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# When Playing Becomes Sports

BY RICK H. HOYLE

**If organized sports have become something undesirable—and all indications are that they have—can we rediscover the enjoyment and fun that initially drew us to them? The three books reviewed here suggest how parents, coaches, and ministers can return sports to their roots in play.**

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**W**hen tempers flare on the playing field or in the stands during an athletic event, it is not uncommon to hear echoes of “It’s just a game!” as someone attempts to put the event and its outcome in proper perspective for the unruly participants or observers. But are sports, particularly those involving children and adolescents, “just a game” and, if not, what have they become? If sports have become something undesirable—and all indications are that they have—can we rediscover the enjoyment and fun that initially drew us to them? The three books reviewed here offer a sobering account of the current state of organized sports programs and suggest how parents, coaches, and ministers can return sports to their roots in play.

Here is the problem in a nutshell. Youth sports participation in the twenty-first century is highly organized and almost entirely controlled by adults. Ironically very few young athletes—primarily those with above-average ability and a taste of competition—continue to play sports as adults. Yet, physical activity is an essential component of good health across the lifespan. If we are to increase the number of adults who remain physically active, we must ensure that they play during childhood and that their initial forays into organized sports are positive and rewarding.<sup>1</sup> The likelihood of this sort of experience—and a lifetime commitment to physical activity—is increased when the adults who create and control youth sports programs are committed to the overall health and well-being of young athletes.

## YOUTH SPORTS IN CRISIS

In *The Cheers and the Tears: A Healthy Alternative to the Dark Side of Youth Sports Today* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999, 240 pp., \$19.95), Shane Murphy draws on his experience as chief sport psychologist for the United States Olympic Committee, sport psychologist in private practice, and parent of children who participate in sports to detail what is wrong with youth sports programs and how they might be salvaged. The presentation is frank and at times unsettling, but ultimately optimistic and hopeful. Murphy asks us to deal head-on with what sports programs have become, and then commit ourselves to reclaiming the essence of play that draws our children to them. "There is something wrong with youth sports today," he writes, "and we owe it to our children to change things for the better" (p. 7).

Although it may be true that "after religion, sport is the most powerful cultural force in American society,"<sup>2</sup> youth participation in sports has not been as thoroughly discussed as other aspects of children's lives such as education. Yet, estimates indicate that between twenty and thirty million youth in the United States participate in nonschool sports programs that, during season, occupy them an average of eleven hours per week. At their root, these programs have two overarching goals: to promote talent development and to contribute to the promotion of lifelong participation in sports and physical activity. Arguably, these programs are reasonably successful at promoting talent development, but they are, in the author's view, a "huge failure" at promoting lifelong participation. For instance, youth sports dropout is high, with more than one-third of participants indicating that they do not intend to continue the following year. Some find their way back to sports and physical activity as adults. Many do not.

Murphy avoids the "sugarcoated portrayal of sports for kids" typical of many treatments of youth sports participation, bringing to light the "dark side" of adult-organized sports for youth. Evidence of a dark side includes troubling levels of emotional abuse by parents and coaches, high risk of injury, burnout, family conflict, interpersonal violence, and the general unhappiness of many young athletes. What is at the root of these problems? Although the author gives appropriate attention to trends such as externalization of motive and incentives, his primary focus is many parents' tendency to overidentify with their young athletes.

Murphy asks parents to consider carefully their motivation to enroll their children in sports programs, providing a self-administered test to facilitate this introspection. He reviews a number of positive motives (bonding with one's children, promoting social development, teaching self-control and respect) and negative motives, primarily those that stem from overidentification (dreams of glory, young athlete as an investment, competition with other parents). Underlying the positive motives is a general view of sports participation as a means to making the young athlete a better person. The pleasure inherent in sports motivated by this goal raises the likelihood

of lifelong participation.

A strength of the book is the author's detailed treatment of the development of competitive orientations. He draws heavily on the academic literature on motivation to argue that sports participation at its best fosters a mastery orientation, characterized by self-motivation and striving for excellence. Although an additional, modest dose of ego orientation serves competitive athletes well, it is the internal drive provided by a mastery orientation that makes for longevity in sports participation. The best coaching and parenting use mastery-oriented strategies such as skill development, focus on progress, and general love for the game to keep participants motivated and engaged.

The book closes with a chapter devoted to larger concerns such as cultural attitudes toward competition and how youth sports programs are structured. Murphy encourages a shift away from the talent-development model that currently pervades youth sports programs to a participation-promotion model that "can do a lot of good for children, for families, and for communities" (p. 190). Many of the recommended strategies will sound familiar to readers whose children have participated in purposeful church-sponsored sports programs such as Upward. Strategies that promote positive parental involvement, a focus on teaching, respect and support for coaches, and adults who model good behavior can return sports participation to its rightful place as an enjoyable, lifelong activity.

### **PARENTS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE**

Parents committed to changing the tenor of youth sports participation will find concrete and specific advice in *101 Ways to Be a Terrific Sports Parent: Making Athletics a Positive Experience for Your Child* (New York: Fireside, 2003, 320 pp., \$14.00), written by Joel Fish (with Susan Magee). Like Murphy, Fish is a licensed psychologist who has counseled adult athletes who compete at the highest level as well as young athletes and their families.

As the title indicates, the book is a compilation of 101 pieces of advice for parents of children and

adolescents participating in sports programs. These are thematically aggregated into ten "chapters," which are sets of one- to three-page elaborations on suggested strategies for managing common problems faced by young athletes and their parents. Themes range from those primarily concerned with sports participation (e.g., managing competition, managing injuries, and risk of injury) to those that primarily concern the health and well-being

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of the young athlete and his or her family (e.g., sports participation and family life, managing sibling sports rivalry). Advice ranges from the commonsensical – “15. Encourage positive thinking” – to the incisive – “46. Treat your child’s coach the same way you would treat his teacher.” When appropriate, specific suggestions are offered by age of child athlete – elementary, middle, or high school.

Although the focus of this book is, by and large, on parents doing what is right by their young sports participants, the authors set the stage by noting the trends elaborated by Murphy. Extending the age range into high school, they note that forty million children participate in sports programs. This number is skewed toward the elementary and early middle school range because, by age thirteen, more than twelve million will have stopped playing. Thus, although children used to start their own games and play them until adults stopped them, now they are reliant on adults to start and manage them. This is done with limited success. The authors note that no more than two percent of young athletes will go on to win an athletic scholarship, and fewer still will ever play professionally; thus, as argued by Murphy, youth participation in sports should focus on the intrinsic qualities of enjoyment and positive social relations as opposed to extrinsic outcomes such as championships, scholarships, and contracts.

This is not a book that one would read from beginning to end. There is no inherent order in which chapters should be read, and parents are likely to vary in terms of which chapters are relevant to their own experience. This is a book to be consulted – by parents of young children who hope to avoid the problems they have seen in other families and sports settings, and by parents of longtime sports participants who need to solve the specific problems, often unforeseen, that inevitably arise as one season follows another. Particularly strong are the chapters on relating to coaches, dealing with the desire to quit, and managing self-image concerns. The latter will be especially useful for parents whose children are gymnasts, wrestlers, or participants in other sports in which body weight is a salient concern. There is something here for any parent who wants a positive, healthy experience for his or her child athlete.

## **A ROLE FOR THE CHURCH**

Is there a role for local churches in addressing the crisis in youth sports participation and promoting physical activity across the lifespan? The contributors to *Recreation and Sports Ministry: Impacting Postmodern Culture* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2003, 243 pp., \$24.99), edited by John Garner, believe there is and provide a blueprint for using recreation and sports to achieve the broader aims of the church while addressing the need for sports experiences that are positive and constructive. Among the contributors are faculty at secular and Christian universities and individuals who have successfully developed and managed free-standing recreation and

sports ministries. Most have served as recreation and sports ministers at one or more churches. Garner has been involved in such ministry for more than thirty years and now directs recreation and sports ministry at LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention.

This well-edited book is comprised of ten chapters that offer comprehensive coverage of recreation and sports ministry in the church setting. The chapters are short and focused, covering a broad range of topics. Background and context are provided by chapters on biblical foundations and the history of the church recreation and sports movement in the United States. The heart of the book is a set of practically-oriented chapters that cover topics such as the recreation and sports minister as a professional, administration of recreation and sports programs in a ministry setting, and a framework for developing such programs. A strength of the book is the collection of seventeen appendixes that range from sample permission forms to worksheets for projecting event and total ministry costs.

The first three chapters provide justification for viewing recreation and sports as a context for ministry and the history of this idea in the modern church. In the opening chapter, Garner indicates surprise that, given the connection between fellowship, outreach, and sports, churches do not routinely use recreation and sports as tools for ministry. He touches on the trend toward regular participation in leisure activities, observing that people often drive past churches on Sunday morning on their way to the lake or a sporting event. He argues for a view of leisure as a component of the abundant life we have in Christ. If congregations are to compete with other leisure options, however, they must move beyond the pick-up games that sufficed in the past to formal programs that rival those outside the church. Such is the task of recreation and sports ministry, which Garner defines as “activity that takes place during leisure time with the stated purpose or intention of helping people become aware of their need for a relationship with God, his daily role in their lives, and their place in the kingdom work” (p. 10). This view of

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sports and recreation is in stark contrast with the current state of sports participation described by Murphy and Fish, and has the potential to return athletic participation to the desire for play that initially attracts participants.

Further background and context is provided in contributions from Rodger Oswald and Brad Wesner. Oswald notes that sports and recreation are neither condemned nor encouraged in Scripture. In their support are frequent references to play in the Old and New Testaments. He concludes

that recreation and sports are “culturally strategic means of reaching people with the gospel” (p. 35). Wesner traces the history of recreation and sports in churches, emphasizing the vacillation over time between viewing them as unwise pleasure seeking and simple ways to promote fellowship (and, on occasion, raise funds!). Perhaps as a reflection of a cultural trend, recreation and sports currently are in favor in churches. It remains to be seen if and how they will be integrated into church programming.

The remaining chapters provide a wealth of practical advice for churches considering a recreation and sports ministry and ministers charged with developing and overseeing those ministries. Dale Connally sees these ministers as “leisure-services providers” who, along with their secular counterparts, are charged with helping people improve their quality of life. At present, this charge is pursued without benefit of designation as a profession and the structure and safeguards this designation provides. Garner provides a blueprint for developing a church-based recreation and sports ministry. Dale Adkins offers advice for administering such ministries, emphasizing the need to keep the focus on “growing people, not simply doing things.” Chapters by Paul Stutz and Greg Linville touch on issues related to programming. Stutz is concerned with the nuts and bolts of programming, whereas Linville focuses specifically on programming for the purpose of evangelism. Following a second chapter by Linville, this one focused on the ethics of competition in the church setting, Judi Jackson closes the volume by addressing the issue of maintaining physical activity across the lifespan. She concludes that leading a balanced life across the lifespan is critical, and church recreation and sports ministries can and should contribute to this goal.

## **CONCLUSION**

In these volumes is reason for concern about the current state of sports participation in the United States—especially programs for youth—but reason to believe that sports can and should be a positive aspect of people’s lives across the lifespan. The authors provide guidance for correcting what is wrong with organized sports, including a prominent role for parents, coaches, and local churches. The focus of these books, particularly the parent and family oriented books by Murphy and Fish, is the sports experiences of youth. As Garner and colleagues make clear, however, sports participation is not just for youth. Indeed, adult needs for exercise, challenge, and camaraderie make recreation and sports an ideal vehicle for bringing people onto the church campus and sharing the gospel with them in an environment in which they feel comfortable. There is a role for all in the rediscovery of play in sports.

## **NOTES**

1 Allen Kraut, Samuel Melamed, Daphna Gofer, and Paul Froom, “Effect of School Age Sports on Leisure Time Physical Activity in Adults: The CORDIS Study,” *Medicine &*

*Science in Sports & Exercise* 35 (2003), 2038-2042.

2 American Sports Data Staff, "Sports Participation: The Metaphor of Youth Development," American Sports Data, Inc., available online at [www.americansportsdata.com/pr-recreation-leisure.asp](http://www.americansportsdata.com/pr-recreation-leisure.asp).

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