

# UNTIL IT HURTS

## WHY YOUTH SPORTS ARE ANYTHING BUT CHILD'S PLAY



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Like most red-blooded American dads would be, Mark Hyman was proud when his son Ben showed promise as a baseball pitcher. "At twelve, he was a good pitcher with the tools to become an even better one," Hyman writes. "I really did not need to rush him or interfere with his progress. But of course I did."

So after long practices and, Hyman thought, productive encouragement, Ben suffered from a sore shoulder at age 13. By the time he was a senior in high school, he tore an elbow ligament. Ben then became one of the disturbing number of teen and even pre-teen players to seek out [Tommy John](#) surgery. Hyman recounts a conversation with Frank Jobe, the doctor who invented the surgery, who cautions that there's no excuse for a child to be pitching until his arm is sore. "You know 'No pain, no gain'?" he asks Hyman. "I'd like to punch the guy who said that."

The overbearing sports parent is a cliché -- but it's a cliché, Hyman argues in "Until It Hurts," that we dismiss with too much of a laugh and not enough concern.

"I had amazed and disturbed myself with the importance I'd attached to the outcome of a child's sports game," admits Hyman, a seasoned sports writer who co-authored "Confessions of a Baseball Purist" with ESPN's Jon Miller. He suggests that overzealous adults, including him, have taken over kids' sports, creating athletic experiences long on misguided expectations and short on fun.

Ben and his over-involved dad join accounts of dozens of other young athletes Hyman meets in travels across the country. There's Whitney Phelps, older sister of Olympian Michael and an early swimming phenomenon in her own right, who recalls pain so intense she had difficulty standing at age 12. "We were workhorses," says Whitney, now in her late 20s. "We would do whatever we had to do to be fast. Getting out of the pool [because you were hurt] might not have gone over so well. We were yelled at. And the way you were yelled at made you doubt yourself. You wondered: Is it that bad? Is it worth getting out or should I stick through for another five thousand yards."

Taylor Hooton, a 17-year-old Texas baseball pitcher, hung himself in 2003 in the midst of a steroids-induced depression. Why steroids for a teenager that was already six-foot-two and 175 pounds? Taylor's father Don can almost pinpoint the day. As he tells Hyman, Taylor was coming off the field one afternoon when the JV coach intercepted him, telling him that if he planned to play varsity next season, he needed to "get bigger." "What the hell are you telling a kid that big that he needs to get bigger to throw a baseball?" said Don Hooton. "We are turning over our 16-year-old babies to coaches who are untrained. That really gets to the heart of the matter."

It's likely that every parent and coach who reads Hyman's anecdotes will relate to at least one, will glimpse their own bad behavior, whisper a personal mea culpa and seek out ways to undo inflicted damage and do their part to fix a national problem that needs fixing.

Hyman tracks a history of over-invested adults all the way back to the 1930s, when New York City educators warned that the emphasis on winning was too great in public school athletic leagues and that "the physical and mental strain of playing for championships was unhealthy for the young players."

In the ensuing decades, a litany of vocal dissenters from the widely accepted state of youth sports in America largely went ignored. They include college professors, educators and disillusioned, high-profile youth advocates from major league pitcher Joey Jay to Little League Baseball founder Carl Stotz, who spent the last four decades of his life railing against Little League and an adult-dominated youth sports culture inflicting considerable physical and emotional damage on young athletes.

In 1953, Jay became the first Little Leaguer to graduate to the Major Leagues, but when his own son started playing in 1965, he was surprised to find neither his wife nor his child happy. "I went to one game and watched angrily while the coach made a tired six-year-old who just couldn't get the ball over the plate go back to the mound and keep pitching until he was ready to collapse."

"I discontinued my connection [with Little League] in 1955, when I saw the way things were going," said Stotz in a 1964 Los Angeles Times article. "The national organization . . . began developing into a Frankenstein. I became utterly disgusted."

As for why parents have become so fanatical so early, Hyman writes about **Tiger Woods'** appearance on the Mike Douglas Show on October 6, 1978 at the age of two. "Woods' precocious cameo on the Douglas Show was kitschy entertainment. Yet for the millions of parents watching -- and tens of millions who have heard about it over the years -- it sent a powerful message: it's possible to turn your kid into a champion if you start early enough."

Hyman closes with a hopeful appeal for all those who care about kids and the games they play. He highlights programs across the country where "concerned adults are organizing" and "seeking to restore a sense of perspective to kids' games and . . . mute the impact of overly invested adults." Programs like the Wildcat Baseball league in Fort Wayne, Indiana, the Athletes and Authors camp in Baltimore and Atlanta-based Soccer in the Streets. He even found a youth league in Naples, Florida, that fines parents \$45 if they call out to a player during a game.

Hyman urges parents and coaches to heed the advice of sports medicine doctors, seek out training programs and, perhaps most importantly, listen to what our children are saying. Michael Stuart, a Mayo Clinic orthopedic surgeon and chief medical officer of USA Hockey, has three sons who have played professional hockey. The sport was as much a part of the Stuart family routine as breathing. Yet before the start of each hockey season, Stuart says, "I always made a point of asking each of my children a very important question: 'Do you want to play hockey this year?' . . . I didn't ask the question because I didn't know the answer, I asked so my children would know there was no expectation. It was their choice."

*Jon Reischel, who has coached youth sports for nearly 20 years, blogs at [integrityinyouthsports.blogspot.com](http://integrityinyouthsports.blogspot.com)*

## **Until It Hurts**

America's Obsession with Youth Sports and How It Harms Our Kids

by Mark Hyman

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