

'meaningful minutes'

The recent story about the New Jersey father charged with punching a coach and knocking him unconscious because he was upset over his son's lack of playing time during a Pop Warner football game, is just the latest in an endless series of similar tales.

Most go undocumented. A few - like the Philadelphia father who allegedly pulled a gun last year on a youth football coach because his 6-year-old son wasn't getting enough playing time - get national media coverage.

Regardless of whether they are reported, all such stories highlight one of the major reasons for parental misbehavior in youth sports: the lack of an equal-playing-time rule prior to grade six for athletes who hit certain benchmarks and abide by team rules.

There are myriad reasons for the epidemic of out-of-control parents, and nothing should excuse the actions of a verbally abusive or violent parent. But there are ways for sports leagues to eliminate the reason so many parents reach the boiling point and blow their tops.

The stresses of sports competition can overwhelm the coping skills of parents, who are increasingly led by our winner-take-all society to believe that unless their child is successful in sports, he or she will fail as an adult.

But parents who act out at youth sports contests, like the gun-toting father in Philadelphia and the Colt's Neck, N.J., dad, are simply acting out of frustration over the way youth sports have come to be organized and run. All too often, more skilled players get the bulk of the playing time to maximize the team's chances of winning, gratify adult egos or out of a mistaken belief that they somehow deserve more time. Coaches' children, for example, rarely sit on the bench.

The solution is for youth sports programs to adopt and strictly enforce playing-time regulations for players who abide by the team rules. Before grade six, young athletes should get equal time on the court or field, and there should be a "meaningful minutes" rule for grades seven to high school sub-varsity.

"Meaningful minutes" means more than inserting a player for just a few plays (football), an inning (baseball), a single shift (hockey) or a few minutes of a soccer or basketball game. It's enough time for youth athletes to feel they not only have had a chance to contribute and are really a part of the team, but have had enough time on the playing field or court or rink to get experience for game action and to develop their skills in the crucible of competition - which is worlds apart from practice.

Adopting such rules creates a win-win situation for players, coaches and parents. The children would play together more as a team and have more fun, because they would feel less pressure to excel individually to earn more playing time. Two of a coach's major headaches would be eliminated: pestering from benchwarmers for more time and complaints from their parents for fair and full inclusion.

Above all, the parents would be far less likely to act out. If every child, regardless of skill level, got equal playing time, the frustration over seeing their child being excluded from the game, which leads to so much of the parental misbehavior in today's youth sports, would be eliminated.

In survey after survey, kids say that they want less emphasis on winning and would rather get playing time - even if it means the team loses - than sit on the bench of a winning team. It's time to start listening to our kids when it comes to sports.

If we did, maybe, just maybe, we wouldn't have so many parents thinking that the only way to get more playing time for their young children is to demand it from the coach with a fist or at the point of a gun.

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October 11, 2007