

## Results of Doug Abrams Survey on Youth Sports Issues

The Survey's objective was to capture what Doug's readers believe are the key problems in youth sports programs, and identify ways to remedy the situation. Many of Doug's readers are experts in youth sports, serving as educators, league administrators, and members of national, regional and local institutes and associations devoted to improving youth sports.

The survey was emailed to the "Today's Articles" subscriber list in May 2005 and 81 responses were received over the next several weeks. The survey was designed by Doug Abrams and Bob Bigelow. The results were compiled courtesy of Bob Bigelow. For questions and comments, or to obtain a copy of the full survey results with all open-ended comments and prescriptions offered by the participants, please contact Bob Bigelow at [www.bob-bigelow@comcast.net](mailto:www.bob-bigelow@comcast.net) or by phone at 781-729-6134. Bob's web site is [www.bob-bigelow.com](http://www.bob-bigelow.com).

### PROFILE OF THE SURVEY TAKERS

Participants were from 18 states across the country, from Massachusetts to California. About half were from Eastern states and half from the Midwest and Western U.S.

**Types of Youth Sports Organizations.** The survey takers represented a wide variety of organizations associated with youth sports (65 respondents reporting):

- 25% from regional sports associations, youth leagues, local sports organizations or clubs (e.g., Smithfield Baseball League, Glen Ridge Athletic Association, Kirkwood Soccer Club, park and rec departments, etc.)
- 15% from institutes and organizations dedicated to improving youth sports (e.g., Positive Coaching Alliance, Kindness Counts Foundation, etc.)
- 14% associated with national youth sports organizations or state associations/affiliates (e.g., US Youth Soccer, Michigan Youth Soccer Assoc., Massachusetts Hockey, etc.)
- 14% associated with high school programs or leagues, including Ads
- 5% from colleges or universities
- 4% from the media
- 23% all other

**Nature of Involvement with Youth Sports.** Respondents were connected to youth sports in a variety of ways, the most common as parents, youth coaches, youth league administrators and high school coaches (more than one choice per respondent possible):

- 63% parents of youth players
- 52% youth coaches
- 32% youth sports administrators
- 22% former youth coaches and/or administrators
- 22% high school coaches
- 17% interested observers
- 10% youth players

- 10% journalists
- 10% high school Ads/administrators
- 6% college/graduate students
- 3% park and recreation programs
- 30% other (e.g., sports physician, coaching educator, sports facility owner, former pro athlete, trainer for a youth sports institute, etc.)

**Types of Youth Sports Involved With.** Among respondents who are youth sports parents, soccer, baseball and basketball were the top three sports their children participated in (58 respondents with more than one choice per respondent possible):

- 62% soccer
- 40% baseball
- 36% basketball
- 33% ice hockey
- 19% softball
- 17% football
- 14% swimming
- 14% lacrosse
- 10% gymnastics
- 10% volleyball
- 10% tennis
- 9% track and field
- 5% wrestling
- 10% other

**Levels of Participation.** More than half of the children of the survey takers participated in recreational youth sports, while 45% were involved with travel or “select” teams (58 parent respondents with more than one choice possible):

- 52% youth recreational sports
- 45% travel/select teams
- 29% high school varsity sports
- 22% junior high school/middle school sports
- 22% high school JV sports
- 21% collegiate athletics
- 2% other

## **MAJOR PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED IN YOUTH SPORTS**

Survey takers were asked to list the top 5 problems they saw in youth sports. Parental misconduct was cited by far as the number one issue by nearly 3 out of 4 respondents. Nearly 6 in 10 cited pressures for over-specialization, while half listed coach misconduct and over-emphasis on winning as key issues.

The problems can be sub-divided into three critical categories to shed further light on the issues:

## **Misbehavior**

- 71% parent misconduct
- 51% coach misconduct
- 38% parental interference
- 18% player misconduct
- 16% misconduct by administrators

Misbehavior is a huge issue among parents and coaches, including parent interference with youth programs and teams. Fortunately the misconduct by players and administrators was cited by less than 1 in 5 survey takers.

## **Characteristics of Programs**

- 46% insufficient skill instruction
- 41% over-emphasis on travel or select teams
- 36% cutting/benching players
- 33% lack of fair playing time
- 33% seasons that are too long
- 23% too little emphasis on recreational sports
- 23% high cost of participation
- 9% league structure issues
- 4% unsafe conditions

Nearly one half of the respondents were concerned with lack of quality skill instruction, while over one third cited too much emphasis on travel sports, cutting players (associated mostly with travel sports), lack of fair playing time (also associated with travel sports), and seasons that are too long (again often part of travel programs and the pressure for specialization at young ages). Too little emphasis on rec programs and high costs are also common to travel sports, making nearly every factor here related to issues common to elite or select programs.

## **Attitudes of Coaches and Parents**

- 58% pressures for over-specialization
- 49% over-emphasis on winning
- 25% pressures for scholarships and other financial rewards

Almost 60% of the survey participants flagged pressures for over-specialization as a major problem. Many parents of more talented players believe dedication to one sport and longer playing seasons builds advantages, even at young ages. In addition, about half of respondents identified the over-emphasis on winning as a key issue. Many parents and coaches believe that winning is associated with superior player development. While the number citing financial pressures was lower, 1 in 4 survey takers still sees this as a key issue affecting today's youth sports programs.

## **OPEN-ENDED COMMENTS: PRESCRIPTIONS FOR CHANGE**

The survey also solicited prescriptions for improving youth sports. A variety of solutions were offered, from better approaches to educating parents to simply getting adults out of youth sports as much as possible.

### **If you had the opportunity to change or improve youth sports programs in your community, what would you do? (62 Respondents – 30 brief excerpts provided here)**

- Education for all involved, especially those in leadership positions (coaches, parents, administrators, etc.).
- Take parents out of the equation.
- Less emphasis on select travel teams as such early levels. Provide multiple teams, especially at lower levels.
- Go back to the sandlot days. Let the children show up and play. Reduce structure.
- It's time for consequences for people in the stands, there's rules for everyone else involved in sports. Improving training for sports officials is directly tied to the success of programs and a sportsmanship program in place.
- I believe young players should have the chance to play on a regular basis for fun and not in such an organized system.
- Provide resources for organizations/communities to educate their members on the positive aspect of sports
- At the youth level, remove parents as coaches and allow Parks & Rec personnel coach teams. Mandatory instruction for all coaches, including youth right through middle school and high school.
- I would lobby to place more emphasis on school-sponsored programs at younger ages (middle school, for instance), so that more of the coaches are teachers, and select-type teams received less emphasis.
- I would not ask children to specialize and I would have the parents take a step back and realize that sports are for the enjoyment of the children participating.
- No "select" teams for players before 6th grade -- period. Requirement to develop all players (meaningful playing time, perhaps 1/2 each contest minimum) for 12-13 year olds.
- Hold required/mandatory parent meetings regarding appropriate behavior of parents/fans prior to letting child participate.
- I would limit the length of each season and the number of games that each child was allowed to play...

- Educate, Educate, Educate the parents as to the psychological, physical and emotional harm they are responsible for in youth sports.
- Need to change the focus to be more generalists and develop better athletes, not a specific sport.
- Mandatory coaches' training not only about skills and drills, but more importantly, the PROCESS of coaching...
- I think we need to start enforcing restrictions on "out of control" parents and come down hard at the youth level.
- ...variety of leagues allows for player development at each child's own pace. Somewhat eliminated are child's fears of "I'm not good enough". There is a team best suited for everyone.
- Our local Boys and Girls Club has already taken steps toward a more positive atmosphere in adopting a Code of Ethics. Each player and parent is provided with this material at the time of registration. Each parent and child must sign the Code of Ethics, and return a copy with their registration form.
- Provide more coaching clinics. Provide them with an understanding that winning is not everything.
- Throw the scorebooks away....
- Emphasize the concept of "silent" games by the coaches and parents...
- More training for coaches and parents, including mandatory coach certification
- I would not allow parents to be involved in their child's team.
- I would get rid of any organization and just have the kids, show up, pick their own teams and play. Until they are about 14 years old.
- Start select teams at later ages, such as at age 12 or 13.
- I would put more of an emphasis on playing and skill building and less on the "professional sports model".
- Blow it up and start all over again, but just letting the kids play. No adults, except to provide for safety of the kids.
- De-emphasize teams at younger ages.
- I would try to assure that the board of directors of each youth sports association had slots for adults who are not parents of any child participating in the program.

