

Why I Don't Want My Kids to Play Team Sports

By Jeff Pearlman

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Way back in 1982, my brother signed up to play youth soccer.

It was my parents' idea. David was twelve at the time—painfully shy, socially awkward, owner of few friends. Mom and Dad thought joining a team might prove beneficial. So they enlisted him in the Mahopac Sports Association with hopes that the fresh air and the green grass and running and kicking and laughing would instill confidence and happiness.

I don't recall the name of David's team, but it featured red uniforms and was coached by a local dad who worked as a fireman. He was a loud, boisterous guy, not unlike many of the fathers I see alongside fields most weekends in my hometown of New Rochelle, N.Y.

Before every game, the coach would have all his players form a circle, put their hands inside and yell out, "Team!" Then, without fail, my brother walked to the bench, sat down and remained there—completely ignored—for three quarters. Immediately before the final period began, the coach would point to David and begrudgingly insert him at right fullback for the requisite minimum amount all kids must play. He made it painfully clear to the others that my brother was the weakest of weak links; that he was useless as a soccer player.

More than three decades removed, I detest that coach. I know his name, know his whereabouts, and often fantasize about running into him in a supermarket or coffee shop.

Me: "You coached youth soccer back in the day, right?"

Him: "Sure did."

Me: "Do you remember the score of the third game of the 1982 season?"

Him: "What?"

Me: "How about the fifth game?"

Him: "Um ..."

Me: "The first game? The second?"

Him: "Huh?"

Me: "Right. Because in the name of winning a bunch of meaningless twelve-year-old soccer games, you destroyed my older brother ..."

That experience—and those memories—didn't merely slice up David. They sliced me up, too, in a most unusual way for a guy who not only loves athletics, but who has made a career out of chronicling them.

Namely, thanks in large part to Mahopac and soccer and 1982, I do not want my children playing organized team sports.

I know ... I know. Team sports build character. Team sports teach youngsters how to win and lose. Team sports are all about camaraderie and togetherness and unity and ...

No.

Perhaps, long ago, youth sports leagues offered universal positives. Nowadays, however, what I see are parents itching to land their kids far-off college

scholarships; coaches thinking themselves the next Nick Saban and John Calipari; calls for year-round dedication; the hiring of private tutors to help six-year-old Junior master the changeup. Rare are the times that I've attended a young sporting event without hearing at least one or two parents scream vulgarly at a pimply-faced teen referee, or mock the opposition, or demand more playing time for their tykes.

My son Emmett has actually participated in spring baseball the past three seasons. He's a solid hitter and an awful fielder, but he enjoys the game and digs the handshake line afterward.

Late last summer, we received our first-ever a sign-up sheet for "Fall Ball."

"Fall Ball?" I asked another parent. "Why?"

"Because," he said, "it's a chance to focus more on the game."

I asked Emmett whether he'd like to play baseball in the fall and spring. He paused for 1/1,000 of a second. "Too much," he replied.

"Too much what?" I asked.

"Too much baseball," he said.

Now, come spring, Emmett will begin his inevitable decline. The "Fall Ball" kids will be far superior. The coaches will hand them the prime positions. My son will be placed in right field. He'll hit eighth. Maybe ninth. He'll grow frustrated, feel inferior, lose interest. It won't be as bad as 1982, but it'll seem familiar.

No, thank you. Not interested.

I want my kids to run track and cross country—where the ultimate goal is to accomplish your personal best. I want them to learn an instrument, to master a craft, to join the drama club. I want my son to be a "science nerd." I want my daughter to write poetry. I don't care if they win and I don't care if they lose, as long as they try and as long as they're happy. We place such an unhealthy emphasis in this country upon victory, without stopping to ponder the end game. Yes, medals are nice. Trophies, too. But, really, what's so important about being the best? Why are we so focused on the result, while forgetting the value of the journey? Why do we devote so much time turning our offspring into ... us?

Once, long ago, I was like the sports parents I now abhor. I needed to win—and anything short of that goal was a failure. I'd cry and mope and lock myself in my room. I'd promise myself the next time would be better—and, when it wasn't, I'd feel even worse. Then, one day more than a decade ago, I experienced an epiphany: While playing for *Sports Illustrated's* intramural basketball team in a competitive league, I scored two points, missed all my free throws and had an opposing forward repeatedly beat me to the rim. I felt like absolute crap—until I remembered that, when the game ended, we'd all go out to the neighborhood bar to talk and eat and drink the night away. It was what I loved most about sports—the unity and togetherness.

Inexplicably, from that point on I never again lived and died with my success in a sporting event. The thinking hasn't made me a better player, but it's allowed me to replace irrational competitiveness with contented bliss.

It's also allowed me to see the truth: That my children don't need the hostilities of organized youth athletics to make them whole.

If anything, they need to do without them.

Note: Jeff Pearlman is the author of the coming book Showtime: Magic, Kareem, Riley, and the Los Angeles Lakers Dynasty of the 1980s.