

Sports Make Dreams

Ernesto peers through the fence watching kids his age playing baseball. He is slumped over with his head in his hands. He knows that his dream of one day becoming A-Rod will never come true, because his mom cannot afford the cost of his joining the youth baseball team that he is so longingly watching. His mother is a single parent who doesn't have the money for \$750 in fees, \$400 for equipment and uniforms, and \$200 for transportation, plus much more for travel that was required for her son to play youth baseball. Just then a bright green low rider pulls up. One of several thugs shouts, "Come on homes, you know sports are for the kids with money. Hop in we are your team."

Hopes and dreams are important to everyone, especially children. For over one hundred years sports have been the center piece of hope and dreams for kids, especially those who are less fortunate.

Any child with a broomstick in his hand could stand against a brick wall as his pal pitched a sponge ball and imagine he was Babe Ruth or Willie Mays batting in the World Series. He could dash around his friends on the sandlot with a tattered football and magically transform himself into The Diesel, The Bus, Sweetness or Broadway Joe. He could stand at the foul line and see himself as Magic, Bird or MJ. That was the substance of dreams that gave hope to every child, no matter how destitute or despondent. This hope came from sports where rags to riches stories abounded. These dreams were available to all kids no matter their background, race or economic status.

Due to the high cost of youth sports these dreams are rapidly fading. To the possible exception of basketball there are no more free sandlot games played by the kids in the neighborhood. Youth sports have evolved to become solely structured, organized team events run primarily by adults. This absence of spontaneous and sometimes continuous play organized by the children themselves has led to a sharp decline of participation in sports and recreation by young people today. Our children are becoming overweight, electronic game playing, couch potatoes.

Children from families at the lower end of the income scale have been severely affected by the commercialization of youth sports. They cannot afford the price tag that is attached to most youth sports today. Participation in youth sports by children from families with an aggregate annual income of less than \$60,000 has declined by a factor of 50% over the last 40 years. Idle children in certain areas have reached epidemic proportions. Children who need it most are being deprived of their hopes and dreams.

Today a child who plays for an organized youth sports team must typically bear the following costs:

- Participation fees
- Equipment expense
- Uniform expense
- Medical and insurance costs
- Travel expense
- Other administrative fees

Depending upon the sport and location these expenses can range well into the thousands of dollars for a single sport, for a single child, for a single season. It is easy to see how this is far beyond the means of many families. Additionally, unlike in the past, these teams most often don't practice or play in the neighborhood where the child resides. So there is the added expense of transporting a child to practice and games. This often requires an automobile and spare time, hence the 'soccer mom.' The odds of participating in youth sports are severely

against a child of a single mother without a car, especially in the suburbs. That's if she could afford the other expenses.

Certain sports such as ice hockey or gymnastics come with extremely high price tags and are beyond the means of a substantial number of middle income families. The individual sports like tennis and golf have traditionally had their unique costs structures and there are special programs that address the needs of underserved kids for these sports. The core sports of football, baseball, softball, soccer, lacrosse, field hockey, volleyball, track, wrestling and swimming should be available to all kids. However, the cost of participating in these sports can be quite high—nearly \$1,000 per season for baseball and softball and upwards of \$2,000 per year for lacrosse and volleyball for example. The dad of a catcher on Little League baseball team related that his 13 year son was walking around with \$2,500 of gear in his bag. Even middle class families are feeling the pinch of commercialized youth sports and often must strain so that their kids can participate. The pay-to-play phenomena in youth sports is in full swing.

Why are the expenses of youth sports so high? The main reason is the fact that, to the exception of basketball, kid organized and run pickup games that are free have disappeared. The driving force for this change is acutely increased parental scrutiny. The days of a kid riding his bike to the rec center or sandlot have gone the way of the soda jerk and drive-in movies. Modern parents are compelled to keep a tighter rein on their children. My parents never came to the field or diamond where I played except maybe to call me to dinner and then I was back out until the street lights came on. Parents now run the leagues and control youth sports. The question is raised—do our kids relish this intense involvement and control by adults. Mark Hyman in his book, *Until It Hurts*, avers absolutely not.

Over the years public support for sports and recreation has receded. While publically supported youth leagues still exist youth sports have become more and more a private enterprise. In most parts of the country, the old parks and recreation leagues are long gone. John Engh, the chief operating officer of the National Alliance for Youth Sports, said the combination of slashed municipal budgets and the push to involve children in organized sports at a younger age resulted in the current system. According to Hyman, when today's parents played in youth leagues about 30 years ago, they typically showed up for games run by the local parks and recreation department, often outfitted with little more than a glove and the clothes on their back. They now register their children for leagues run by independent local boards, which sometimes control huge budgets with little or no municipal oversight.

Despite the good intentions of most youth sports organizations, profiteering will always raise its ugly head. Youth sports has become a rapidly growing industry and facility rentals, uniforms and sports apparel, athletic gear, coaching, sports travel, sports catering, youth sports medicine, and league and team management are all booming industries. Youth sports tournaments that involve out of area teams are major revenue generators and have become the central industry for a number of communities across the nation. Private coaching and training is another big profit center. The price to play is getting higher and higher.

Even the schools now charge to play. *Science Daily (May 14, 2012)* — In an era of tight funding, school districts across the country are cutting their athletic budgets. Many schools are implementing athletic participation fees to cover the cost of school sports. But those fees have forced kids in lower-income families to the sidelines, according to a new poll that found nearly one in five lower-income parents report their children are participating

less in school sports. In 2011 sixty one percent of the nation's public high schools charged participation fees to play varsity sports.

Increasingly larger numbers of low income children are being left on the sidelines. This is neither good for the kids nor good for society. By every measure children who play sports become better citizens. Not only does sports keep children busy and out of trouble but it also teaches them many very important life lessons.

Physical Benefits

Children who play sports develop general physical fitness in a way that's fun, and they establish lifelong habits for good health.

This is particularly important at a time when obesity in the United States has reached epidemic proportions. The incidence of obesity has increased by more than 50% among America's children and teens since 1976. It continues to grow at a staggering rate. The 2009 National Survey of Children's Health showed that non-athletes are 60% more likely to be overweight than athletes.

Healthy Habits

Because sports increase an awareness of one's body and how it responds to different stimuli and circumstances, sports help prevent drug and alcohol abuse. Most athletes value what their bodies can do and want to maintain those abilities. Being an athlete also gives kids an acceptable reason for telling their friends no to drugs, booze, and other high-risk, unhealthy behaviors.

Behavioral Benefits

Children that participate in sports are less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as, smoking, drugs, sex, and criminal activity.

Nearly 775,000 youth are involved in gangs.

- Between 3:00 and 6:00 PM are the peak hours of violent crime, and are also the hours when children are most likely to be the victims of crime
- Teens left unsupervised 3 or more days per week are twice as likely to hang out with a gang member and three times more likely to be engaged in criminal behavior
- Areas with high crime rates also tend to lower rates of physical activities

Studies have shown reduced crime rates in areas with sports-based youth development initiatives.

Personal Development Benefits

Participating in youth sports:

- Builds self-esteem, self-respect and dignity
- Provides social interaction with peers and adults
- Provides an opportunity to develop talents
- Teaches sportsmanship and how to control emotions
- Teaches teamwork
- Shows kids how to play within the rules
- Teaches kids how to deal with adversity by showing them it is alright to make a mistakes

- Instills self-discipline and an awareness of the value of preparation
- Provides leadership opportunities
- Fosters a sense of community by providing a sense of belonging or to be part of a group
- Provides a stress relief from academic and social pressures
- Teaches time management and the value of planning ahead
- Diversity leads to better understanding and respect

Societal Benefits

Studies have shown that those who participate in youth sports are less likely:

- Contravene the law or go to prison
- Join a gang
- Abuse alcohol or drugs
- Abuse sex or become pregnant
- Skip class or have discipline problems in school
- Drop out of school
- Become a welfare recipient

And are more likely to:

- Perform well in school
- Have higher grades on national tests
- Graduate from high school
- Go to college
- Become and remain gainfully employed
- Become directors and managers
- Become business and political leaders
- Contribute to society by participating in social and charitable programs

A survey of individuals at the level of executive vice president or above in *Fortune 500* companies indicated that 95% had participated in high school sports.

It must be noted that underserved children incrementally benefit more from youth sports than more fortunate youngsters. The most damaging result of the high cost of youth sports is the loss of dreams.

It is mandatory to play high school sports or high level club sports to qualify for a college athletic scholarship. It's nearly impossible to play at the high school or major club level without developing the requisite skills through youth sports. Many children are now missing the opportunity to gain entry and financial help for college through athletic scholarship because they are unable to play in high school. Ironically, a major portion of these missed opportunities lies with the kids who need it the most.

The so called travel team has emerged from the commercialization of youth sports. The travel team involves the better players who play against better players. Accordingly, the travel team is the best means to develop the skills needed to play in high school or to be noticed by college scouts in the case of club teams. However, the travel teams economically discriminate against kids from low income families in a major way. To the exception

of youth basketball, which is often subsidized, the cost of having a child play on a travel team is far beyond the means of many families. It is not unusual for a family to incur expenses exceeding \$5,000 per year for a child to play on a travel team. There are cases where such costs have mounted up to \$10,000. Consequently, low income children are rarely in the game.

For certain sports such as volleyball, gymnastics and sometimes swimming the focus of college recruiting are on the major club teams. Membership and participation on the elite sporting clubs is extremely expensive and combined with cost of travel are out of the question for many middle income families not to mention those families below them on the income scale.

CBS Money Watch A volleyball dad estimates he spends \$8,000 to \$10,000 per year on his three daughters for club volleyball..... he knows of high school teams that require their athletes to play club. "What I think is disconcerting about that," he says, "is the high school coach is basically telling the parents they have to spend thousands of dollars for their kids to make the high school team."

Personal coaching and training is becoming increasingly popular and is employed by many families to enhance their child's chances to play in college or to gain a scholarship but such personal attention is clearly in purview of the affluent and privileged.

Youth sports are no longer a talent and effort meritocracy but an economic meritocracy. This fact may be evidenced by the declining diversity in certain sports such as baseball and lack of diversity in the so called prep sports such as lacrosse, volleyball and field hockey. One would think that the United States could field a more competitive men's soccer team considering the sheer number of kids now playing youth soccer in America. The problem is that hungry, aggressive and talented low income kids or ethnic kids, such as Hispanics, who may have an affinity for the sport, cannot afford to play organized youth soccer and therefore never get the chance or exposure to play at a high level.

We can level the playing field in youth sports.

The first step is to make the public aware that there is a problem. I have found that when I present the situation many people respond "Yes, I think you are right. It was in the back of my mind but I really never completely thought it through." People who don't have young children often are not fully aware how drastically the landscape of youth sports has changed since they were kids. So the problem must be brought to the forefront. Most people can generally appreciate the value of sports and will positively respond. Sports belong to all our children.

The next step is to increase public support for youth sports programs. Federal, state and local budgets, including school budgets, for youth sports must be increased. The public and the politicians must be made aware of the benefits of youth sports and the costs to both the children and society for not playing. The cost of health care related to childhood obesity far exceeds the cost of keeping our children active. It costs significantly less to support a young man to play soccer for a year than it cost to keep him in prison for a year. The positives of youth sports far outweigh the expense.

Much of the management and operations of youth sports programs and facilities that was once run by government has been turned over to private entities. Scrutiny and regulation of these private boards and concerns should be increased. This includes privately run youth sports leagues and clubs who should be held to certain minimum standards.

Youth sport leagues and teams both public and private should be encouraged and assisted in making opportunities available for less fortunate kids to participate. These entities can be provided with education and guidelines on how to raise money to support participation by underserved children. Local communities should be involved in this effort with the goal that every kid in the community that wants to play can play. No kid should be left on the sideline.

The business community should be enlisted to provide programmatic and financial support for this effort. Businesses may support leagues, teams and individual athletes, as well. Sporting equipment and apparel manufacturers, as well as retailers should contribute by providing free or discounted gear for low income athletes. Adult sports teams as well as college and professional sports teams can contribute used gear also.

My vision for the future:

- A day when youth sports and recreation is affordable and available to all children
- All students are able to play school sports
- Adequate new sport facilities are constructed; existing facilities are continuously upgraded and they are available to all children
- As many young people as possible are actively involved in free play, sports and physical activity
- All kids have their hopes and dreams

Dreams do come true.

A concerned and generous neighbor helped Ernesto with the costs of playing Little League baseball and now he is batting .340 as the star shortstop for the Towson State University baseball team.

Darryl Hill, Chairman
Kids Play USA Foundation, Inc

Learn more:

www.kidsplayusafoundation.org