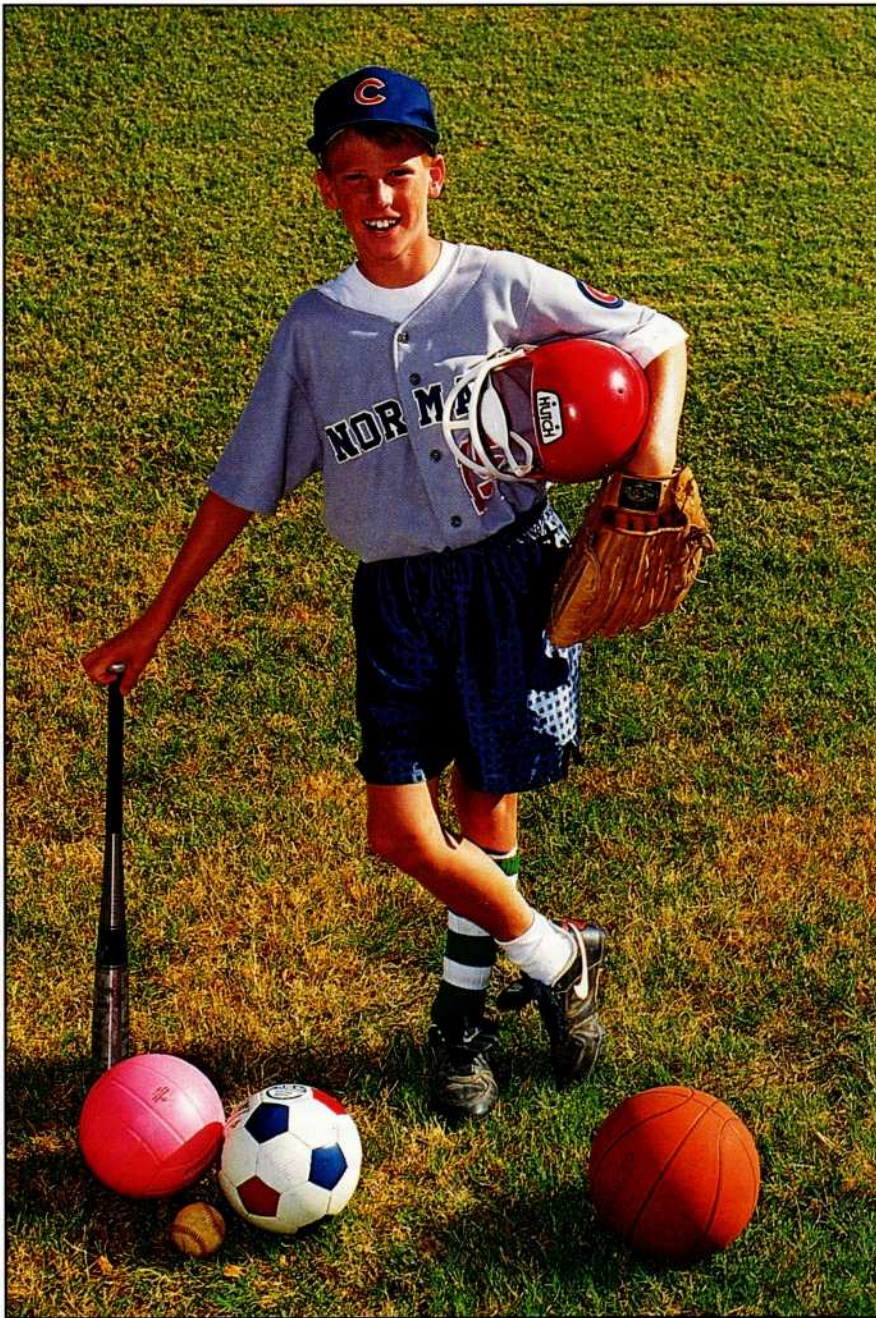


# YOUTH SPORTS: BUILDING CHARACTER —OR CHARACTERS?



*Trevor Tullius, 12, prepares for the myriad of available organized youth sports.*

For America's youth, the world of sports is a microcosm of society that can be inspiring or disappointing, a positive learning experience or dangerously unsettling.

Sports advocates claim that the pastime builds character, as evidenced by desirable behavior toward teammates, opponents, officials and coaches; they contend that sports foster fair and honest play and equal opportunity for all to enjoy. Proponents view sports as a proving ground for newly developed values—for taking on moral dilemmas replicating situations that occur in everyday life. Yet in the opinion of a University of Oklahoma sports educator, these suppositions about youth sports, like victory itself, are human outcomes that are not automatically achieved.

"Our society is putting more emphasis on sports than it ever has," maintains Trent Gabert, chairman of OU's department of health and sport sciences. Gabert argues that, while Americans yearn to be "the world's best" in Olympic competition and in professional sports, "many of our children are needlessly subject to the pressures and risks of organized sports. Children involved in sports are seldom free to establish standards that fit their own interests and abilities."

Instead, Gabert maintains, the vast majority of children fall victim to the outcome-based evaluation so typical of adult sports. While organized play provides an opportunity for building positive values and strong character in American youth, it can be influenced unduly by adults. Gabert finds that, rather than cultivating good character in children, adult-imposed standards (and conduct unbecoming of role models) too often create "characters" of many youngsters engaged in organized sports. Unfortunate experiences with organized sports can lower a child's concept of self-worth and lead to "wash-out." He cites a damning national statistic: 75 percent of the nation's youth leave sports by age 15.

by Randall Turk

photos by Gil Jain



In attempts to build athletes in their own image, are American adults losing sight of what their children want from experiences in sports?

"Kids want to develop skills and maximize their individual talents," Gabert insists. "Children's sports programs should be run for children, not for parents or society. Most of all, kids want enjoyment from sports. They want to play for fun."

Youth sports have grown enormously since the turn of the century. In 1903, the first adult-organized youth sports program resulted in New York City's Public School Athletic League. That program swelled to over 150,000 youngsters in only seven years.

Little League Baseball, the most prolific example of youth sports in America, began in 1939 as a three-team league for 8- to 12-year-old boys in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. It has grown to become the largest sports organization on earth, with over 16,000 leagues in 31 countries.

In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed a law giving Little League Baseball Inc. a federal charter of incorporation, one of a handful of federal charters ever granted. Like the American Red Cross and other national charities, the charter made Little League Baseball eligible for federal subsidies and favorable tax treatment in exchange for the organization's promoting American values around the world. In addition, Little League makes millions of dollars a year from team fees and the sale of the Little League manuals, bats, shoes, uniforms and other accouterments.

Such growth in Little League Baseball came at the expense of its founder, Carl Stotz, who had served the organization first as president, then as commissioner. After a bitter and protracted federal court battle, Stotz was ousted from Little League in 1955. As commissioner, Stotz had filed suit to prevent his successor as the Little League president from turning the program into a

big business but withdrew when it became evident to him that the judge was about to rule against him.

Little League-type football, more costly to operate, did not catch on as quickly as Little League Baseball, but once it did, it spread quickly. Most popular is the Pop Warner League formed in 1929 by Philadelphia stockbroker Joseph Tomlin and named for his old high school coach Glenn Scobie (Pop) Warner. The league accounts for some 6,000 teams of 8- to 10-year-olds who hold playoffs in "midget bowls" around the country.

Almost from the beginning, organized sports for the very young have had their detractors. By the mid-1930s, educators had become alarmed by the overemphasis placed on winning and

As many elementary schools eliminated certain organized sports programs, the public turned to community agencies—YMCAs, Boys Clubs, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, local service clubs, religious organizations and local park and recreation programs. With that came well-meaning but untrained volunteers who assumed leadership roles in youth sports programs. That situation has endured, Gabert says, often with disastrous effects on the outlook young people have on sports.

With parents, Gabert contends, "there are many 'pseudo coaches.' Everybody views himself as an expert on who should play, how kids should play and who should coach. Parents are much more vocal. They aren't unbiased about their kids. Many parents don't know as

much as I think they should about sport as it influences child development, and they routinely turn their children over to some of the lesser informed coaches."

Good coaches "devote tremendous attention to developing sportsmanship in their players," Gabert says. "They produce learning situations for children by rewarding and penalizing behaviors, by providing instruction in the fundamentals of the game and by their own behavior. That's schooling. A good coach will get his team members to discuss and reach consensus on what actions will result in the mutual interest of all players. That's education."

Gabert stresses that sportsmanship is a quality that must be taught to children as their ability to reason about moral action matures. "It is a quality that is reinforced by rewards and penalties and by providing the underlying rationale for both," he says.

"The most important lesson the coach can teach is that success is not equivalent to winning," Gabert asserts. "Children should be taught that success is found in striving for victory. The child comes first, and winning is second."

In the real world of adult competi-



*Christie Smeal, left, Monica Karriker and Jessica Nimmo, of the Norman Youth Soccer Association's "Fury '83," tune up for the coming season.*

the associated physical and emotional strain of championship play.

In the 1940s the American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Association for Health, Physical Education and Recreation, the National Education Association and other organizations issued policy statements opposing highly organized sports competition for children of elementary and junior high school age. The statements opposed tackle football for children below the ninth grade and boxing for children of any age.



tive sports, victory is the prize, not the personal improvement necessary to attain it. All too frequently children's concepts of what it means to win or lose are distorted by the repugnant behavior of their parents and other adult spectators attending athletic events for youngsters, Gabert maintains. There have been times at such events when fierce adult hostilities have left children traumatized.

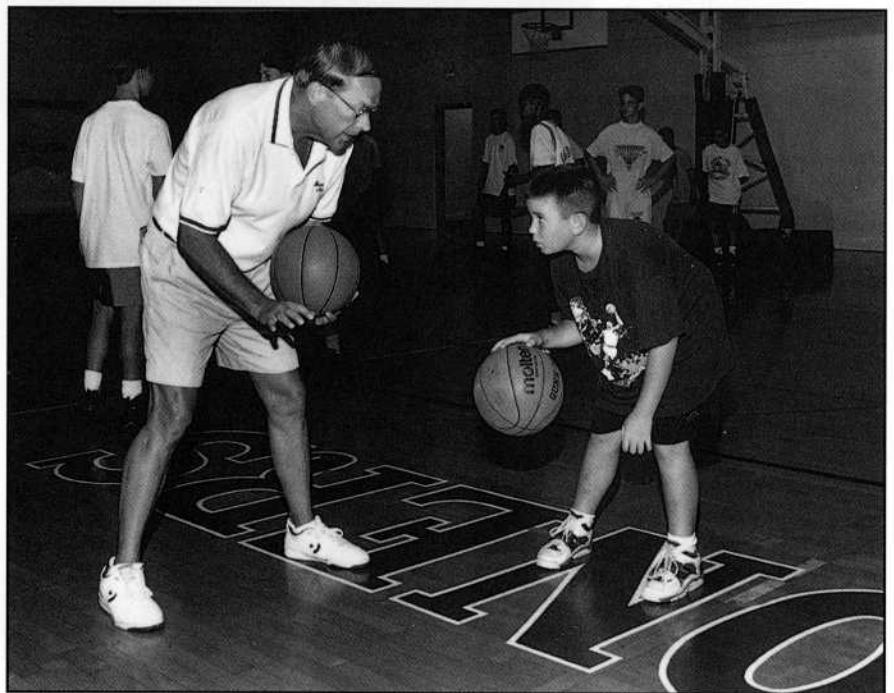
A mother in Oklahoma shoots another mother over a dispute at a youth league baseball game. In another extreme example in a sports-related activity, a Texas mother hires a "hit man" to kill the mother of her daughter's cheerleading rival. The impact of any violent incident is magnified many times over when observed by young children, Gabert feels. "There's a great deal of psychological research to verify that when you see violence, you have a tendency to act more violently," he says.

More widespread in its effects on children is a parent's dominance of a child's sport, Gabert believes. "Individually and collectively, parents can undo in only one game the values a coach has labored throughout the season to instill in his team," he says. Hysterical mothers and angry fathers who razz opposing players, swear at officials and bark orders to their children can produce adverse effects for an entire program.

"Fathers who dress down their kids for losing, or go over every mistake after the game, undermine every principle that competent coaches emphasize and—worse—bleed the joy of sports from these children," Gabert stresses. "Many parents have lost perspective on the meaning of children's sports. Children involve themselves in sports for exactly the opposite of what motivates adults in professional sports."

He shares the view that professional sports are both big business and "show business"—a gigantic arena where a select few of the most talented individuals are treated as merchandise. The objectives of professional players are to win and to grow wealthy. Gabert sees nothing wrong with those objectives in adults. On the other hand, he finds that children can grow jaded or "burn out" when subjected to adult motivations and pressures.

"For most children, it's intrinsic rewards—developing their skills and hav-



*In the top photograph you can feel the layup coming as the intense young man drives the lane at the summer 1993 Billy Tubbs Basketball Camp. In the bottom photo, an attentive Jeff Edzards gets some dribbling tips from Tubbs himself. When Jeff obligingly took some free throws for the camera, Tubbs quipped, "You've gotta keep the ball lower when there are photographers around so they can see your face."*

ing fun—that draw them to sports. But early in the game they must deal with extrinsic rewards, such as parental praise or love; the trappings of championship success, such as trophies, ribbons, prizes; and all the other things made available in adult-organized sports programs. At the grand old age of 13 or 14, many of these youngsters discover their intrinsic motives for sports are gone.”

The thirst for victory and its accompanying competition is much stronger among parents and coaches than among their young charges, Gabert observes. Winning often becomes essential when coaches and parents provide no built-in controls to deal with individual or team “failure,” he says. “In far too many kids, to lose at the game is to be a failure as a person.”

Parents in the stands, a persistent reality, often provide unfortunate examples of the damage adult hostility can wreak on children, Gabert maintains. Ugly confrontations among coaches, umpires and parents, the threats, sarcasm and gestures only serve to stigmatize youngsters subjected to high-pressure competition. “Under these circumstances,” he says, “a child’s love of the game falls sacrifice to the fear of failure.”

A great schism occurs among early teens who are pushed, pulled and prodded to achieve adult objectives in sports, Gabert insists. “Kids at this age have been subjected to pressures from all sides—from parents, peers and coaches. Only the most talented athletes, now equipped with the values of adults, go on to find increasingly larger rewards. Those less gifted are left behind, often with unmistakable symptoms of withdrawal.”

Gabert cites social researchers who have found that children who are persistently less than successful in sports can suffer irreparable damage from the resulting disapproval of adults who are significant in their eyes. “The level of aspiration for performance these kids have diminishes over time and may even vanish altogether. They simply stop trying.”

Like life itself, organized sports provide a chance for individual progress and development. How can the organized sports environment be modified to improve a child’s chances for experiencing positive development? Gabert believes the answer rests with the very

adults who have insinuated themselves into the world of children at play.

“Adults need to know more about how children develop physically and psychologically,” he says. “They need to determine what children want and need from sports, and how they can provide positive encouragement—instead of adopting a rigid position that poses obstacles to a child’s developing character.”

Coaches do not escape Gabert’s critical evaluation. He finds many are unsuited to the essential task of motivating youngsters, to say nothing of the delicate psychology of cultivating character in their young charges. He finds that,

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in pursuit of winning, coaches commonly sideline youngsters rather than “allowing them to participate and enjoy.”

Of course the distasteful task of cutting a child from the team can be devastating for all concerned.

Gabert and an associate, Scott Branvold, observe that many youth sports coaches are largely ignorant of the training methods required to improve cardiovascular endurance, strength, flexibility and body composition—qualities that sports can help youngsters achieve and that can carry over into a lifelong concern for health.

“You’d like to think that coaches running kids for three miles without water is outdated, but some of the coaches (and the dads) are out there doing it,” Branvold says.

Character-building values have fallen prey to many a coach’s apparent

hypocrisy, Gabert notes. “Most coaches come up with some values: a sense of fairness, playing by the rules, a positive mental attitude, the importance of teamwork. Are these values really there or just talked about? These values are not automatically taken on by children. They must be planned and practiced like the game itself.”

Says Branvold: “One value is trying to do one’s best. There have been instances when talented 11- and 12-year-old kids put in a pool for the draft have been told by coaches who want them on their teams to ‘look as bad as possible’ at team tryouts. It’s not the kids doing this; it’s the adults.”

“A positive environment in organized sports must be child-centered,” Gabert urges. “It begins with knowledge of what motivates children to enter sports, and it depends on what adults can do to foster a child’s positive concept of himself as a person.”

He cites a 1987 study on sports participation by American youth conducted by Martha E. Ewing and Vern Seefeldt of the Youth Sports Institute at Michigan State University. The study, believed to be the largest of its kind ever attempted, explored why youngsters participate in sports, why they quit, how they feel about winning, how motivations differ and what adults can do to encourage a child’s positive experience in sports. The study involved more than 10,000 students in grades 7 through 12 throughout the country.

***Some highlights:***

- Sports participation — and the apparent desire to participate—declines steadily throughout the teen years. Asked several questions about sports or activities they “are participating in or intend to participate in,” a general decline in participation cuts across almost all forms of organized sports, both in and out of school.

Among 13-year-olds, 24 percent indicated they participate in basketball, 14 percent in football, and 24 percent in track. At age 15, the sports participation dropped to 22 percent in basketball and 21 percent in track, but rose to 21 percent in football.

Most sports reflect a dramatic drop-off in youth participation and interest. Only 14 percent of both age groups indicated they participate in baseball.

Overall, 26 percent of the 13-year-olds indicated they participate or in-

tend to participate in intramural sports. That figure plummeted to 17 percent for 15-year-olds. "This is expected, but it should be more by choice," Gabert believes.

The researchers indicated the study purposefully was constructed to reflect the highest level of participation possible. Data from the National Federation of State High School Associations suggest that less than 21 percent of high school students is involved in even one school sport. Social activities and dating often replace sports as youngsters mature, the study found. "Watching TV" was the highest-scoring activity among all age groups.

- The survey clearly established that "fun" is a crucial factor in the decision to remain involved in a sport or to drop out. Boys and girls agreed completely on the importance of fun in sports. Both sexes ranked fun as the top reason for being involved in their favorite sports and indicated "lack of fun" was the second most important reason for dropping a sport. Both said making practices more fun was the most important change they would make in a sport they dropped.

For those who participate, "fun" entailed such benefits as improving skills, staying in shape, taking satisfaction from one's performance and competing against others. For those who dropped out, "not fun" seemed to involve pressure—to perform, to win, to practice too much. The sense of "play" seems to have left the experience.

- Winning, the most publicized and pursued goal of sports, got low grades from junior and senior high students. The study suggests the path to excellent performance lies in motivating young people to embrace self-improvement. In 10 questions exploring reasons for being involved in sports, winning never ranked higher than seventh.

Even among the most dedicated athletes, winning paled in significance to self-improvement and competition. The athletes, isolated among the sample through analytical techniques, ranked winning in eighth place among reasons they played their best school sport—well below the number one reason, "to improve my skills."

The study determined that motivation for involvement in sports is not the same among all students at all ages. In the way they ranked a number of moti-

vational factors, the students fell into three broad groups:

- **Reluctant participants** — Roughly 25 percent of respondents seemed to feel they "had to" be in sports because of outside pressure. They were more interested in being with friends. They were less willing to play and practice hard. They were less likely to rate their abilities as being as good as others.

- **Image-conscious socializers** — This group represented 40 percent of the total, including good athletes. They seemed more inclined to draw their motivation from rewards or approval of others. Being perceived as good, feeling important, winning trophies, being popular and staying in shape (looking good) were relatively more important to this group.

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***"When you compete against your own potential, you begin to learn things about yourself that are valuable not only in sports but also in all of life."***

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- **Competence-oriented** — These were athletes who practiced and played harder, yet their primary motivation was to improve their skills. They indicated they are more interested in using sports to learn about themselves than to prove how skillful they are.

Four general "truths" about children and sports emerge from the study: (1) Fun is pivotal. If it is not fun, young people will not play a sport. (2) Skill development is a crucial aspect of fun. It is more important than winning, even among the best athletes. (3) For young people, the most rewarding challenges of sports are those that lead to self-knowledge. (4) Self-knowledge resulting from self-competition is more important than victory, attention from others or other rewards in creating lifetime athletes.

What is "fun"? Another study by Steven J. Danish, chairman of the department of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University, suggests that the concept of fun in sports is a balance between skill and challenge. More importantly, Danish finds that enjoyment from sports, like its human participants, is dynamic.

"Enjoyment in sports is greatest when the individual sets his or her own personal challenges and personally assesses his or her own performance against these challenges," Danish writes. "The best challenges and greatest rewards in sports . . . come from competing against yourself—against your own potential or goals—instead of focusing on the outcome of the contest, which is something over which you may have very little control.

"When you compete against your own potential, you begin to learn things about yourself that are valuable not only in sports but also in all of life. When young people perceive that the challenge of an activity is greater than their skills, anxiety results. If this imbalance persists, they may drop out. On the other hand, when an individual's skill exceeds the challenge, boredom can result. This, too, can lead to dropping out.

"What is enjoyable for individuals will change with age. Even though boredom or anxiety may produce a drop-out, the individuals may well turn to the same or another sport later on, especially if they can find something important about themselves in the activity. When knowing oneself becomes as important as proving oneself, sport becomes an essential element in personal growth and self-expression."

Gabert takes the position that participation in sports should be a choice available to all, yet that goal may never be reached in American society. "Sport for everybody requires social reform," he notes, "especially in this country where democracy is practiced, and social control is usually not a principle espoused by our political platforms."

To better the chances for American youth to enjoy participation in sports, Gabert has proposed a system to increase the values and the enjoyment in competition. Essentially, he suggests "equalizing" sports competition for youth by classifying young people by their levels of skill and physical maturity.

In a paper supporting the position,





Gabert suggests a classification system based on such factors as skill level, body size, gender and physical fitness level to create homogeneous team groupings. "The classification system should equate teams so that potential success is possible for as many individuals and teams as possible," he writes. "Theoretically, a 50/50 win-loss situation should be attempted. The farther you move away from a 50/50 competitive situation, the greater the possibility of achievement motivation problems."

In addition to enlarging the quality of fairness in youth sport, more accurate classification could help prevent injuries and encourage success, Gabert believes. "Classification according to biological maturation is not a recent concept," he says. "Since 1968 classification has been supported by the American Academy of Pediatrics,



*At top, batter Ryan McIver and catcher Michael Caldwell of the all-victorious Cardinals demonstrate their T-ball form under the watchful eye of umpire Marcus Mizell. Pictured below is OU health and sports sciences educator Trent Gabert, who likes to see children playing for fun.*

the Committee on Medical Aspects in Sports within the American Medical Association and the other organizations concerned with sports. What isn't as clear are the methods most effective in establishing a classification system."

In the final analysis, Gabert finds the

essential importance of sports is its long-term effect in improving health and the enjoyment of life, not scholarships in collegiate sports or the remote chance of entering professional league play.

"In this country, the percentage of adults in the big leagues is less than for brain surgeons," he says. "Of all the kids playing in 500 high school basketball games on one night, maybe one will make it into the pros."

Professional sport is a short, risky profession, and indolence seems to be the alternative for most American adults, Gabert

finds. "We have a large segment of inactive adults. Only 20 percent of all adults spend 30 minutes at their maximum heart rate three times a week; 50 percent of American adults do nothing.

"There's still the strong urge in children to play and create. Sports should give them that opportunity." @