

Keeping First Things First

When we lived in Scotland, Cindy and I treasured watching our children play soccer on the back pitch without adult supervision or league control. This weekly vigil had us reminisce about our own backyard games where dreams inspired “legendary feats,” where play, finesse, and hard work intertwined without unraveling into the ugly sights and sounds of obsessed parents and coaches, where equipment mattered very little (though I loved my Chuck Taylor’s before they were retro), and where boys and girls mutually contested, recognizing similarities and differences. Sure our children play organized sports even on select teams, but they also learned to simply play with their neighborhood mates for the fun of it. And when conflicts arose I am confident they worked it out; everybody experienced winning and losing moments, skills, different sports and the adventure to play without *our* burdensome expectations. Because of these experiences, my wife and I are ambivalent about traveling teams in youth sports. Let us consider what is wise and best for our children.

Concern: Our primary purpose as Christian parents is to trust God and partner with our faith community to nurture our children’s faith formation, so that they learn to follow God’s call to serve and love others. I believe that sports can be a formative school, one of innumerable experiences, in which they discover gifts, strengthen bodies, develop friendships, renew minds, play creatively, and aim for excellence. We have found, however, when our children played on travel teams, we were tempted to make sports number one *de facto*, potentially relativizing other spiritual priorities, and perhaps, short changing their formation. Whatever the experience, it should be more about the children and less about our own fulfillment and egos, and if not, it can spoil their freedom and deprive them of the abundant life.

An important implication is that, when we forget this overarching vision, we can leave our children vulnerable and unprepared to handle win-at-all-costs attitudes, misplaced priorities, contested identities, resulting in heightened anxiety about whether they measure up, belong or are accepted. For example, if you have ever seen the film *Tree of Life*, young Jack is doubtful about whether his father (Brad Pitt) accepts and loves him, sending him to struggle and trying to earn his favor instead of living secure in grace. Too many children are unprotected in our system of “super sports,” striving to get something for and from their parents, coaches, and friends, rather than playing freely by the way of grace.

Certainly, these challenges meet us throughout life, but the pressures of travel teams in youth sports are uniquely intense for such little disciples trying to find their way. Remember that sports do not have the magic to complete our children. So, if you are contemplating travel teams, ask, how does this commitment and their participation square with their faith formation as Christians? and what other opportunity costs should we consider (e.g., eating family dinners together, education, church, rest, family vacations, other activities)?

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