The Competition

By Virgil Stringfield

The air in the classroom was thick with tension. The mixture of anxiety and anticipation created a low hum that resonated off the four walls. The teacher stood up, approached the overhead projector and a hush spread. The classroom transformed into the area of intense competition. A flick of a switch revealed "**Weekly Algebra Test** - Question 1) $12x^2-9x-35=0$; solve for x". Suddenly, without warning all of the parents who had been standing in the back of the room burst loose with a variety of suggestions at the top of their lungs. One father would run back and forth to his daughter's desk, yelling "*factor into binomial pairs* ". A mother found a chair to stand on and was screaming "*use the quadratic formula*" while jumping up and down. Another father had cupped his hands to intensify his voice exclaiming, "*complete the square*" over and over again. It was obvious that the decibel level was well above and recommended standard, but the participants seemed so intent that the excitement of the moment outweighed and other considerations.

Obviously it is apparent the above situation is not a healthy learning environment. Somehow, this same observation is much less obvious when the classroom becomes the athletic field and the test is the competition of a youth sports match. It does not matter what sport is being played, the level of parental guidance frequently oversteps the boundary of support and enters into the realm of frenzied confusion. The crux of the dilemma is that it is easy for adults to recognize the solutions to problems in a youth sports match and just as painful for them to allow their children the opportunity t find the solutions by trial and error. This is compounded by the difference in physical work rate and pressure of opponents which the children are contending with during the game compared to the pacing of the parents on the side of the field. Add to this the undeveloped cognitive ability of children that dictates the need for education. Also, it is important to keep in mind that the simplest solutions may be beyond the technical ability of a particular child to achieve at the moment. It is difficult to maintain a balance between assistance and interference. If our children are to develop into intelligent athletes, it is vital that when there is a question about maintaining balance, any error that is made should be in the direction of less assistance to avoid interference. In soccer this is crucial for players as they become older. The pressure becomes greater both in terms of sped and strength. The players who solve their own problems tend to adapt quicker than those who have been given solutions. They are the ones who move on to the higher levels of the game.

Granted, it is not likely that we will see a test administered like the one described and also it is just as unlikely that we will see our children play a soccer match in an environment that is as quiet as we would expect an algebra test to be. It is important to note that the solutions offered to the algebra problem in the classroom are all correct, just different methods to solve the problem. This is not always the case on the soccer field. Even if it was the case, the variety of choices can cause confusion. It is important that we recognize that both are learning experiences and share similarities. Practice is the counterpart of classroom instruction and matches and evaluation just the same tests. The difference is that sporting events are also valued as entertainment and have

the added dimension of opponents. Certainly the solution is not to give up the enjoyment of watching our children play. The solution does require us to constantly be looking for the boundaries and trying to get on the side that encourages learning.

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