

# Young athletes' worst pain can be parents

Investment of time, money, pride and emotion can make the pressure on kids too much to overcome

With roughly 4,000 basketball games played per year at The Fieldhouse in Fishers, founder and director Scott Burton witnesses the good side of youth sports on a daily basis: competition, camaraderie, individual improvement and team success.

Then there's the unseemly underbelly of youth sports.

The parents.

Not all parents; not even close. But Burton sees enough bad ones that it doesn't surprise him that experts on the subject say the No. 1 problem in youth sports is parents' behavior. "Sometimes, I just shake my head," Burton said. "I mean, it's first-grade basketball." Disturbing incidents have been reported across the state:

» A Michigan City basketball parent beat a middle school coach unconscious in March after the coach forced his daughter to run laps after practice.

» In August, a 27-year-old father at a pee-wee football game in Franklin Township bit two off-duty police officers who attempted to restrain him after he'd come on the field to argue a call.

» In May, police were called to Northview Middle School when a fight erupted between two local AAU teams and parents streamed onto the court. No charges were filed, but punches were thrown.

What turns seemingly normal citizens into raving mad youth-sports parents? The race for college scholarships plays a part, as do the gratification of living vicariously through a son or daughter and the ever-increasing investment in time and money. Unlike an A on a math test, little Jimmy's five goals are on display for the public. Insecure parents are comforted when Jimmy plays well. When he doesn't, look out. "Then it's not fun anymore," said Jim Thompson, executive director of the Positive Coaching Alliance, a national nonprofit organization that provides training for youth sports administrators, coaches and parents. "Research is pretty clear that when kids are in a positive emotional environment, they learn a lot more. The major reason kids stop having fun in youth sports is that there is someone, often a dad, who makes life miserable for them."

## The issues

In the exploding world of "elite" club sports, parents are investing more time and money to develop their children into athletes. A season can cost a family \$5,000 in assorted expenses and as many as 50 days on the road. With that investment often comes a sense of entitlement. "In essence, it's consumerism," said Mark Britner, who has coached elite club volleyball in Central Indiana for 24 years. "Now it's, 'I'll take my kids somewhere else' if an issue arises. There are so many more club programs now, it's amazing. Parents want more input and control." Dan Gould, director of Michigan State's Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, cited research in junior tennis that roughly 70 percent of parents were "low maintenance." Of the remaining group, many viewed youth sports under the professional model, where success is judged by wins and losses.

Victories validate their worth as a parent. "They see the wins and losses -- or the college scholarship -- as a reflection of their parenting skills," Gould said. "They get seduced by that because that's the scorecard. Parents aren't really trained to see all the other things -- the skill development, the fitness, the life skills and learning how to set goals."

### **The Earl Woods effect**

The fame that a handful of highly successful obsessive sports parents have attained can also cloud a parent's judgment. Earl Woods raised his son Tiger as a golfer from age 2, when he appeared on "The Mike Douglas Show" and hit balls into a net. That clip resonated with parents years later, when Tiger Woods eased from child prodigy to Masters winner at age 21. Earl Woods created a golf machine. A generation of parents was inspired to follow his lead, but with often damaging results. It can be a fine line. It's good to be involved. It's not good to be involved to the point where it ceases to be fun for kids. "You have to make sure it's not like eating broccoli," said Mark Peters, who created a travel baseball team for his son, Dillon Peters, who developed into a star pitcher at Cathedral High School and was 4-1 as a freshman at Texas this season. "Being his dad and his coach, we talked a lot. I remember he told me once that he wanted to make me proud. I told him that if baseball wasn't something he wanted to do, we could go fishing or bowling. The fire has to come from within. "The parents who live vicariously through their kids will be the ones to drive them out of sports." There is evidence that parents of elite-level athletes, for the most part, encourage rather than push. In 2001, the University of North Carolina-Greensboro's applied sports psychology department researched the development of psychological talent in Olympic champions.

Part of the study focused on the parents of Olympic athletes. There were several common traits:

- » They were very committed to the child.
- » They modeled an active lifestyle.
- » They exposed the child to different sports.
- » They transported the child and attended games and practices.
- » They provided considerable encouragement and support.

While these parents held high standards, the athletes generally developed a love of the sport at a young age. Only later, once it became clear that the youngsters were elite athletes, was there a focus on individual skill development. It's not on the field or in the gym where a young athlete normally loses interest; it's in the car on the way home. "One of the worst things that can happen is the dreaded 'P-G-A.' That's the post game analysis," said Thompson, who created the Positive Coaching Alliance 20 years ago. "Dad is driving home, dissecting his kid's performance and making it miserable on him. As soon as that kid can extricate himself from the situation, he will. And he'll do that by not playing anymore." Research shows roughly 70 percent of kids drop out of sports by age 13. While there are many reasons for it, parental pressure is a major contributor.

## **First go-round**

Josh Helvie, Zionsville, is immersed in the youth sports wringer for the first time. His son, 7-year-old Aiden, is a first-grader who plays with the George Hill Rising Stars, a travel basketball program sponsored by the Indiana Pacers guard. The team will play in 15 tournaments, going as far as Baltimore and Memphis between February and July, in addition to a two-hour practice once or twice a week. Helvie, his son and 4-year-old daughter were watching an eighth-grade game two weeks ago at Northview Middle School as part of a tournament in which Aiden's team was participating. A fight broke out on the court, and one of the players punched an assistant coach on the other team. As the fight escalated, Helvie grabbed both kids by the waist and ran to the top of the bleachers, where he told them to turn and face the wall. The police were called to the scene, but no charges were filed. "It was pathetic from every angle," Helvie said. "The trash-talking from the parents made the whole thing escalate out of control." Helvie's eyes are now open to the world of competitive youth sports. Despite some of the negatives, he estimates that "75 percent of it has been good." "I don't see the need to be out every single weekend, playing the same teams," Helvie said. "It's opened our eyes. You see parents doing chants and moms getting after other moms. In some ways, I think it's been a blessing for us to see how not to act firsthand." The whirlwind of youth sports doesn't appear to be slowing down. There is more specialization and more elite club teams than ever before. Parents build their schedules and vacations around club team tournaments. "In the end, it has to be the kid that wants to do it," said Ralph Richards, the girls director for Carmel United Soccer Club, "or it's not going to work out."

## **Are you one of those parents?**

No one sets out to be a negative influence on their child, of course, but the line between encouraging and pushing in youth sports can be narrow. "You get your kids involved in sports, and nobody gives you an instruction manual," said Dan Gould, director of Michigan State's Institute for the Study of Youth Sports.

Here are some guidelines on how to keep youth sports positive:

- » Warning signs including putting great amounts of pressure on a child to succeed; the child frequently arguing with coaches and officials; the child not enjoying practice; and an emphasis on winning trophies, say Sean Cumming and Martha Ewing of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports.
- » Another no-no: Looking at youth sports as a means to a college scholarship or pro career instead of a fun and healthy activity, warns the Rutgers Youth Sports Research Council. For every 10,000 high school athletes, three will reach the NBA, and nine will play in the NFL.
- » Kids should play as many sports as possible at a young age to avoid burnout and overuse injuries. "Some parents feel like if they don't get that personal coach and additional instruction, they are missing out or falling behind," said Dr. Greg Dale, the director of the sports psychology and leadership programs at Duke University. "That's the wrong message. They should be out playing pickup games with their friends."
- » Empower the kids: Let players take a more active role in conversations with coaches about playing time and their role on the team when they are about 14, said Ralph Richards, the girls director for Carmel United Soccer Club. "Sometimes, the parent wants it more than the child," said Richards, who has been with Carmel United for 11 years. "That can be a difficult topic to discuss."