

O'Sullivan: The race to nowhere in youth sports



"My 4th grader tried to play basketball and soccer last year," a mom recently told me as we sat around the dinner table after one of my speaking engagements. "It was a nightmare. My son kept getting yelled at by both coaches as we left one game early to race to a game in the other sport. He hated it."

"I know," said another. "My 10-year-old daughter's soccer coach told her she had to pick one sport, and start doing additional private training on the side, or he would give away her spot on the team."

So goes the all-too-common narrative for American youth these days, **an adult-driven, hyper-competitive race to the top in both academics and athletics that serves the needs of the adults, but rarely the kids**. As movies such as "[The Race to Nowhere](#)" and recent articles [such as this one from the Washington Post](#) point out, while the race has a few winners, the course is littered with the scarred psyches of its participants. We have a generation of children that have been pushed to achieve parental dreams instead of their own, and prodded to do more, more, more and better, better, better. The pressure and anxiety is stealing one thing our kids will never get back: their childhood.

The movie and article mentioned above, as well as the book "[The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids](#)," highlight the dangerous path we have led our children down in academics. We are leading them down a similar path in sports as well.

The path is a race to nowhere, and it does not produce better athletes. It produces bitter athletes who get hurt, burn out and quit sports altogether.

As I said to my wife recently, the hardest thing about raising two kids these days, when it comes to sports, is that the vast majority of the parents are leading their kids down the wrong path, but not intentionally or because they want to harm their kids. They love their kids, but the social pressure to follow that path is incredible. Even though my wife and I were collegiate athletes, and I spend every day reading the research, and studying the latest science on the subject, the pressure is immense. The social pressure is like having a conversation with a pathological liar; he is so good at lying that even when you know the truth, you start to doubt it. Yet that is the sport path many parents are following.

The reason? **FEAR!**

We are so scared that if we do not have our child specialize, if we do not get the extra coaching, or give up our entire family life for youth sports, our child will get left behind. Even though nearly every single parent I speak to tells me that in their gut they have this feeling that running their child ragged is not helpful, they do not see an alternative. Another kid will take his place. He won't get to play for the best coach.

"I know he wants to go on the family camping trip," they say, "but he will just have to miss it again, or the other kids will get ahead of him."

This system sucks.

It sucks for parents, many of whom do not have the time and resources to keep one child in such a system, never mind multiple athletes. There are no more family trips or dinners, no time or money to take a vacation. It causes parents untold stress and anxiety, as they are made to feel guilty by coaches and their peers if they don't step in line with everyone else.

"You are cheating your kid out of a scholarship" they are told, "They may never get this chance again."

It sucks for coaches who want to develop athletes for long-term excellence, instead of short-term success. **The best coaches used to be able to develop not only better athletes, but better people, yet it is getting hard to be that type of coach**. There are so many coaches who have walked away from sports because while they encourage kids to play multiple sports, other unscrupulous coaches

scoop those kids up, and tell them “if you really want to be a player, you need to play one sport year-round. That other club is short-changing your kid, they are not competitive.”

The coach who does it right gives his kids a season off, and next thing you know he no longer has a team.

And yes, most importantly, it sucks for the kids. Any [sports scientist or psychologist will tell you that in order to pursue any achievement activity for the long term, children need ownership, enjoyment and intrinsic motivation](#). Without these three things, an athlete is very likely to quit.

Children need first and foremost to enjoy their sport. This is the essence of being a child. Kids are focused in the present, and do not think of long term goals and ambitions. But adults do. They see “the opportunities I never had” or “the coaching I wish I had” as they push their kids to their goals and not those of the kids.

They forget to give their kids the one thing they did have: A CHILDHOOD! They forget to give them the ability to find things they are passionate about, instead of choosing for them. They forget that a far different path worked pretty darn well for them.

So why this massive movement, one that defies all science and psychology, to change it?

We need to wise up and find a better path.

Parents, start demanding sports clubs and coaches that allow your kids to participate in many sports. You are the customers, you are paying the bills, so you might as well start buying a product worth paying for. [You have science on your side, and you have Long-Term Athletic Development best practices on your side](#). Your kids do not deserve or need participation medals and trophies, as some of you are so fond of saying, but they do deserve a better, more diverse youth sports experience.

Coaches, you need to wise up as well. **You are the gatekeepers of youth sports, the people whom play God, and decide who gets in, and who is kicked to the curb.** You know the incredible influence of sport in your life, so stop denying it to so many others. Are you so worried about your coaching ability, or about the quality of the sport you love, to think that if you do not force kids to commit early they will leave? Please realize that if you are an amazing coach with your priorities in order, and you teach a beautiful game well, that kids will flock to you in droves, not because they have to, but because they want to!

Every time you ask a nine-year-old to choose one sport over another you are diminishing participation in the sport you love by 50 percent. WHY?

To change this we must overcome the fear, the guilt and the shame.

We are not bad parents if our kids don’t get into Harvard, and we are not bad parents if they do not get a scholarship to play sports in college. We should not feel shame or guilt every time our kid does not keep up with the Joneses, because, when it comes to sports, the Joneses are wrong.

As [this recent article from USA Lacrosse stated](#), college coaches are actually looking to multi-sport athletes in recruiting. Why? Because they have an upside, they are better all-around athletes, they are not done developing and they are less likely to burn out.

You cannot make a kid into something she is not by forcing them into a sport at a very young age, and pursuing your goals and not your child’s goals. Things like motivation, grit, genetics and enjoyment have too much say in the matter.

What you can do, though, is [rob a child of the opportunity to be a child, to play freely, to explore sports of interest, to learn to love sports and become active for life](#).

Chances are great that your children will be done with sports by high school, as only a select few play in college and beyond. Even the elite players are done at an age when they have over half their life ahead of them. It is not athletic ability, but the lessons learned from sport that need to last a lifetime.

Why not expose them to as many of those lifelong lessons as possible?

Why not take a stand?

Why don't we stop being sheep, following the other sheep down a road to nowhere that both science and common sense tells us often ends badly?

It is time to stop being scared, and stand up for your kids. Read a book on the subject, pass on this article to like minded people, bring in a speaker to your club and school, but do something to galvanize people to act.

There are more of us who want to do right by the kids than there are those whose egos and wallets have created our current path. We have just been too quiet for too long. We have been afraid to speak up, and afraid to take a stand. We are far too willing to throw away our child's present for some ill-fated quest for a better future that rarely materializes, and is often filled with so much baggage that we would never wish for such a future for our kids.

If you think your child will thank you for that, then you probably stopped reading a while ago.

But if you want to get off the road to nowhere in youth sports, and to stop feeling guilty about it, then please know you are not alone. Our voice is growing stronger everyday. We can create a new reality, with new expectations that put the athletes first.

We can put our children on a road to somewhere, one paved with balanced childhoods, exploration, enjoyment and yes, multiple sports.

Someday our kids will thank us.