

December 22, 2008 Monday
ALL EDITION

SECTION: SPORTS; Pg. C01

HEADLINE: Youth sports should be fun

BYLINE: BILL WELLS, STAFF

COLUMN: YOUTH SPORTS SPOTLIGHT

Editor's note: Youth sports should be fun, right? Unfortunately, that's not always the case. In a six-part "Youth Sports Spotlight" series, Bill Wells writes about whether there is indeed enough fun in youth sports these days.

Part I: Tom Farrey, author of "Game On: The All-American Race to Make Champions of Our Children," discusses the topic:

ESPN reporter Tom Farrey spent five years doing investigative reporting and taking casual notes for his book, "Game On: The All-American Race to Make Champions of our Children."

Farrey, a married father of three kids, traveled throughout the country and beyond, and came to a few conclusions regarding the state of youth sports. He said one of the problems is that fun, too often, has been de-emphasized, mainly because, "Youth sports, to a large degree, have been hijacked by adults."

Farrey didn't spend all 384 pages of his book slamming parents. However, he did say that since youth sports are run by adults, programs and leagues are usually aligned through the scope of adults, as opposed to the kids.

"Now, organized sports are driven by the needs of adults who think they know what's best for kids," said Farrey, 44, who lives in Burlington, Conn. "But it's probably worth asking kids what they want to get out of youth sports. Do they want to drive two hours away to play some team in some town they've never heard of when they're eight? Do they want to spend every weekend playing these games? Do they want to play one sport year-round? No one is asking kids if this is what they want."

In a 1989 study conducted by professors at Michigan State University, both boys and girls listed "having fun" as their top reason for wanting to play a sport. Winning didn't make the top 10 for either gender.

"We often use winning and competing interchangeably, but they're really different," said Farrey, an ESPN reporter for 10 years. "For kids, competition is fun. They want to test themselves. They want to try to win. They prefer to win. They might even cry at the end of a game because that's how much they cared. But five minutes later, most kids have forgotten about it and moved on.

"It's the parents that haven't moved on. It's the parents who want to talk to the kids in the car on the way home about what they did wrong, or the parents who continue to talk at dinner about what they can do better and what happened in the game today. It's a different kind of approach parents often take to winning than kids take to winning. It's not that winning is bad, or seeking to win is bad. Competition is good. But at what point does it become win at all cost? What point does the game no longer belong to the children?"

More than 40 million American children a year play youth sports. Farrey, through his research, said regardless of the level of play, fun needs to be incorporated.

"Fun is critical in the development of a great athlete," he said. "We tend to think of youth sports in two

ways. There's sort of like, there's the fun end of it that's recreational sports. And there's travel team sports, which are meant to be competitive, serious and committed, and all that stuff.

"What we forget is that even in travel sports, fun still needs to be a critical ingredient. If you want a kid to embrace a sport, if you want him sign up the next year, if you want him to play for 12 years or 15 years, the kid has to have fun. The kid has to fall in love with the game. A romance has to be sparked. When that happens, that kid wants to go to practice, and he wants to watch the great athletes on TV or YouTube do their thing, and he tries to imitate it in the backyard."

Farrey's oldest child, his 11-year-old son, plays competitive soccer and basketball. Farrey said his son has enjoyed sports, whether at the recreation or travel level, partly because the coaches have kept the activities enjoyable.

"It's been a good experience, thanks to him having good coaches."

For more information, go to tomfarrey.com.

NEXT WEEK:

An in-depth look at Farrey's "Game On: The All-American Race to Make Champions of our Children."

WHY KIDS PLAY SPORT

Results of a 1989 survey of 8,000 kids, conducted by Michigan State University, on reasons for participating in non-school sports:

BOYS

1. To have fun
2. To do something I'm good at
3. To improve my skills
4. For the excitement of competition
5. To stay in shape
6. For the challenge of competition
7. To get exercise
8. To learn new skills
9. To play as part of a team
10. To go to a higher level of competition

GIRLS

1. To have fun
2. To stay in shape
3. To get exercise
4. To improve my skills
5. To do something I'm good at

6. To learn new skills
7. For the excitement of competition
8. To play as part of a team
9. To make new friends
10. To go to a higher level of competition

Bill Wells can be reached at [@charter.net](mailto:bill@charter.net)