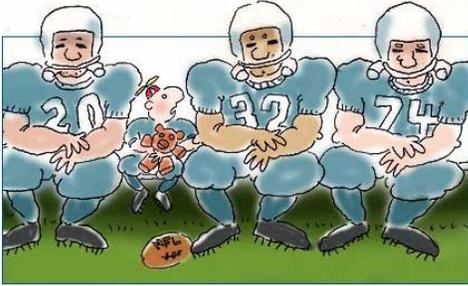


Pushing too hard too young by Jaqueline Stenson



F.Birchman / MSNBC.com

Intense training schedules. Pressure to win and be the best. Painful injuries. Given all these factors, it's not surprising that some athletes simply burn out on their sport. But what is shocking to many in the field are the young ages at which this is happening more and more -- sometimes as early as 9 or 10.

Winning means recognition and that could lead to moneymaking opportunities -- high school championships then college scholarships and maybe a shot at the pros.

"Kids sports have become much more competitive," says Dr. Jordan Metzl, medical director of the Sports Medicine Institute for Young Athletes at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City. "And in general, high-level competition for young kids is not a great thing," says Metzl, co-author of "The Young Athlete: A Sports Doctor's Complete Guide for Parents."

With more kids than ever in organized sports, Metzl and other experts in sports medicine and youth athletics say they are more and more worried about the pressures put on some children to excel. But the pressure can be too much for others, especially grade-schoolers who aren't as prepared to deal with the stress as older athletes.

And the goals of sports for young kids can differ very much from those of their parents and coaches, says Avery Faigenbaum, an associate professor of exercise science at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. "Most children would rather play on a losing team than sit on the bench of a winning team," he says. When Faigenbaum asks kids who've quit why they're no longer interested in sports, their typical response: "It's not fun anymore." There are no benefits to playing sports if kids quit early on.

A new ball game

While parents may have spent much of their early childhoods riding bikes around the neighborhood, playing pick-up games of baseball or basketball with the local kids and maybe joining Little League, today's children often fall into two very different groups: those who sit inside playing video games and those who participate in organized competitive sports like soccer, ice hockey and basketball.

A big difference today is that kids involved in sports play harder and younger than ever, says Steve Marshall, an assistant professor of epidemiology and orthopedics at the Injury Prevention Research Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Some 19- or 20-year-olds may wish their parents had pushed them more to stick with sports when they were younger rather than giving up, he adds.

Injury toll

Aside from the mental pressures that young athletes may experience from intense training and competition, physical complaints are a growing concern, sports medicine specialists say. One of the most complete surveys to date, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found that from 1997 to 1999 sports and recreation-related injuries were more common nationwide than injuries from car crashes.

A study published last September in the Journal of the American Medical Association showed that over the last 30 years in the area around Rochester, Minn., forearm fractures many of them resulting from sports and recreation activities, increased 56 percent in girls and 32 percent in boys, mostly among kids in the preteen and early teen year.

Another factor that adds to sports injuries is the couch-potato culture where kids lie around all summer watching TV, for instance, and then jump into a sport in the fall when they're out of shape.

But if young kids focus on just one sport, they may not benefit from a future in athletics "There's no truth in the idea that says that if a child athlete plays just one sport that will guarantee success as a teen or adult," he says, adding there's actually more evidence that if they diversify they'll play better.