





# ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?

## *When Sports Go Wrong*

BY DIANA SIMEON | PHOTOS BY BETH SEGAL

When Madeline was living with her family in Texas a couple of years ago, she joined her middle school's track team. She was new to the sport, but she was fast. She worked hard. She won medals.

Then one day, Madeline fell while taking a hurdle. She cracked a bone in her wrist. Her track season was over.

Her coaches were upset, but probably not in the way you'd expect. Rather than consoling their promising athlete, or encouraging her to return next season, they turned their back on her.

"They shunned me for the rest of the year," recalls Madeline, who has since moved to the East Coast. "I guess because I would no longer be winning them any medals."

Every year, millions of teenagers in the United States participate in team sports. In fact, the Gallup research shows that more than 50 percent of teenagers are on a school athletic team.

But, what about the remaining 50 percent? Certainly, plenty of

those teenagers are happily involved in other extracurricular activities. After all, not everyone is athletically inclined. Still, there's a sad story here, too, because there's a significant number of teenagers who, like Madeline, once enjoyed sports, but no longer participate. These teenagers say it's just not worth it.

"Sports lost their appeal for me," says Madeline, who adds that her coaches also verbally abused the team at practices. "I did end up trying out for the track team last year, but I actually found myself overwhelmed with memories and emotions from my experience the previous year and ended up dropping out."

Talk to coaches, parents and teenagers about the downside of sports, and you'll hear the same answer:

by middle school and certainly by high school, it has more often than not become a game of medals. Not the plain old fun of playing. Not the fringe benefits that sports offer. But winning. Period.

No surprise, then, that so many teenagers are opting out.

This issue, *Your Teen* takes an up-close look at sports: why our teenagers should play, how we can avoid getting nuts about our teenager's sports performance, what to look for in a coach and, most important of all, how to keep sports positive (heck, even fun).

### THE UPSIDE OF SPORTS

Here's what parents should understand about team sports: they greatly

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benefit the participants, regardless of their talent or the team's record.

Obviously, fitness is a perk. In a nation struggling with weight, a daily dose of exercise goes a long way. But, equally important are the non-athletic skills that sports build.

"There is an awful lot you can learn in sports that you will use the rest of your life," explains John Duffy, a Chicago-area psychologist and author of *The Available Parent*. "You learn to play on a team. You learn to handle challenges. You learn to deal with adversity. You learn to be gracious when you win and when you lose."

Studies show that athletes also tend to do better in school and have lower dropout rates than their non-athletic peers. What's more, research also shows that sports can serve as an antidote to many risky teen behaviors. A 2011 University of Michigan study found that teenagers who play team sports were less likely to smoke and do drugs. However, it's worth noting that the study also found that they were somewhat more likely to drink frequently.

Time to re-think the after-game party?

Meanwhile, female athletes have additional advantages. The Women's Sports Foundation reports that girls who play sports are half as likely to become pregnant (because they are more likely to abstain or use contraceptives) and also more likely to

have a positive view of their bodies (though this is not the case in sports where a particular physique is prized, like gymnastics, dance and figure-skating).

### WHAT GOES WRONG

So with all the benefits, why do so many teenagers stop playing team sports by high school? According to a study by the National Alliance for Sports, more than 70 percent of adolescents drop out of their sport by middle school. Some may take a break, some may switch to another sport, but many abandon sports altogether. And, the number one reason that adolescents stop? The sport isn't fun anymore.

"There are two things that can happen, in my opinion," explains Bill Morton, a longtime coach in the Raleigh-Durham area and dad of three boys (including two teenagers) who play baseball. "When you get older, it gets competitive. Some of the kids take it very seriously, but some are out there just to have fun, so that kid who just has a love of the game can get turned off by the intensity. The other thing is that a kid might realize they can't compete at the level they need to. And, they are not ready to dedicate themselves to one single sport, and unfortunately that's what kids are expected to do now."

Needless to say, when sports get serious and winning becomes the primary goal, which tends to happen around middle school, it puts tremendous pressure on teenagers—and there's not much

fun in that. For starters, there are the physical demands of rigorous training schedules. More than one expert told *Your Teen* that sports-related injuries are on the rise in teenagers, in large part because so many young athletes now play just one sport year-round.

The emotional pressure is also particularly tough for teenagers to handle. This can come from coaches, who too often care more about scoring than their athletes' overall well-being, and from parents, who fixate on their teenager's—and team's—performance.

"Especially in the teenage years, when it's all about being the best and winning, it's so much pressure," notes Frank Sileo, a psychologist in Ridgewood, New Jersey and author of *Sally Sore Loser*. "I understand we all like to win," he adds. "Winning feels good, and losing doesn't feel so good. No one is going to deny that. But, at what point do we lose the focus of what we're doing here?"

That's a question that Jesse, who lives in the Cleveland area, would like answered. The summer before his sophomore year, Jesse decided to play in a regional baseball league—which required a commitment of four full days a week—instead of attending his football team's summer training sessions.

Turns out, that didn't go over so well with the football coaches. "Once football started, the coaches were mad because I hadn't gone to off-season training, even though they said it was

not mandatory," Jesse explains.

As the season progressed, Jesse noticed his coaches were unsupportive, at times even outright discriminatory. For example, while he played in every game, he didn't letter. And his teammates were also hostile. Enough was enough, and Jesse walked away from a sport he'd played for half of his life.

"I decided that I didn't want to make it any worse, so I didn't play football again. I had played eight years worth of football, which at that point was half of my life. I gave it my all. I gave everything I had to it."

Asked why his coaches and teammates may have acted in this way, Jesse says, "It's so competitive, and everyone wants to win. It's getting away from the kids who want to have fun and just going to the kids who want to play no matter what."

### STAY IN THE GAME

What should our goal be when it comes to teenagers and sports?

"Yes, it's beneficial for teenagers to be involved in sports," says Gary Malone, a Dallas-area psychiatrist and author of *What's Wrong With My Family?* "But the correct word here is involved."

In other words, says Malone—who swam for top-ranked Southern Methodist University in the 1970s—sports are a part of a teenager's life, alongside academics, friends, family and other claims on a teenager's time, such as working or volunteering.

Here's how to get started (and also check out Teen Speak for how one West Coast teenager has struck a balance between sports and the rest of his life).

**Keep perspective.** First of all, consider why your teenager plays sports. Enjoyment is reason enough, but if you're counting on glory from your teenager's athletic career, be realistic.

"Only three percent of high school athletes go on to play in college," Malone says. "Less than one percent of college athletes go on to play professional sports."

Meanwhile, your teenager's odds of winning a college athletic scholarship aren't great, either. Few athletes receive one—and even then, it may be only a couple thousand dollars a year or less. (See our Q&A with former NBA player Bob Bigelow.) That said, playing sports can certainly help your teenager gain admission to a competitive college, plus earn her merit aid, but other extracurriculars can do that too. And always remember, academics matter most for gaining admission to college. If your student ranks well below a college's admissions requirements, she won't get in, regardless of

her talent on the playing field. If your student is struggling academically because of time devoted to sports, he may be damaging his college prospects. It's time to reassess.

**It's not about you.** When our teenagers excel, we can't help but feel proud. But, too much investment in our teenagers' sports performance is a red flag.

"If it means that much to you, if you get a narcissistic tweak if your teenager won an event, you need to do a little introspection," Malone advises. "Ask yourself why it's so important that your teenager hits the home run in the big game."

What is important here, say the experts, is that your teenager owns his or her sport's experience. In other words, it's not about you (and it's especially not about your

past sports glories or failures).

"Parental ego has a lot to do with the problem," Duffy says. "We take our kid's performance as a reflection on us, so if our teen scores a goal or gets the run or whatever, we can stick out our chest a little further and feel a little better about ourselves. And our teen is kind of secondary a lot of the time."

**Don't be "that" parent.** One way to make sports about our teenagers is to be conscious of how we act at events and—equally important—during the car ride home. Indeed, if you talk to teenagers about parents' behavior on the sidelines, you'll get an earful.

"It's definitely not helpful," Jesse says. "It's annoying, and when it gets to that point, it isn't fun anymore. When the parents are screaming and angry, it's not

fun, and you don't want to play."

Duffy has heard similar feedback from his own son, who plays water polo. "The other day, there was an intense game," Duffy recalls. "My son told me the worst part of the game was the parents screaming in the stands. It's really distracting and takes his mind out of the game. He even found it embarrassing."

A recent survey by Tampa Bay's i9 Sports of athletes, age eight to 14, found that more than 30 percent of respondents wished "adults weren't watching their games." Meanwhile, more than 10 percent said they'd been called a name by another player's parent; almost 40 percent said they'd witnessed verbal fights between parents.

How should parents behave during a game? Jim Thompson, Executive Director of the na-

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tional organization, Positive Coaching Alliance, recommends “no-direction” cheering during events. “We think parents should cheer, but it should be positive. Let the coach coach. Let the players play,” Thompson says. “You can say, ‘Hey, good kick.’ But you shouldn’t say, ‘Hey, kick it to Julie.’”

Not only is it distracting, but spectators also have no idea what play the team is executing. Kicking it to Julie may seem obvious to you, but the team or your player may be trying a different strategy.

Morton goes so far as to hold meetings with parents before big games. “I’m coaching a U13 travel team. The Friday night before our last game, I held a parent meeting. I said, ‘I want you to be the biggest cheerleaders. I don’t want to hear anyone yelling at the umpires or saying negative

things to the kids.’ I want my parents to be the fan base, not the hot head in the stands that no one wants to stand near.”

Additionally, Thompson says, avoid the “dreaded post-game analysis.” Rather than drilling your teen on what he or she did wrong, ask open-ended questions. ‘How did you feel about the game?’ ‘What did you like best?’ Get them to talk.” Again, let your teenager own the experience.

**Value positive coaching.** A good coach can change lives. A bad coach will make your teenager miserable and, worse, miss out on all the valuable life lessons sports can offer. Just ask Leslie A., whose son dropped out of basketball because of his high school coach.

“To have him come to us and tell us that he had made a decision to quit the school’s var-

sity basketball team made me incredibly sad,” says the San Antonio-based mom, who asked her last name not be used so that her son wasn’t “black-balled” from his current team. “I think too many school coaches lose sight of why they are there. They are hired not only to develop our children’s physical skills, but to grow leaders, teach sportsmanship, team work, etc. So many coaches don’t get it, and our kids pay for it.”

The bottom line: parents must insist on a positive coaching model for their teenagers and push schools to hire coaches accordingly.

What is positive coaching? Well, no surprise, Positive Coaching’s Thompson has a lot to offer here. It’s about coaching for mastery (not just winning) and for filling emotional tanks—“if you are draining the emotion-

al tank by yelling and criticizing all the time, players don’t do well,” he notes.

It’s also about showing respect for the game (and your opponents). “If you are a coach who wins a lot of games and even wins the championship, but your players don’t want to play for you anymore, so they drop out, then you are a failure as a coach, no matter how many games you win,” he adds.

Morton, who played baseball through college, couldn’t agree more. “I always stress to any of my teams that we are playing a game, and a game is fun. It’s not life or death. The sun will come up tomorrow, regardless of what happens. Take it seriously. Give me 110 percent. But, it’s a game.” ■

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