

## REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Most men, regardless of their professional success, would trade it all for the ability to hit a curve and go to their right, or throw a tight spiral 60 yards, or consistently shoot under par on the toughest courses on the planet.

We would toss out our medical or law licenses if we could only shoot 53 per cent from the field and slam dunk at will. To be sure, we hold out the hope that our sons and daughters can fulfill their – and our -- youthful dreams of achieving the glory and success of professional stardom in one sport or another.

When dreams become expectations, however, parents can turn the youth sports experience into a nightmare without even realizing the pressure they put upon their children and the volunteers who coach, referee, or umpire the games.

Competitive sport does that to us. It is intoxicating. As we wish only the best for our children, and want to defend them when we feel they have been wronged, too often we forget the principle behind youth sports: That our children need to learn about competition and discover the glory of victory and learn to deal with inevitable defeat in a positive way.

As parents, we want our children to excel in school, yet we don't anticipate that they will become Nobel Prize winners – as only about six people per year do. We don't expect that our children will become a CEO of a Fortune 500 company one day, although we encourage them to do well in school.

Yet when it comes to sports, dads, in particular, too often steer and pressure their sons to be the next Barry Bonds or Tom Brady. The fact is, that same son probably has a better chance of becoming a Fortune 500 CEO.

More than 37 million children from ages 6-16 are involved in youth sports each year. At the professional level, there are fewer than 4,000 people enjoying the dream so many of us share. So, the odds of making a living as an athlete aren't very good.

So, then, what's the point of youth sports?

Quite simply, it can provide more positive interaction among families, relatives and friends than almost anything else imaginable.

Our children learn the importance of teamwork, they learn to function in a structured environment, and they learn the importance of good sportsmanship. Equally important, in a society of poor dietary habits and physical fitness practices, we can steer our kids toward a healthier lifestyle.

As parents, we can interact with our children, participate in their growth, teach them valuable lessons that carry over to their scholastic and professional futures, and, yes, we can have fun with them.

But first, we must rein in our own expectations so that we can enhance and not hinder the athletic dreams of our youth.

What should be the expectations?

Parents should expect a quality and safe environment for our kids. We should expect the volunteer coaches to be caring, nurturing and fair-minded. We should also expect them to make mistakes. We should expect the volunteer umpires and referees to do their very best to be fair on every call they make. We should also expect them to make mistakes. We should expect our children to have fun and discover in themselves the desire, drive and ability. We should expect them to make mistakes.

And, finally, we should expect other parents to enjoy the experience and not berate the youngster who hits the home run that beats your team, or boo the kid who trips over second base and is tagged out to end the game.

Youth sports is about having fun with your kids, letting them learn from the experience, and sharing in their moment of glory, or supporting them in their inevitable failure. In professional soccer, one or two goals are scored in most games – by both teams combined. Dozens of scoring opportunities are missed. In baseball, a batter who is successful just one third of the time is an all-star. In football, the top rushers average about four yards a carry and the top quarterbacks miss about 45% of the time.

Should we expect any more results from our kids? The best team in baseball wins fewer than 60% of its games. The last undefeated professional football team was the 1972 Miami Dolphins. Should we expect our kids' teams to be better? We see replays of missed calls by professional umpires and referees. Should we expect more from the volunteers who devote time and energy to youth sports?

Too often, and without realizing it, parents so immerse themselves in the success and failure of their kids' sporting effort, they lose sight of the most important things. Too often, we put All-Star status ahead of Good Sportsmanship. And too often, parents find their children are better at being Good Sports than they are.

Sometimes, we just need to be reminded that the games are for the kids. We're there to share in their dreams not to create them.