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Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Business News

February 22, 2009 Sunday

SECTION: STATE AND REGIONAL NEWS

HEADLINE: Youth sports about winning? Our kids are saying 'No'

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Feb. 22--One of the neat things about young kids is that they'll usually tell you what they want and what's important to them.

Granted, some things youngsters think are vital to their lives are things adults know from experience are unnecessary, counter-productive and/or dangerous. But when the topic is what children want from participation in organized sports, if adults will listen, the kids will tell us.

Three years ago, Baylor University's Health, Human Performance and Recreation Department released results from a survey of 6,000 youngsters in the lowest levels of youth sports, kids 6 to 8 years of age, who were involved in baseball, softball, football and soccer.

Asked why they play sports, the overwhelming response from the young'uns was: f-u-n. In fact, 62 percent of the children surveyed said "To have fun" was their main reason for participating.

Of the seven responses given, "To be with their friends" was second (11 percent), "To make new friends" was third (10 percent) and "To become physically fit" was fourth (7 percent). "To improve their skills" or "To learn new skills" each drew 4 percent.

At the bottom of the list was competition. Just 2 percent of kids responding said "To succeed or win" was the most important reason they played.

Other studies of what attracts today's youngsters to sports reinforce Baylor's findings, and really, those results could be applied to past generations. If you can remember that far back, most of us initially got involved in athletics because we wanted to have a good time, and we wanted to hang with our buds and budettes.

Now, here are some different numbers.

Results of surveys by the highly-regarded Northeastern University Center for the Study of Sports in Society and the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University show the rate of attrition among teen athletes -- better known as "burn out" -- has risen steadily for the past two decades.

At present, nearly 42 percent of young people who began playing sports by age 8 have given up athletics by the time they reach 16.

Why? Among the reasons teenagers say they're "burned out" are: being pushed too hard by

adults (i.e., parents and/or coaches); sports demands too much time; other kids are better athletes; peer pressure; and developing new interests.

However, nearly 50 percent of young people who leave athletics by age 16 say they did so because: "It's not fun anymore."

"Fun" is the correlation between these different studies.

The main responsibility in seeing a child gains positive attributes from youth sports lies with parents -- it goes with the parenting territory. As a parent of a sports beginner, your jobs are:

--support and encourage your kid, his teammates and the coaches;

--help your child learn basic skills, if you can; and,

--promote sportsmanship.

If you're the parent of a child in the early levels of sports, telling them winning and being the star player are the measure of success makes you part of the overall problem. By pushing winning and stardom at a child who's 6 or 7 or 8, the chances dramatically increase they will come out of youth sports with feelings of failure, inadequacy and low self-esteem. And those feelings will generalize to other areas of their lives.

Second on the responsibility list are coaches. Youth league coaches are the foundation builders in the World of Perspiring Arts. Essentially, their job is to make sure as many kids as possible enjoy the early experience, and that the kids want to come back and play again.

Youth league coaches not only do that by making sure every kid gets plenty of playing time and is introduced to basic skills, but also by teaching them how to:

--work within a group;

--react to success and failure;

--play within the rules;

--show respect for themselves, their teammates and their opponent; and,

--find joy in using their natural abilities.

In the grand scheme of athletics, it doesn't matter what team is champ of the 8 and under basketball league or the 6 and under soccer league.

If you're the parent of a participant or a coach, listen up: At the youngest levels of sports, winning IS NOT what it's all about.

Just ask the kids.

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