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Living Well: When coaches and parents put too much emphasis on winning, kids may drop out

By BOB CONDOR
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E-mail is a regular part of Dave Schumacher's workdays, same as many of us. But the similarities tend to stop there.

Schumacher is the coaching director for the Washington State Youth Soccer Association, which trains and educates some 12,000 coaches each year. He gets a lot of e-mail notes from those coaches. Some of the e-mails are outright nasty.

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"I got an e-mail from a U9 (under 9 years old) coach who was very upset with me saying kids should not be overbooked or even play in summer tournaments, especially younger players," explained Schumacher. "The coach said he had discovered seven open tournaments his U9 team could play in in July and August. He signed up the team for six. That means those kids and parents were tied up for six of eight possible weekends."

The coach was proud of his aggressive scheduling. He warned Schumacher, without any decorum, if U9 players in Washington didn't all follow suit, they would fall behind kids in California.

For Schumacher, it equates to too much soccer -- a sport he loves -- and too little summer. You know, family vacations, barbecues, impromptu swims, the lazy hazy days nobody seems to have time to enjoy anymore.

"It's only natural when kids go to tournaments that they want to win medals and trophies," said Schumacher. "Parents want the same thing. So tournaments can be fun. But they can also bring out the worst in people."

More than 46 million American kids will participate in an organized sport between now and the beginning of next fall's school year. But 50 percent of kids drop out of those organized team and individual sports by age 12, and the number rises to 75 percent by sophomore year in high school. On average, three of every 10 youth sport participants don't return for a next season.

For these athletic dropouts, the thrill and particularly the fun is gone faster than Ichiro Suzuki runs to first base.

Do the math. It equals up to 34.5 million disconnected teenagers. Not good whether you are a sports fan or decidedly unfanatic.

"In the past, youth sports represented a nice way to keep kids out of trouble," said Lenny Wiersma, co-director of the Center for Advancement of Responsible Youth Sports at the

University of California-Fullerton. "Now you can argue that youth sports are critical to preventing childhood obesity, which is an epidemic. We are losing kids earlier and earlier to TV, alcohol and, at least down here, gangs."

Wiersma made the point that there are few physical activity alternatives for students, since phys. ed. class is routinely downsized or eliminated altogether when school budgets are tightened.

It is common among parents, even the ones who dream of their children getting college scholarships or making millions as sports stars, to say they want their children to have fun in athletics. Yet someone like Dr. John O'Kane, who is team physician for the University of Washington and a sports-medicine specialist with a Seattle practice, said he sees a distinct subset of teenage athletes whose sports participation "is not their goal but the parents' goal."

"I have been at lots of select team basketball games," said Richard Bouche, a podiatrist with The Sports Medicine Clinic at Northwest Hospital and Medical Clinic. "Some of these kids never smile -- the whole game or the whole season."

Wiersma said he has a quick barometer for a no-fun factor among youth sports participants: "If the parent talks longer about the game than the kid on the car ride home or if the parent dwells on winning and losing more, it fits into a situation of potential burnout for the young athlete."

Ronald Smith, a professor of psychology at the University of Washington and a noted expert on coach-player relationships, holds that most kids don't pay much attention to win-loss records -- or wouldn't naturally -- until about age 13. Putting them into highly competitive situations -- say, six U9 tournaments in two months -- is counterproductive to both fun and wider participation.

"Before kids hit puberty," said Wiersma, "they don't really understand competition and that it involves a mixture of performance and luck and circumstances, even weather conditions. All they see is they're not good enough."

Smith has done seminal work about why kids drop out of sports. The No. 1 reason?

"It's not fun," said Smith. "The next five all have to do with parents' or coaches' behaviors."

Smith and UW colleague Frank Smoll have chosen to concentrate on improving the coaching approaches in youth sports.

"We look at supportiveness," said Smith during a recent speech at a psychology conference. "Highly supportive coaches respond to positive behaviors such as effort, good conduct and following the rules with positive reinforcement. Those same coaches respond to mistakes with encouragement and technical instruction rather than criticism."

A supportive coach no doubt will look for clues that his or her players are having fun.

"I look for it in body language," said Tony Miranda, who runs the Northwest Juniors Volleyball Club based in Bellevue and acts as junior program director for the Puget Sound region of USA

Volleyball. "It can be hard to tell if your players are having fun. But I look at body language, whether the players are energetic and whether they enjoy each other's company."

Wiersma and Cal-Fullerton's youth sports center has been conducting a sweeping three-year study of youth sports in Orange County. The concept of what's fun has surprised the researchers.

"Parents and coaches equate fun with fooling around during practice or a similar fleeting concept," said Wiersma. "The kids themselves have been clear and consistent. The No. 1 thing that makes sports fun for them is being challenged in a manner consistent with their abilities. They report that they like to work hard in practice and know they accomplished a difficult task. Fun is much more intrinsic than being with friends. It goes beyond playing games."

Smith has discovered similar trends in his work. He said youth athletes "like structure and organization" but coaches should save the drill-sergeant approach.

What's more, studies show wins and losses have little to do with whether young athletes like playing for a coach. That's especially true for that relative sliver of kids who keep playing sports into their high school years, overcoming emotional burnout and stiff competition that ultimately results in a minuscule few making it to university teams or pro stardom.

"Teens like to play for coaches who instruct them in such a way that they are more successful," said Smith.

Interestingly, Smith said some of the all-time most successful coaches have emphasized this "mastery" of skills approach over the "ego orientation" that is all about winning and losing. Legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden is the model for the mastery approach (one example is his famous quote, "It's what you know after you know it all that counts"). Another is North Carolina basketball icon Dean Smith, who said equating winning and losing to life and death means "you will be dead a lot."

For Schumacher, the state soccer coaching supervisor, the definition of fun is apparent in driveways, back yards and basements throughout the Puget Sound area.

"When kids play a sport on their own every day," said Schumacher, "that's when we know it's fun."