



BY RICK WOLFF

# Having Fun Is What Sports Are All About

I'll never forget a conversation I had with a nine-year-old boy not too long ago. He was a good all-around athlete, but his proud parents had confided that his "best sport is tennis." When he came off the court one day, I asked him the other sports he enjoyed. His answer disturbed me: "I play tennis and work real hard at it, but I also play basketball and baseball and I snowboard. But those sports," he continued, "well, I play those sports just for fun."

"For fun?" I asked.

"Yeah, just for fun. When I play those sports with my friends at school, I don't have to worry about competing or winning like in tennis. You see, I'm supposed to take my tennis seriously."

That got me thinking. How could a child determine so early in life that certain sports are played for fun and others must be taken seriously?

More and more these days, dismayed parents of junior and senior high athletes tell me they've become disappointed when their youngsters, who have played competitive sports since age six, say they're no longer interested in committing themselves to play on high school varsity teams.

A simple case of burnout? Perhaps. But I think this growing trend goes even deeper among kids today. As our children take up competitive sports at early ages, and then become fully immersed with travel, select, elite or premier squads, we really shouldn't be surprised when a youngster begins to differentiate between playing one sport "for fun" and another "because I'm supposed to work at it."

Maybe it's time we get back to the main reasons kids are first attracted to sports. Camaraderie and companionship—simply being with your friends on a team—are probably most important. One also hopes they find joy in mastering a skill, whether it's kicking a soccer ball or lobbing a tennis ball over a net or sinking a basketball shot. And there's no denying that kids enjoy winning the occasional game or two.

The question is: How do we, as parents, ensure that our children keep on enjoying sports as they get older? To that end, here's a quick set of guidelines I would suggest:

- When you talk over the game with your young athletes, let them tell you what was most enjoyable about the day's competition. That is, to make sure they truly enjoyed themselves, let them describe to you the most satisfying part of their experience. They talk. You listen.

- Hold back on your critical comments, especially when



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LEFT ON THEIR OWN, KIDS WILL PLAY SPORTS FOR THE PLEASURE OF IT.

kids are young. That means you should fight the temptation to give your child some "constructive criticism," because as soon as you do, those critical comments can deflate the fun your child gets from participation.

In fact, a child quickly picks up on the notion that doing well in sports is not so much about having fun as trying to please Mom or Dad. As you might imagine, the more experienced the child becomes in sports, the less inclined he is to keep up this daunting task.

- Feel free to take photos of and videotape your children while they play organized sports. Don't worry if they might be a bit camera-shy at first, because they'll be first in line to see the finished shots or video.

And every so often, once the season is over, sit down and revisit those magical moments with your kids. Let them recall and relive those fun-filled days with you.

- If you want your children to feel good about themselves and their sports participation, give them some sincere praise. Praise—above everything else—is a universal "smile maker" for kids. It's inexpensive, easy to provide and helps reinforce the child's enjoyment of the game.

The bottom line? It's great that your little ones are playing sports now. Let's see what we can do to make certain they keep on playing. Don't forget—it's still about having fun!

Sports psychology expert Rick Wolff is the father of three children and the author of *Good Sports, The Concerned Parent's Guide to Competitive Youth Sports* (Sagamore, 1-800-327-5557).