 9 No national body coordinates grassroots sports. The truth, the U.S. Olympic Committee is supposed to.

The survey delivered several important findings, some of which are highlighted elsewhere in this book: The Olympians were most often introduced to their sport through unstructured activities. That once enrolled in organized sports, quality coaching was important in the acquisition of technique. That clubs and community-based programs, not school teams, were primarily responsible for training these athletes-but that school physical education classes played a key role by developing fitness and, surprisingly, skills. That it took the average Olympian three years to find competitive success at the local level as a child and that the gap was more like five years in sports such as soccer and hockey in players start young. That it took 12 to 13 years after introduction to a sport before they finally made their first Olympic team. And that many played multiple sports as teenagers, dispelling the myth of specialization.

A 1992 study found that when coaches received training in effective skill instruction and positive motivational techniques, only five percent of children chose not to play the sport again. With untrained coaches, the attrition rate was 26 percent.

In the United States coaching is an afterthought. Athletes and parents becomes coaches, and they're not trained to be coaches. In Europe and other societies, coaching is held up at a much higher level as a professional standard. They have to have significant education in sports science, kinesiology, sports psychology, and coaching principles. Very few of the nation's 2 to 4 million youth coaches- perhaps as little as 20 percent-have received any form of training, even if it's just a three-day course on skills and drills. And even fewer have been taught how to coach for character. So most of them wing it, using disciplinary techniques that experts say aren't developmentally appropriate for elementary and middle school kids: extra exercise (64 percent), verbal scolding (42 percent), public embarrassment (18 percent), suspension (8 percent), and striking or hitting (2 percent), according to the survey results presented to the American College of Sports Medicine in 2006.

In USA Swimming coaches are offered strategies on how to keep the late-maturing kid engaged early-and how to prevent the early maturing kid from

getting down on himself when the other kids catch up. Articles point out that only 25 percent of kids who are outstanding in elementary school are still outstanding in their later years.

In terms of basketball McCormik has a few ideas, many of which are drawn from models of Europe where he has coached: Games with less than 5 players per side until age 10 to create floor space and access to the ball that builds technical skills; emphasis on general athletic movement abilities through puberty as bones tend to grow faster than muscles do; a focus on tactical imagination and moving without the ball in the early teenage years. He could go on and on. And he does in his 2006 book, *Cross Over: The new Model of Youth Basketball Development*, which is built upon Istvan Balyi's five stage framework for "Long Term Athletic Development" and was written as a response to USA Basketball's lack of initiative in coaching education.

The reason guys like me have a job is because thousands of parents see their kids aren't getting better. Many of the existing programs are based on the goal of how we can win the next game or the next championship. It's that "peak by Friday" mentality. They basically try to put together an all-star team by finding the quickest kids and cutting the rest. Then they have them use the press to create turnovers. Or,, with the younger kids, they try to teach really organized offenses that take away their decision-making, which ultimately stunts their development.

Twenty five years ago, Americans had the highest basketball IQ in the world. Now, it's just the opposite. It was unheard of in the past that a non-US player would be a point guard in the NBA or even at the D1 level. Now the guys with the creative flair are Steve Nash, Tony Parker, and Manu Ginobili. There certainly are Americans who know how to play the game like Jason Kidd, but the foreign players come here with a much better understanding of it at a young age. In that respect, basketball and soccer share the same problem in our country. Basketball just gets better athletes, so it covers better.

To pin all of the shortcomings of American basketball on the AAU, or USA basketball, wouldn't be fair, though. Structurally, the sports clubs of Europe more

readily lend themselves to teaching and to long term athletic development. Though each country does things differently, the local clubs that players come up through often own their own facilities and receive some government subsidy. They're staffed by paid coaches who are often certified and overseen by their sport federations. They offer teams in a range of ages, from six and under through, in many cases the professional level. The goal with the children is to develop talent that someday could play for the top team or, after they can enter into contracts around age 16, be transferred to another team for profit. The incentive, then, is to produce sound athletes who ripen in their early twenties, not on winning national titles at age nine. That's how Italy delivered the first player taken in the 2006 NBA draft, Andrea Bargnani. The foundation for Kobe Bryant's highly skilled game was laid in that country, where fundamentals were drilled into him between the ages of 6 and 13 when his father was playing with the top clubs.

Myth NO. 10 Children inevitably find their best sport. The truth, most are never exposed to sports they might excel at.

There are plenty of stories of kids who tried baseball, basketball, all these sports, and had a miserable time. And so the kid thinks sports are not for him, and he quits all sports. But he really is deficient only in eye-hand coordination, he's find in every other area. The parent mistakenly put him in there a little too early.

We are losing our child centered focus. It's really easy to forget that sports are about producing better kids, physically, socially, and developmentally.

Myth NO. 11 Money is pouring into youth sports. The truth, it is but not in the communities that need it the most.

Myth NO. 12 Media coverage drives up participation. The truth, kids play a game, then they become fans.

Myth NO. 13 Grassroots hoops has become too professional. The truth, the problem is it lacks a professional approach.

Myth NO. 14 Playing sports builds character. The truth, it depends on who runs and who surrounds the team.