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Walk it Off: Taking Advantage of Passion in Youth Athletics
By Christopher T. Theriot

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The Price

Abigail Wolf remembers the soccer ball hurling toward her, hard and fast, striking part of her finger.

“It feels like I could tell immediately that it was broken,” she said. “I knew it hurt, but I didn’t want to complain because I wanted to finish the game.”

She finished playing but kept the injury under wraps to avoid being sidelined for the rest of the season.

Weeks passed and the pain grew increasingly unbearable. Finally, an X-ray revealed that the finger was indeed broken.

“I was reluctant to complain based on the mentality of the team,” Wolf said. “The times I did mention my finger hurting, no one believed me, and told me to get back out there.”

Wolf was an 11-year-old playing in a recreational soccer league that was meant to offer kids a sport to play during summers.

Today, the former athlete who loved spending her time playing a sport she loved, was shocked how steep a price that actually was. From parents, coaches, viewers, and just about everyone other than the player, the effort and sacrifice made both mind and body of a player can be taken for granted. The assumption by parents and coaches that kids will rise above injury can be a mental strain for an adolescent. These athletes don’t want to let anyone down, and as a result, strain their well-being to do so.

That idea can be hard to realize at such a young age, and all one can think about is the positives of their experience, pushing the negative to the side.

Smelling freshly cut grass on the morning of practice, going to eat with your teammates before and after a game, and game days where everyone is hyper-focused on one thing: winning.

Memories such as these push experiences like Wolf's out of frame, and oftentimes don't resurface until they are brought up between players.

Youth athletics involves sacrifices like time, health, or money, just like any extracurricular would. Although sometimes these programs can ask kids to go that extra mile.

Phrases like, "You have to buy into the system if you want to win," are echoed all across the country. When looking at this type of culture deeper however, cracks start to form, and the sacrifice is much greater.

Gabrielle Sharman, a former middle and high school lacrosse player From Georgia, has experienced that price. The now 20-year-old college student recalls her coach and parents being particularly persistent on a summer double header where field temperatures ranged from 110 to 115 degrees.

"We had two games to play that day. During the second match, I collapsed in goal," she said.

She remembers the faces of her parents and coach as she lay on the ground, her vision blurred.

As she lay, her equipment grew increasingly claustrophobic, consisting of full torso padding, leg padding, arm padding, gloves, and a helmet.

"My mom was rubbing ice on my wrist and bringing the water bottle to my mouth over and over again," she said.

"You'll be fine, let's get back out there," her mother kept repeating, with her coaching nodding in agreement over his mother's shoulder.

Jesse Lipshie, from Washington-Liberty High School, having participated heavily in wrestling as a student, graduating in 2016. The "walk-it-off," culture of sports is something he

feels makes it rewarding and is all part of the process. Getting up when you get knocked down or taking a strongly worded lecture from your coach, is all a part of what makes sports have weight for Lipshie, and for him, the positives far outweigh the negatives.

“One of the things I learned from that ‘walk it off’ mentality is that it is ever present- in not just wrestling, but every type of martial arts,” he said. “It isn't necessarily for the sake of winning; a lot of times it is when it comes to sports, but the main focus of martial arts is first and foremost self-defense.”

Now a college senior, Lipshie isn't involved in the wrestling world as much as he used to be, but he will never forget the valuable lessons from that kind of coaching, many of which carried forward as he grew older.

“When you get punched in the gut, or tackled to the ground, or get your bell rung by a mean right hook, it may be in a controlled environment,” Lipshie said. “Your opponent isn't going to stop, and that is a fact you deal with when fighting.”

As much as he values the life lessons and experiences, he understands that there is a way to do it, and a way to not.

“That isn't to say, ‘play through your injury,’” he said. “I don't find this mentality perfect by any means. When it comes to competing, I have my gripes with it seeing how children risk their health for a coach's career/schools' reputation can seem less about ‘preparation’ and more about something else.”

The Culture

In 2013, ESPN (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network) put out a story with a now-famous quote about youth sports, writing that they are, “So big, no one really knows how

big.” Three years later, Aspen Institute put out a study that estimated that three out of four American households have at least one school-aged child participating in youth sports.

On average, based on information from Stanford Children’s Health, 30 million children participate in recreational sports every year. This information was compiled from the National SAFE KIDS Campaign and the American of Pediatrics.

The positives of being in programs like this across America are the main talking points of people who want others to join. The social, physical, and competitive traits that go along with being in a regimented and structured program at a young age has its draw.

However, the negatives that stem from this deep immersion can be overlooked by adults running these programs, or parents putting their kids into them.

Of the millions of kids playing sports, 3.5 million experienced injury, and of those 750,000 ended up in a hospital emergency room on a yearly average.

One need only look at the manner in which kids experience injuries, with many youth athletic programs pushing their kids further than they can go.

This has caused kids to stray away from recreational sports in recent years. The culture of always performing to advance up the food chain and putting a focus on the gain of the ones in charge have led kids to lose the passion and drive to participate.

It’s more than simply walking off an injury. The mindset to do so is baked into how things are done, and what follows is a drop off in participation. “Win-at-all-cost” coaching is a form that does not work nearly as well as positive reinforcement, particularly when a player has not performed to a school’s liking.

A notable shift in 2016, as found in a Washington Post Article by Julianna W. Wilner found that 70 percent of kids drop recreational sports by age 13. The reasons vary, but a large

contingent of players feel the environment takes on higher levels of competitiveness and dedication, some too much to mix in with the regular life of an adolescent.

The purpose is less about fun, and more, “what can you do for us?”

“I grew up playing competitive sports,” said Lauren Torres, a college student from New Paltz, New York. She has since drifted away from playing soccer, softball, lacrosse, and football. Most notable of the four, were the seasons she spent on a predominantly male football team during middle school and high school.

“There was definitely a ‘tough-it-out’ attitude on all the teams I played for,” she said. “While the female-comprised teams preached this, it was never to a point of excess or danger. It was much more intended to create a mental toughness than to push a physical one to the point of real injury.”

A culture she said became “increasingly obvious” was how her female teams focused on strategy and critical thinking, where the men’s team focused on life experience and physical toughness.

“This extended to both the idea of self-defense and preparedness, but also a degree of masculinity and the ‘hardships that men encounter,’ whatever that means in any given context,” Torres said.

That style of playing manifested the game into a rougher, injury-heavy environment.

“Football was the only sport I played that gave it a spin of ‘for life’,” she said. “We were taught that buckling down and being tough was something that was going to help us overcome physical and emotional obstacles later in life.”

“This was often done in excess to prove how masculine you were and is where injuries occurred,” she said.

This culture of “walking things off,” that Torres describes is used throughout youth athletics across the country, resulting in negative impacts on minds and bodies.

While many of these injuries are musculoskeletal (muscle and bone), injuries to the brain remain the deadliest. Stanford Children’s Health reported 3.5 million head injuries, with 21% being attributed to sports

In a professional environment, the National Football League houses 1,696 players. In 2019, there were a reported 224 diagnosed concussions, but only 19 of which were a result of stoppages by concussion spotters

Even at the professional level, where millions of dollars is based on a player's health, the responsibility has fallen on the individual to be aware of the health of their brain. In a culture of resilience, players can push through these injuries, simply just popping back up after a nasty play. Damage has still been done, however.

The difference between professional sports, and your everyday youth athletics program, is they do not have millions of dollars. Oftentimes they are not being able to afford up to date equipment. Playing will still continue regardless.

In the same Stanford Children’s Health report of youth athletics injuries, 215,000 kids ages 5 to 14 were treated in a hospital emergency room for football related injuries.

The idea to press on to show strength, and the obsession with overcoming adversity in the face of injury, fails people. Players like James Ransom, a 13-year old boy who took his own life.

According to a 2018 Bleacher Report article by Mirin Fader, Ransom was participating in just another pee wee football game. During the game, he received a hard hit to the side of the helmet. After remaining on the ground for a few seconds, Ransom popped back up and remained in the game.

He was never examined by a trainer or coach. He would take his life just over a year later.

“I’ve had my bell rung before,” said Ransom once questioned by his parents if he had been alright after such a strong hit.

There were reports of a “culture of yelling,” amongst the coaching staff of his team, with someone saying that players would have helmets hurled towards them following a failed command, Fader reported.

In the weeks that followed, James experienced symptoms consistent with C.T.E. (chronic traumatic encephalopathy), a neurodegenerative disease caused by repeated hits to the head.

Short- and long-term memory loss, harsh mood swings, severe nausea within five to 10 minutes of starting school work, and the inability to track objects with his eyes plagued Ransom. All symptoms he had never experienced prior to the head injury.

Deaths similar to Ransom’s can be avoided. Taking a step back and putting pressure on kids to win and creating more of an emphasis on them having fun are all ways this can be avoided. And above all, not running the players into the ground.

Game Time Decision

Assessing whether a player is able to play a game can have numerous steps, with opinions coming from many angles. There's the athletic trainers opinion, the parents' decision, the coaching staff's decision, and the players desire to want to keep playing.

At the end of the day, one needs to look for overuse of a player, from how long they played in the last game, to how hard they practiced.

According to Boston Hospitals website, specifically the section on how to avoid overuse injuries, the answer is open to interpretation.

“Parents and coaches have a great deal of influence – for better or for worse. Parents and coaches should stress moderation in training and should retrain the zeal with which they push youth and teens,” according to the Boston Children’s hospital website.

The section said coaches should learn and use proper training techniques while trying to avoid overwhelming specific parts of an athlete’s body.

The issue here remains that the accountability in which coaches and athletic directors are held can be inconsistent.

Joelle “J.C.” Church, an athletic trainer at Mineola High School, a Nassau County school located on Long Island, learned what the influence of power can do in a youth athletic program.

“I think every athletic trainer has a story or two about having to put their foot down or speak up. One example I always think about was during my first year at my high school,” J.C. said.

While working a high school football game, the quarterback of her team took a helmet to his wrist right before half time.

“During half time I assessed the situation,” she said. The injury had obvious signs of breakage, with the only thing missing being a deformation. These aspects of the injury could have only been seen by a trained eye like J.C.’s. “Naturally, the athlete in question wanted to go back in the game,” she said.

Once J.C. recognized the severity of the injury, she informed her boss, the athletic trainer. She told him she wanted to speak with the parents prior to discussing anything further and see if they wanted to sideline the doctor/physician to examine their child.

“My A.D. had then informed me that the athlete could make his own decisions,” she said. “He told me that ‘If he/she says he/she is good to go then he/she’s good to return’.”

She was then told to tape up his injury, and put the player back out there.

“As a new athletic trainer for the district, I did my job,” she said. She then spoke up to the sideline M.D., informing them of the situation. J.C. was then called in for a meeting with the A.D. where she was reprimanded for lying.

She said she was reprimanded for notifying the physician about the wrist injury and was told she had never been informed to “put him back out there” with an apparent injury. The A.D. informed her that she must have mixed things up because the program would never approve of this.

J.C. said her decision stemmed from pressure she felt from her boss. She believed that she had to. Still, the thought of putting a player in harm's way nags.

“Our A.D. the next week came to find out that the player couldn't write in class because of a teacher's complaint, yet never sat me down to discuss this” said J.C.

Injuries like these come about when a player is subjected to above average reps or playing time. The injury J.C.'s quarterback sustained was one that could have been avoided had the player not been playing in a program that accepted this type of conduct.

Marty Wells, the Athletic Director of Elwood High School in Indiana has seen much in his over 40 years of experience, and over the years he has tried his best to stay in tune with where his athletes are at physically as well as mentally.

“To me player performance is based on knowing the right technique for their sport which is part of player safety, how physically fit they are and how mentally fit or ready to play they are both of which are part of player safety,” said Wells.

The Brain

An injury that players may sustain over the course of their playing career is a concussion. Being one of the more invisible injuries, they can be hard to spot, and require a well-trained eye.

As defined by the CDC, “A concussion is a type of Traumatic Brain Injury – or TBI – caused by a bump, blow, or jolt to the head or by hit to the body that causes the head and brain to move rapidly back and forth.”

Referred to as an SRC (sports-related concussion), the ways in which one can sustain such an injury are endless.

At the 5th international Conference on Sports in 2016, held in Berlin, experts presented 60,000 articles, each one trying to come up with a consensus statement on sport-related concussions.

During this meeting, they came up with the 11 “R’s” of concussion management. These include remove; reevaluate; rest; rehabilitation; refer; recovery; return to sport; reconsider; residual effects and sequelae; and risks of reduction.

As a result of this conference, researchers conducted a study on 51 Swedish elite soccer teams, leading them to find that risk of concussion was 1.19/1000

Of the 959 players followed (389 women and 570 men), data showed that the men's league was riskier.

Eight percent of female players continued to play after immediately sustaining a concussion, while also having a worse initial symptom of a concussion. Male players had over 40% playing through concussion symptoms, but their symptoms were harder to detect.

This article was published in the Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports in February of 2020. The purpose of this research was to highlight the consistency in head related injuries, in a sport that is predominantly played with one's feet.

In the article, it also states that “The duration of symptoms after an SRC (sports related concussion) is associated with concussion severity, number of symptoms, severity of symptoms, sex, depression, and history of headache diagnosis such as a migraine or tension headache.” It is not a preposterous idea that someone who sustains a concussion may keep playing. These symptoms can be very hard to read on an instant scale, which requires a lengthy process of tests and exams to ensure programs get it right.

In relation to youth soccer in America, JAMA Pediatrics, a peer-reviewed medical journal published by the American Medical Association, published a study conducted from 2005-2014, that found 627 concussions among girls, and 442 among boys.

This means that there was a 4.50/10,000 concussions rate among girls, and 2.78/10,000 rate among boys. Both of these figures include practices and games.

The point being, even when the sport is not high contact, like soccer, head injuries can still be persistent and regular.

Making a Difference

There has been a common theme over the past number of years with fewer and fewer kids playing organized athletics every year. Many of these cases can be attributed to not having the desire to play anymore, but data has also been leaning towards the culture of youth athletics being a huge reason.

According to a 2016 article from the Washington Post, 70% of youth quit organized sports by the age of 13.

“Our culture no longer supports older kids playing for the fun of it,” according to the article.

The focus has gone away from having fun and become much more about winning. Less about having a good time, and more about what you are doing for the school.

Season after season, sport after sport, youth athletes are expected to keep the cycle of participating in sports that oftentimes give no thanks. Each sport has a different coach, with a different standard, and their own timetable on when they want to get things done. This pulls kids in numerous directions all at once.

It must be stated that this is not the case with all programs across America, and that not all coaches mean to undermine the health of their players. It can be stated though that many athletic trainers within a program give their time and effort in the sole purpose of making sure an athlete is healthy.

They are always near the field for games and practices, form bonds with players that are away from a coaching staff and do whatever they can to make sure a kid is safe.

Michael Davis, the trainer at Atlantic Coast High School in Jacksonville, Florida strives to strike a balance between player safety and an over-eager coaching staff.

“Just like anyone in a new profession, it is important to recognize how your profession has shortcomings, and do what you can to address those,” he said.

Davis received a Bachelor's degree in Sports Medicine from the University of South Carolina. After that he earned a Master Degree in Kinesiology through Jacksonville Sports Medicine Program. He then joined Atlantic Coast High School as part of an initiative called Project 17 to place a well-trained athletic trainer at public schools in need across Florida. Davis's experience includes clinical rotations through high schools as well as collegiate football and basketball.

This program, created by multiple organizations, including Florida Blue, Brooks Rehabilitation, The National Football League Foundation, Jaguars Foundation, and Memorial Health in Florida, has provided 17 high schools, or over 16,000 student-athletes, with certified athletic trainers.

From 2017-2018, the program caught 134 concussions, according to Project 17. Had these schools not been assigned an experienced athletic trainer, this number of caught concussions would not be nearly as high.

And this is ultimately the objective of athletic trainers, to keep kids safe. They try their hardest to be the voice of reason.

“I have a pretty straightforward philosophy,” said Davis. “If an athlete is hurt or injured, as those words mean the same for me, then I inform them and their parents of what is going on. If it is an injury that if they play on, cannot get worse or will not hinder their abilities to perform the task at hand then they may play.”

The importance that each athlete gets proper time with an athletic trainer like this cannot be overstated. When trainers are forced to cover more than one school, this is when care begins to fall.

Per the Journal of Athletic Training, in correspondence with the National Athletic Trainers Association, it was reported that in 2019, 13,473 schools (66%) had access to athletic trainer services, while 6,799 (34%) had zero access.

Initiatives keep popping up all over the country to put trainers with specific schools in a full-time position. Yet, even as recently as 2019, there is room for improvement. Those 66% of schools are the only schools that reach “the gold-standard model” which is the baseline level of care that schools should be able to provide their athletes. To reach this baseline, schools must

have one dedicated trainer who works solely with them. This means 34% of schools in America do not hit this minimum level of care, creating a service that is not as effective.

“There are times when athletes want to push through injuries,” Davis said. “Sometimes this is okay. I constantly remind my kids that I’m here so they can play healthy, but also be able to play with their children, or reach heavy items off the top shelf at the grocery store. It isn’t just about the now, it’s about the quality of life they will have in the future.”

While Davis can’t remember every cut, bump or bruise he treated, he mentioned that there are always cases that stick out more than others, changing the way trainers do things.

“Some stick out more than others,” he said. Davis remembers a situation where a student almost died while under his care. While in the moment, he acted and did what he needed to to ensure their safety. The weight of the situation did not dawn on him until sometime later.

With cases like this, there is a common phenomenon that happens. A player goes down and the crowd will grow silent. As the player lies still, medical staff rushes over and tends to them, while players gather around and take a knee. Once the player is hoisted away into an ambulance, players stand up, the crowd claps, and the next play is ready to take place.

This level of desensitization is something athletic trainers try hard to avoid.

“The day healthcare providers across the board become complacent in what we do, is the day we have failed,” Davis said.

Similarly, Kevin Rapps, an Athletic Trainer at Baldwin High School in Florida, was also a part of Project 17.

“There has always been push back from coaches or parents,” said Rapps. He describes an environment where you have to prove your knowledge to parents and coaches.

Rapps acknowledged that every job has its different set of obstacles, but it can be the convincing of parents and coaches that remain the largest, especially when it's something they don't fully understand.

Some injuries take a well-trained eye to catch, and this fact can be hard to explain to a parent or coach who is passionate about their kid doing well.

“Some parents and coaches will only believe it if it's coming from a physician. We rely on those physicians and athletic directors to help us do our jobs,” said Rapps

Throughout his career, Rapps has seen different types of athletic programs in both rural and urban locations, in states like Illinois, Indiana, and Florida. Many though, feel similar no matter where he is

In the end, the experiences of seeing kids succeed always stands out among the bad according to Rapps. He says he works each and every day to see them excel in sport, as well as in their personal life.

Those bad situations, specifically the people who help solve them, can be easily forgotten. Marty Wells, the Athletic Director of Elwood High School in Indiana, feels that resources must be available to help that.

“There are times when an athletic trainer has to handle the death of a student athlete,” said Wells. “I have had to do this several times. An athletic trainer hopefully has a good relationship built with all of the student athletes, parents/guardians, coaches that they can help.”

Up until a few years ago, there were zero adequate resources that helped athletic trainers handle grief and stressors from their work. Today, there is a committee that has been formed by the NATA for this very purpose. Wells is a member of this committee.

It is called the Crisis Intervention and Stress Management Committee. The members have been trained to work with student athletes, coaches and staff members. They get together yearly and train to keep their practices up to date.

It can be much to deal with, the stressors of making sure these kids are happy and healthy.

The common theme amongst trainers is their dedication to the young athletes overall experience. They care about when they win, but above all, they want a kid to shine and take away something valuable once leaving the program. This matters more to them than how many wins or losses the team they work for has.

These trainers are a compass for kids, forming bonds and looking to them for leadership. They help guide them to playing for fun, and to care about that more than they do a dropped pass.

But there are coaches and athletic administration members above them running things, and it is a constant battle of opinion on how things should be done in the way of health.

Accountability

Problems can oftentimes be traced back to its roots, and in youth athletics, if there is a problem with the way the ship is being run, go talk to who's running the ship.

Accountability starts at the top, and in recent years there has been more pressure on ensuring a student-athletes safety when playing high contact sports. One initiative in particular, is the Positive Coaching Alliance.

The main mission of the Positive Coaching Alliance, PCA, is “to transform youth sports so sports can transform youth.”

To achieve this goal, they came up with the Positive Coaching Mental Model (PCMM). This model was created to help coaches run programs from a more positive moral standpoint. It's main point: a positive coach is one who is a "double goal" coach.

"A win-at-all-cost coach has only one goal: to win," the research proposes. This research elaborates on how one goal coaches are obsessed with developing strategies to win, thinking of players as tools. A positive coach also wants to win but has a second goal: to help players develop positive character traits. Ones where they can transfer them to everyday life but are not steeped in forms of strength and hyper masculinity.

The work that was used in Positive Coaching Mental Model began with John Nicholls' 1984 research at Purdue University entitled, "Mastery Orientation." Where, he studied how different methods of coaching affected cognitive development.

One of the main points Nicholls made was that youths who had developed what he called an "ego orientation." This would later be renamed to "scoreboard-orientation" by the Positive Coaching Alliance a few decades later.

In his research, Nicholls found that "scoreboard-oriented" athletes were all worse off in ability as well as their confidence in the sport. He cites that there is a sizable drop off in the desire to play after experiencing a coach who taught in a "win-first" way.

Nicholl's research made it through many people's hands over the years, spanning numerous researchers and schools.

The information was compiled in 2009 by the Positive Coaching Alliance to create the Positive Coaching Mental Model, allowing coaches to see data backing up the use of positive reinforcement in coaching.

Anthony Tramonte, a former softball coach of almost 20 years at Mineola High School believes there is nothing more important than the relationships that a coach shares with their players

Even so, the old-school way has a knack for sticking around, and they care little for data.

The screaming, yelling, and throwing coaches will be around as long as coaches from past decades still have an outlet to run programs.

“This mentality tends to come from the elder spectrum of coaching,” said J.C. “Education is the number one factor and until school districts make it a necessity it will always be deemed by the past education of those coaches and what they have experienced themselves.”

Commonly, coaches will be hired on the premise of a tough mentality, or past accolades as players that have been only seen in a time before proper health regulations for youth players.

This is the type of coaching that centers itself around a “walk-it-off” attitude.

This idea of “tough love” goes beyond traditional sports.

Dean Williams, Head Coach of the Queensbury High School hockey team, located just beside Lake George in New York, is one who is all about winning.

Upper parts of New York are known for their hockey culture, and hockey culture generally remains to be one of the strongest “tough-it-out” sports around.

“My players are tough,” said Williams. “But yeah, it’s the responsibility of the coaches to realize when they are ‘banged up’ or running on empty.”

Williams is entering his 21st season as head coach and also grew up playing at a nearby high school growing up from 1987-1990, just 10 minutes away at Glens Falls High School. His roots are deep with the community, and he doesn't seem to be going anywhere anytime soon.

“Speed and skill have improved a ton over the years,” he said. “There is a bigger emphasis on it during training and its translating into our game.”

The coach described how this skill game takes away from those big injuries, and that they have fewer over the years.

But, on the topic of how these injuries (and specifically concussions) have affected the way he has coached over the years, he was short, to the point, and soft spoken.

“In general, the concussions over the years and how they are treated has made me more aware of the long-term effects,” he said. “I take it very seriously when I feel a player is suffering.”

Sources

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6. Liz Jacobson
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10. Michael Davis
11. Dean Williams
12. Kevin Rapps
13. Joelle (JC) Church
14. Anthony Tramonte
15. Marty Wells

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