

# YOUTH SPORTS: *STILL* FAILING OUR KIDS HOW TO REALLY FIX IT



**BOB BIGELOW** WITH DOUG ABRAMS

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### **Youth Sports: Still Failing Our Kids – How to Really Fix It**

By Bob Bigelow with Doug Abrams

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## INTRODUCTION

My name is Bob Bigelow, and I receive calls for interviews from the print and electronic media at least ten times each year, a few hundred over the 25 years that I've worked to bring positive change to youth sports. Interviewers invariably ask two primary questions.

The first question goes to the heart of what motivated me to write this book. "Is youth sports getting any better, or is it getting worse?" In other words, are the adults growing more sane or less? My answer has been the same for more than two decades -- from 30,000 feet (my macro view), it's getting worse; from the "community" (micro) level, it has adjusted for the better in some towns and cities. Given that youth sports is primarily local, the answer depends on whether a particular community maintains age-appropriate systems conducted by adults who care about ALL the kids who play.

Mark Hyman is a Baltimore-based youth sports change agent, author of two very good books the past decade, and a fellow U-Penn Quaker. Recently an article quoted Mark stating that "the parents have won!" This was his answer to, and perspective on, the question I had received so many times. As Mark I think would concur, any such "victory" is NOT good news.

Mark may be right, if the game is indeed "over"! But I'd like to think that we're still "playing" the contest in basketball's third quarter, baseball's 6th inning, or ice hockey's second period. The natural competitor in me contends that there is still time to play out the contest for age-appropriate programs, and to "give the games back to the kids," a line I first heard in 1991. But Mark's statement cannot be easily dismissed. We may not have much time left.

The other question that interviewers always ask me is, "What are you trying to accomplish with all your speeches (1200+ to date), written material, You Tube clips, and the like?" My stock (glib) answer is, "I'm trying to get adult egos out of youth sports.... ONLY the kids' needs matter." Since the early 1990's, I've always been most interested in creating what I've called "Adult Ego-less, Youth Sports Models." The children play, and the adults facilitate by acting far more like camp counselors -- and elementary school recess teachers -- SERVING the kids' needs. This approach means acting very differently than the coaches we see in high school, or the college and pro coaches we see on TV.

In 2001, I co-authored *Just Let the Kids Play* (HCI Books), which argued for better serving kids' needs, and for developing new models for meeting those needs. An alternative Sports Camp Play Model (or "system") for youth sports is now my chief focus as a true solution to enduring problems, and this model is the core of these ten chapters. The children will compete just as hard, they'll try to win, scores will still be kept, and they'll get better coaching and skill development. But the adults involved will have to change both their roles and their behaviors. This adult ego-less play model will force them to give the games back to the kids. As I've told thousands of adults, "your blood pressure may even decrease, as you begin to take the games' outcomes less seriously, and see the actual processes of children's play as what is truly important." The children will no longer be pawns in some adult-oriented, youth sports chess game, and the children will take more "ownership" of these contests.

As you begin this book, let me say that my recommendations are mainly geared toward elementary school aged programs and kids (i.e., up through sixth grade). I refer to these as "younger" children or players. This encompasses millions of children who play sports every day throughout the country. Many of the problems written about youth sports over the years also pertain to older children as well, but my focus here is on kids up through 12 years old.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I begin by conveying many thanks to our publication's two "teammates." First up, my Fairfield County, Connecticut-based, long-time youth sports friend, colleague, and consultant, Steve Fisher. Steve has contributed much to what you'll read here, and has been the (somewhat) gentle, "bug in my ear" the past few years to get this project completed. Since I first met Steve after a talk in Fairfield County over fifteen years ago, he has always asked me the right -- and not always comfortable -- questions about what I can specifically do to improve organized youth sports. As a bonus, he has been involved in organized youth soccer for over two decades as a coach and administrator. He has seen and lived all the challenges from the "field" level. Thank you Steve for keeping this project, and me, on target.

Second up is Doug Abrams. Of the thousands of wonderful youth sports adults I've met since the late 80's, Doug is as unique, concerned, gifted and smart as I've ever met. A former Wesleyan University (Connecticut) hockey goaltender, a 40+-year youth hockey coach, and the founder of a mid-Missouri youth hockey club, Doug has been at the grass roots level of sport for decades. His day job is as a juvenile law and family law professor at the University of Missouri School of Law. He has written or co-authored six law books, he has written law review articles, and he has written dozens of blog columns on youth sports. He's a brilliant writer and terrific editor. He compliments me way too much in the Foreword that follows this Introduction! Steve and I are so thankful to have his talents on our team. Thank you, Doug.

Finally, my thanks to the Bigelow family. My wife Nancy, that 5-2, former Penn State backstroker, 40-year collegiate swimming coach (the past 34 here in Greater Boston at Tufts University), and 32-year partner in marriage, has always been my strongest -- and quietest -- supporter. For as much advice as I've given over the years on how to be a better coach, I've always known that I'll never be better than number two in my own household. For Nancy to have coached college athletes for over 40 years is an amazing accomplishment.

When *Just let the Kids Play* was published in 2001, our sons, David and Stephen, were 14 and 9 respectively...they were well into the prime of their youth sports "careers." Almost fifteen years have passed, and my boys are now young men of 28 and 23, college graduates, and off into the working world. As my own parents warned me when my kids were very young, life goes way too fast when you have children. Twenty years flew by in a blink.

Parental pride alert to follow -- what happened in the later sporting years to the sons of this 6' 7" former NBA player, and a 5' 2" major college swimmer and 40-year collegiate coach? My oldest, David, became a decent high school basketball player (5' 11" and more his mom's height than mine), and a very good lacrosse midfielder. He later played club lacrosse at the University of Delaware. His Dad, still pretty coordinated, can barely catch a lacrosse ball in a stick. David could do that very well.

"Little" brother Stephen, three inches taller at 6' 2", and with long legs like his dad, and whose major youth and high school sports interest was soccer, later, begrudgingly, developed an interest in track and field (though he initially thought it was really boring!). Six short years later, he was a senior at U-Mass Amherst, one of our state's flagship Division 1 (in NCAA sports parlance) universities. And he became their second best high hurdler ever, an outstanding career by any measure; and as good a collegiate track and field career as anyone has ever had graduating from our local high school here.

My wife and I would marvel at the way our older son could throw and catch a lacrosse ball, and watch our younger son glide so effortlessly over 10 hurdles spread out over 110 meters in just

14 seconds. Once upon a time, Nancy could easily swim a mile in 20 minutes, just as I could make jump shots from all over the basketball court. Those were our athletic gifts and passions. My sons eventually found their athletics niche, and their mother and I couldn't be prouder. It was our sons living their FIRST athletics lives, and not trying to repeat what Mom and Dad did.

To the reader, it is my own family's athletic tales that I often tell to others: please ensure that your children are playing sports for their passion, and their reasons, not yours. Thank you and enjoy the reading!

Bob Bigelow

### **ABOUT BOB**

Former NBA player, Bob Bigelow, speaks nationally and worldwide about youth sports programs, and provides new approaches for positive change to fully meet the needs of young athletes as the top priority. Bob was an NBA first round draft choice and played four years for the Kansas City Kings, Boston Celtics, and San Diego Clippers. He played his collegiate ball at the University of Pennsylvania for Hall of Fame Coach Chuck Daly. He has devoted several thousand hours researching and lecturing about organized youth sports and its effects on children and adults.

Bob has appeared on major TV shows including CNN, on local radio broadcasts, and has been quoted in major publications including *Sports Illustrated* and *The New York Times*. He has been featured in numerous local newspaper columns and articles. He has been a featured speaker at many regional, national and international meetings and conferences of organizations and associations concerned with improving youth sports.

For 25 years, Bob has conducted over 2,500 talks and clinics worldwide. He has also been selected as one of the "100 Most Influential Sports Educators" by the Institute for International Sport at the University of Rhode Island.

"When I was a child, the vast majority of my sporting activities were in playgrounds and sandlots. Now, the majority of youth sports activities are organized and administered by adults. The biggest problem in organized youth sports is very simple to explain -- too many adults who want to compete through children."

Bob Bigelow, CNN Sunday Morning



## FOREWORD

By Prof. Doug Abrams  
University of Missouri School of Law

Perhaps it is his Ivy League education at the University of Pennsylvania. Perhaps it is his playing career in the NBA as a first-round draft choice. Perhaps it is his 25 years as a prominent youth sports reform advocate addressing audiences, and engaging the media, throughout the United States and abroad. One way or another, Bob Bigelow is on to something that can help enrich sports for the nation's younger athletes. This compact book presents the blueprint.

### *Diagnosis and cure*

From his experience and the studies he has conducted, Bob describes the national condition: "Youth sports in America is *still* failing too many of our kids. We adults are still not providing the fun environment, or the potential for true nurtured learning and emotional growth, that should define the core mission of sports for children and adolescents. Youth sports in America is simply not meeting the needs of ALL the children whom we as adults have a responsibility to serve. The failure is particularly noticeable at the younger age levels, for kids 12 and under."

Chapter 1 diagnoses national youth sports failures, including these. By overemphasizing winning and underemphasizing fun, too many sports programs stunt the youngest players' skill development. Programs shut out many of these youngest players from meaningful participation altogether by promoting elite teams; by tolerating abusive coaching techniques; by allowing benchwarmers; and by providing fertile ground for parental misconduct that can fray children's emotions and undermine entire programs.

Diagnoses invite cures. Bob begins with the eminently sensible proposition that no matter how often sports programs remind parents and coaches to spurn misconduct and to serve the best interests of all boys and girls who wish to play, structural change must come first. The structure of youth sports programs creates pressures that drive too many adults to turn away from genuinely child-centered approaches and, in some cases, to descend into confrontation and a host of other problems.

Bob urges that for players ages 12 and under, community sports programs replace the traditional "Adult Oriented" structure, which puts even the youngest children on fixed teams that play fixed game schedules, and maintain fixed standings. He advances a "Sports Camp Play Model" which provides the best of both possible worlds – fun plus learning. The Model provides ways for young kids to engage in the sort of free play characteristic of sports camps (that is, play that adults do not structure or coach), while qualified instructors deliver skills training.

The Sports Camp Play Model has young kids playing their own games, keeping their own scores, and developing their abilities under the supervision of adults who are unburdened by strategies, trick plays, fixed rosters, and league standings. Standings, fixed rosters, and the other trappings of formal league play can wait until the players get older, once they have developed their skills and nurtured their enthusiasm for the game to the greatest extent possible.

### *Why change?*

Structural change is needed because youth sports systems in the United States shortchange too many youngsters. The good news is that more than 30 million boys and girls – nearly half

the nation's children – play each year in at least one organized sports program conducted by a private association or club, or by a public agency such as the parks and recreation department. Nearly all children have some experience with organized sports before they turn 18, and no other activity outside the home and schools holds greater potential for influencing the next generation.

The bad news is that many communities squander much of this potential by perpetuating youth sports systems whose elite teams begin weeding out young children. These communities then lavish practice and game time on the elite teams, even if the imbalance creates a shortage of available facilities that constrict house leagues, and even if the imbalance means creating avoidable waiting lists that sideline many children altogether. No wonder that so many children quit playing before their early teen years, worn down by avoidable pressures imposed by sports programs whose existing structures better serve adult needs than those of children.

Amid a pediatric obesity epidemic caused largely by sedentary lifestyles, Americans regularly tell pollsters that playing sports enhances children's physical fitness while teaching citizenship and similar worthwhile lessons. But at the same time, Americans tolerate community sports systems that produce bumper crops of young athletic dropouts year after year, as many as 70% of all kids who started playing earlier. The paradox seems ripe for change because sports can do little for children who prematurely grow disaffected, and can do nothing for children who quit playing altogether.

Adult behavior issues induced by artificial youth sports pressures are no small matter. A few years ago, Reuters News and the market research company Ipsos jointly conducted a poll in 22 nations. The poll ranked parents in the United States as the world's "worst behaved" parents at children's sports events. 60% of U.S. adults who had attended youth sports contests reported they had seen parents become verbally or physically abusive toward coaches or officials; runners-up were parents in India (59%), Italy (55%), Argentina (54%), Canada (53%) and Australia (50%). Other U.S. polls produce similar disquieting results, but the landscape remains unchanged because the pressures that underlie sports program structures remain unchanged.

In many communities, adopting or experimenting with Bob's Sports Camp Play Model at younger age levels may actually strengthen local youth leagues and high school programs themselves. One of my colleagues often likened community youth sports systems to a pyramid. The strongest parts of a pyramid are at the base and the middle, not at the top. In the youth hockey programs that I have seen as a coach over the years, most beginners enrolled by the age of 12; only a relatively few beginners laced up their skates for the first time as teens. To remain vibrant over time, a community youth sports system must attract the greatest possible number of the youngest beginners and then must overcome attrition by re-enrolling the greatest possible number from year to year. Otherwise, 200 U8's might become 140 U11's, 90 U13s, and downward. When avoidable high annual attrition rates prevail, youth programs (and the high school teams they feed) can suffer because some preteen castoffs might have been late bloomers who could have played important roles later on.

A few words about competition, the proverbial elephant in the room that sometimes leaves parents understandably cautious about reform proposals that would actually help their children. Bob's Sports Camp Play Model would strengthen competition. Bob is a competitor, and he knows that athletic competition is ingrained in American culture. (You don't reach the Division I collegiate ranks and the NBA without the drive to achieve and the thirst to compete and win.) Studies have shown that when the score, say, is 4-2, even six-year-olds engaged in free play know that the difference between having four and having two is the difference between winning and losing. The Sports Camp Play Model respects, and indeed builds on, this dynamic by



encouraging more kids to stay with sports, and thus to continue competing throughout their adolescence.

The Sports Camp Play Model says that youth sports competition is both natural and healthy, provided that the competitors are the children, and not the adults.

### *A recipe for children's athletic success*

This book's ten chapters engage parents, coaches, and league administrators in a constructive dialogue. The book picks up where *Just Let the Kids Play* left off. You probably have never read a presentation like the one that appears in the following pages, but you will be glad you did because children are young only once. As Bob says in the Introduction above, childhood and adolescence pass quickly. Time passed is time lost, and youth sports permits the adults no do-overs.

As a youth hockey coach at all age levels for more than 40 years, I have had parents who, years after their children finished playing, reminisce with relish that their families viewed sports as a wholesome learning experience from the earliest years, and as a source of cherished memories while they also paid attention to the scoreboard every game. These parents are the lucky ones.

I have also had hockey parents who recall with regret that their hearts were constantly in their throats every season, as they worried themselves sick about lineups and scores that were destined to be forgotten weeks, months or years later. Some of these parents lament that adult-induced pressure led their child to join the 70% or so who quit too early. These parents and their children would have benefited from sports programs that, as Bob now urges, placed greater emphasis on fun, emotional growth, and skills development at younger ages as a healthy foundation for continued participation throughout adolescence and beyond.

A Foreword resembles an appetizer; the book is the full-course meal. When it comes to the role of sports in children's lives, Bob is a master chef. Organized sports would better serve the nation's young athletes and their families if parents, coaches, and league administrators follow his wholesome gourmet recipe for childhood and adolescent fulfillment, which Bob begins on the next page.

## CHAPTER 1: LESSONS LEARNED SINCE I WROTE “*Just Let the Kids Play*”

I'll begin with a simple, direct statement: youth sports in America is still failing too many of our kids. We adults are still not providing the fun environment, or the potential for true nurtured learning and emotional growth, that should define the core mission of sports for children and adolescents. Youth sports in America is simply not meeting the needs of ALL the children whom we adults have a responsibility to serve. The failure is particularly noticeable at the younger age levels, for kids 12 and under.

My name is Bob Bigelow and I have been a youth sports reform advocate for almost three decades. I have given countless talks in communities throughout America about the need for reform, and about how we can assure a more wholesome experience for our young athletes. In 2001, I co-authored a well-acclaimed book, *Just Let the Kids Play: How to Stop Other Adults from Ruining Your Child's Fun and Success in Youth Sports*. I have made dozens of media appearances – TV, radio, and online – and I have spoken at many major conventions of youth sports, and parks and recreation, associations. Over the years, I have collaborated with many other reformers because I hoped that together we would have a greater positive impact on youth sports in America.

Unfortunately, I believe that I have yet to succeed in my mission.

Let me digress for a few moments and relate two stories that illustrate the problems that still plague youth sports:

Consider this story that a friend of mine told me about his son. It's not the kind of story that invites newspaper headlines, or that generates TV footage. But it is a story about a private hurt and its enduring impact on a child's life:

“In our town, like many others, the boys youth basketball program has teams that combine fifth-grade and sixth-grade boys. Tradition dictates that two groups of players rotate court time throughout the game. Typically, the sixth-graders play the first quarter, the fifth-graders the second, and the two groups share playing time in the second half.

My friend was the assistant coach of one of these teams and the parent of a fifth-grader. The team's head coach was the parent of the sixth-grader widely regarded as the ‘best’ player on the team. Throughout the team's so-called ‘regular season’ games, the head coach rotated the sixth-graders and the fifth-graders. All the boys got pretty much equal time on the court. Then came the playoffs.

Playoffs have a buzz. The kids are excited to play. The adrenaline among players, coaches and spectators is pumping. Coaches are on full alert. Such was the case as the team took to the court and won its first playoff game, with all of the boys sharing playing time and sharing high-fives at the end.

The second playoff game was more of a challenge. Things didn't go well from the start. The sixth-graders got behind in the score in the first quarter, and the fifth-graders stayed behind in the second. The coach started to get that panicked feeling that he might lose.

Then, with the scoreboard bearing down on him, his adult ego on the line, and victory at the top of his grown-up list of priorities, this youth coach turned his back on half his team. He turned his back on tradition and fair play. He benched all his fifth-graders, who watched from the sidelines as the other boys on the team played the rest of the game.

During this period, one of the fifth-graders got off the bench and walked over to the assistant coach with a question: 'We're not good enough to play, are we?' This wasn't about how you play the game. This was about whether you win or lose, and this head coach won his game on the backs of those fifth-grade boys. My son, at age ten, had seen these kinds of things before and he didn't want to see any more. He felt as if he never wanted to play another basketball game. In fact, he never did."

This story is both poignant and true, although I have left out the names for obvious reasons. It's doubtful that anyone besides my friend and his son recognized what happened in that gym that day. The drama was not obvious to those who watched the game, but the consequences of his coach's actions devastated that child's spirit. He did not recover from the insult. Many children never do.

Here is just one more story:

"The other day, as I lay on the sideline soaking up some fall sun and watching my six-year-old daughter's soccer game, I could not help but smile. As the girls laughed and giggled their way up and down the field, trying and failing, falling and getting up, I was witnessing pure joy and exuberance. The parents clapped and cheered, the coaches hustled to keep the ball in play, and everyone doled out high fives and cries of 'great play' to players on both teams. When my daughter's teammate scored, her teammates all gave her hugs. Then all of the girls on the other team gave her a hug. This was youth sports in its quintessential form: pure, unadulterated fun for everyone.

Then I glanced at the field next door, where some ten-year-old boys were playing. As the boys threw themselves about, the parents screamed and yelled to 'get up,' 'get back,' 'pass it,' 'shoot it,' 'hustle!' The coaches screamed at the players, everyone screamed at the referee, and no one was smiling. Unless, of course, there was a goal, at which point the goal scorer would glance to the sideline to see whether mom or dad approved. At the same time, the guilty party on the opposing team would put his head down and sulk back to the kickoff while receiving the third degree from his coach, and the accompanying groans and moans from the 'home fans.'

As I sat there, I could not help but wonder: Where did it all go wrong? How did we get from here to there? When and why did we take the joy and romance out of youth sports between the ages of six and ten? Is anyone here watching my daughter's game, looking across the way and saying 'I want this experience to become like that?'"

The first story is from my first book, published in 2001 (pages 13 and 14). The second story opens a terrific, recent book by John O' Sullivan, *Changing the Game: The Parent's Guide to Raising Happy, High-Performing Athletes and Giving Youth Sports Back to Our Kids* (Morgan James Publishing, 2014). The biography on the back cover establishes his sterling credentials: "John O'Sullivan is a former collegiate and professional soccer player, and has spent the past two decades as a coach at the youth, high school and collegiate level. O'Sullivan speaks nationwide to coaches, parents, and young athletes about developing athletic excellence and leadership within positive sports environments."

If you want to read a more recent book than mine about what's wrong with youth sports and what can be done to set things right, I highly recommend John's. I have personally met John and seen him speak. He is a great guy who knows what he is talking about!

These two stories illustrate what we're up against when coaches and parents put winning ahead of kids simply having fun and learning the game at the younger age levels. Mine was about youth basketball and John's is about youth soccer, but the same misplaced priorities drive other

sports too, youth baseball, football, lacrosse, you name it. The youth sports world has literally thousands of stories like these. If you are reading this book and already know the problems, you very likely have experienced your own stories. I won't belabor you with any more, but I hope I have made the key points.

Lots of other great books have appeared between mine in 2001 and John's in 2014. This is not a complete list but some of the ones I have read, all good books (please note the "key theme" comments are paraphrased from the books and/or reflect my own opinion):

*Fair Play* (2002) by Scott Lancaster, at the time Senior Director of NFL Youth Football Development. A key theme: making organized sports a great experience for your kids.

*Why Johnny Hates Sports* (2002) by Fred Engh, founder of the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS). A key theme: why today's win-at-all-costs attitudes have compromised many of the original goals of youth leagues, and what can be done to counter these attitudes.

*The Sports Parenting Edge* (2003) by Rick Wolff, media personality, youth sports speaker, and reform advocate. A key theme: a practical and comprehensive guide for parents who want to ensure that their children achieve the most from all their sports experiences.

*Reforming Sports Before the Clock Runs Out* (2004) by Bruce Svare, then Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at SUNY Albany and founder of the National Institute for Sports Reform. A key theme: one man's journey through our runaway national sports culture.

*Crossover* (2006) by Brian McCormick, well-known basketball coach, conditioning specialist and author. A key theme: a new model for youth basketball development.

*Home Team Advantage* (2006) by Brooke de Lench, Founder and President of MomsTEAM Institute. A key theme: defining the critical role of mothers in youth sports.

*Revolution in the Bleachers* (2007) by Regan McMahon, then a writer with the *San Francisco Chronicle*. A key theme: how parents can take back family life in a world gone crazy over youth sports.

*Game On* (2008) by Tom Farrey, then journalist, correspondent, and ESPN reporter. A key theme: examining the all-American race to make champions of children.

*Until It Hurts* (2009) by Mark Hyman, sports columnist. A key theme: looking at America's obsession with youth sports and how it harms our kids.

*The Most Expensive Game in Town: The Rising Cost of Youth Sports and the Toll on Today's Families* (2012), also by Mark Hyman. A key theme: looking at the "business" and money side of youth sports.

And of course *Changing the Game* by John O'Sullivan (2014), which I referred to previously.

In fact, some great books were written before mine, including these:

*Positive Coaching: Building Character and Self-Esteem through Sports* (1995) by Jim Thompson, founder of Positive Coaching Alliance. A key theme: how to balance positive approaches with effective athletic development strategies.

*Way to Go Coach!* (1996) by Ronald E. Smith and Frank L. Smoll, Professors of Psychology at the University of Washington, with years of studies and research into the effects on players of better coaching behaviors. A key theme: presenting a scientifically-proven approach to coaching effectiveness.

*The Cheers and the Tears* (1999) by Shane Murphy, PhD, prominent sports psychologist. A key theme: presenting a healthy alternative to the dark side of youth sports today.

So books about youth sports have appeared for over two decades! The numerous issues addressed in these books include:

#### Issues with Parents:

- \* out-of-control mentality;
- \* bad sideline behavior (yelling at players, referees, and each other);
- \* the emotional toll on kids and the impact on their development;
- \* stress on parents and kids;
- \* competition among parents (bragging rights);
- \* over-hyping of young athletes (more bragging rights);
- \* over-focusing on rare college scholarships; and even
- \* outright violence between adults.

#### Issues with Coaches:

- \* desire to win at all costs;
- \* exercising too much power;
- \* perpetuating unfair playing time;
- \* competing with each other through the kids;
- \* negative coaching behaviors;
- \* stacking teams that create unbalanced games;
- \* unbalanced games that create entitled players; and
- \* declining sportsmanship.

#### Issues with Over-playing (including year-round play in one sport):

- \* overuse injuries;
- \* health risks;
- \* concussions;
- \* year-around play limiting other youthful activities; and
- \* negative impact on family time.

#### Issues at the Organizational Level:

- \* elite teams and clubs (and their physical, emotional, and financial costs) at younger and younger ages;
- \* early over-specialization;
- \* disadvantages to late bloomers;
- \* championships for kids at ever-younger ages;
- \* politics within youth sports programs; and
- \* too few recreational sports opportunities for kids not judged to be “elite” (that is, most kids).

### **The Result: 70% of kids drop out of organized youth sports by age 13.**

This astounding figure comes from research conducted by the National Alliance of Youth Sports (NAYS). Of course, many solutions are offered in these aforementioned books. Rather than identify specific ones from each book, here is a representative list of recommendations which are mentioned in one or more of these books:

- \* recognize that adults' needs in youth sports differ from kids' needs, and adapt games to kids' needs (parents needs for high levels of organization aren't necessarily those of the kids);

- \* adopt approaches for less formal play;
- \* train coaches better in positive approaches (including ones advanced by organizations such as Positive Coaching Alliance and NAYS);
- \* educate parents to better understand the real meaning of sports in children's lives;
- \* avoid having travel and elite teams at younger ages, and even eliminate travel teams below particularly young ages;
- \* modify youth games to better fit how kids learn;
- \* set positive objectives and philosophies at the organizational level;
- \* return to the fundamentals, and stress development and fun over winning;
- \* focus on Long Term Athletic Development (LTAD), train coaches in it, and urge parents to embrace it;
- \* establish codes of conduct for parents and coaches;
- \* promote more silent sidelines and on-field messages about positive behavior;
- \* better leverage the role of mothers as parents who can impact the youth sports environment (dads may be more prone to over-competitiveness);
- \* bring youth sports into the mainstream of the U.S. education system (public and private);
- \* promote broad-based participation at all ages, and more recreational opportunities;
- \* enact more stringent rules that promote equitable playing time;
- \* keep parents from coaching and rely instead on trained professionals;
- \* do not keep scores or standings at young ages;
- \* eliminate playoff and championship games at young ages;
- \* discourage media exposure of youth athletes;
- \* generate better education about the prevention and care of sports injuries;
- \* impose stronger penalties for poor sportsmanship conduct;
- \* stress fundamentals, more play activity, assure that everybody plays, and use positive encouragement; and
- \* press local governments to use the 'power of the permit' to increase access to public fields, gyms, and other facilities to those programs that commit themselves to provide broader opportunities for play.

This is quite a mouthful indeed! I have also conducted my own online survey research on my website, [www.bobbigelow.com](http://www.bobbigelow.com). It's entitled simply *Bob's Youth Sports Survey*, and over 500 visitors have taken it during the past several years. In addition to soliciting rankings of youth sports issues, my survey asks for solutions. Every solution on the list above has also been echoed by one or more survey respondents over the years, so the various approaches identified

in the books above are not necessarily new. But they *all* have merit. (Note, you may download my Survey Report on my website.)

Many of these proposed solutions focus on better education, program structures, and rules within what I call the “traditional team-league model” of youth sports, where children play all season on fixed teams, and often with parent coaches. The teams compete within a defined league (whether “in town” or across multiple communities), and they play a set schedule of games. Most recreational leagues, and nearly all “travel” and “elite” programs, follow this model.

Yet, despite so many great books and proposed solutions, have things really improved under the traditional team-league model?

The fact that more books continue to appear just about every year would tend to indicate that the answer is no, or else why would someone spend the time, energy and cost to write one? If youth sports was getting fixed, why write (and read) yet another book? For that matter, why even read this book?

A better and more poignant indication is given by Doug Abrams, my co-author here. Doug is a nationally recognized youth sports expert and a law professor at the University of Missouri, specializing in family law, and children and the law. A youth hockey coach for more than 40 years, Prof. Abrams is a prolific author and lecturer on sportsmanship, character development, and community sports programs, and a frequent guest on radio and television. For well over a decade, Doug has sent out a regular email to a large list of online subscribers (for free) simply entitled “Today’s Articles.” Each email is a compendium of three to five news articles from around the country (from traditional as well as social media) which tell an actual local story of a youth sports issue or abuse, or provide a commentary on a recent event or series of events. If you subscribe for just a year, you can read over 1,000 articles -- most of which have something to do with problems in youth sports. And most of the problems are caused by adults over the age of 17.

Having subscribed to Doug’s email for over 10 years (and also having known Doug personally for many years), I am sorry to say there is simply no let up in the number or intensity of stories of these problems our kids face. In asking Doug over the years “is it really getting any better based on what you see and read?”, his answer sadly is no. So Doug’s “Today’s Articles” continues on, unabated. And so does the traditional team-league model in most communities.

To reach the root causes of the problems recited above, studies presented in this book provide an alternative to the traditional team-league model for kids in the younger age groups. I call this alternative the “sports camp model.” In the best interests of children in the younger age groups, the proposed model resembles youth sports camps by providing a steady diet of expert skills instruction, adult supervision, competitive games, and fun, without fixed teams, set game schedules, or formal leagues. I firmly believe that adult violence and misconduct diminish, and my research shows that kids learn more than they would under the traditional team-league model. I will describe this research in detail beginning in Chapters 5 and 6.

*But first, let me offer up what I believe is the single most important factor driving the problems that plague youth sports.* It is within this context that my research and solutions truly make sense.

## **The TRUE Root Cause of the Problems in Youth Sports**

As I have read, and re-read, many of the well-written youth sports reform books over the years, one began to really stand out, namely Dr. Shane Murphy's *The Cheers and the Tears* (1999). Dr. Murphy discussed the "dark side of parental motivation," and his key insight is that otherwise good people can fall into bad habits as the result of their visceral passions when their kids appear "on stage" in over-stressed competitions. "*What is it about youth sports that can arouse such passions?*," he asks. "*Why do we sometimes see fights in the stands between parents of youth sports participants?*" (page 49)

Dr. Murphy points to "deeper motivations" caused by the "process of identification":

"[P]arents have a deep and powerful love for their children. The power of this love cannot be underestimated. In my experience, this love leads parents to adopt certain attitudes when it comes to their child's involvement in youth sports:

- \* They want the best for their child...
- \* They want to protect their child from harm...
- \* They hope their child will excel...
- \* They fantasize about what might be...

The result of these attitudes is that parents usually become very emotionally involved in the youth sports experience. As a psychologist, I describe this process as identification -- the parent experiences strong emotions in response to what happens to the child, because the parent identifies so strongly with the child." (pages 49-50)

What Dr. Murphy is saying is that the adults involved -- parents, coaches, and administrators -- have a HUGE emotional investment in (or "identification" with) their kids. Youth sports, with their children "on stage" at every game, simply challenges and repetitively tests that investment. Dr. Murphy continues that "[i]f youth sports were just about play, they would not be such an emotional topic":

"But youth sports involve competition, and this is what makes them intensely involving. We see our children begin to compare themselves to others, and the evaluations are often unfavorable. Our children experience failure and loss, and often this is an upsetting experience. Their young desires and hopes are often frustrated by the coldness of reality, and there's not much we can do to change it. Few experiences match youth sports for generating a clash between hopes and reality." (page 50)

Dr. Murphy adds these exclamation points:

"[T]here is little a parent can do but watch once the child pulls on a sports uniform and goes out onto the field to compete with others... [N]aturally this loss of control can generate a great deal of anxiety. There are few life experiences that can generate the anxiety and tension of watching your own son or daughter participate in a sporting contest. There is a strong visceral and emotional connection because of the adult's identification with the child." (page 51)

"This process of identification helps us understand what happens to youth sports parents as they become more involved in their child's endeavors." (page 51)

*It is these key statements that help us understand the true root cause of the problem.*



To add my own perspective, I think about this process as parents literally seeing their child “on stage” at the “school play” of youth sports every game. We all can feel a bit tense when we go to that school play, see our child on that stage, and truly hope that he or she doesn’t forget the lines, but rather looks good! But at that play we are stuck in the audience and are truly helpless. If all goes well, we rejoice! But if something goes wrong, we identify with the “failure” and often want to blame something or somebody -- the teacher didn’t get the kids prepared well enough, the part was wrong, the wrong play was chosen, or some other factor.

To be sure, youth sports *is* sports and competition, but it is also *a theater in which parents watch their kids perform*, and the feeling can be gut wrenching. We essentially put our kids on stage every game, and in directly competitive situations. Certainly at the school play, parents can compare how their child does versus other kids in the play. At the game, these comparisons can be even more compelling. Even more things may happen (and “go wrong”): playing time may not be fair, the coach may yell at the child, another player may knock the child down without a referee’s call, and numerous other things that parents can’t control.

Now for my next key point: *We adults have created this system that puts kids on stage every game.* The school play may be just once or twice a year, but games happen many times each season, once or more every week. So many times each year – dozens in fact – we expose ourselves to these natural but intensely strong emotions.

Reflecting on the history of organized youth sports, has adult organization really been a good idea? If the adults, who began organizing youth sports programs in earnest after World War II, sensed that they would put themselves through a gut-wrenching process every week, might they have created a different model?

### **A Spectrum Showing the Degrees “Adultification” of Youth Sports**

The history and process of adults taking over kids’ sports has been referred to by a number of authors and youth advocates (such as I) as “adultification.” This notion can be brought to life by a chart I created that follows at the end of this chapter. The degree of adult involvement, and over-involvement, is not uniform and depends on the type of play. My chart shows a spectrum of adultification that ranges from little or none on the left-hand side for activities that we can think of as free play, to a very high degree for so-called “elite” levels at the right side of the chart, where the “stakes” become high (i.e. kids may be showed-cased for possible scholarships to college programs).

In between, there are recreational and travel programs that have varying levels of adult involvement. Travel programs are not as extreme to be sure as elite or premier play, but parents pay more money for these activities and are deeply concerned about how the teams, coaches and their kids perform. That said, even recreational programs involve adults (mostly volunteers) who organize, manage and pretty much run all aspects of the children playing -- from practices through to games.

So let’s take a look at the chart for a moment. I present it as a useful framework within to view the central issue that Dr. Murphy identifies in his book. As adult involvement increases, so does the risk of over-identification and the attendant consequences. If kids play true “sandlot” ball, they are completely on their own and there is simply no interference with how they organize, structure and run their play activities. In the process, not only are they free to play unencumbered by parents and coaches telling them what to do, they also get to learn other life skills about organizing activities and resolving disputes when these arise. In our “wisdom” of taking over youth sports, we also took away those opportunities.

The minimum adult involvement is the second level from the left, free play in a safe zone. What is this? For example, it could be a park in town that is fenced in, provides some equipment for kids to use (basketball nets, goals for soccer, bags for bases, lined courts or fields, etc.). Kids could be dropped off by parents and simply play for an hour or two after school. To provide safety, either volunteers or town employees could watch over the play space, perhaps have a medical kit for bumps and bruises, and even step in on occasion to help resolve a more serious dispute. Occasionally, a knowledgeable adult might even provide a tip or two to kids needing some advice. But that would be it. Safety but no interference in how they kids play.

“Oh I never heard of that,” you might say. Well I will review a great example of this in Chapter 3. This model exists and works well indeed!

Meanwhile as we move to the right of the spectrum, the degree of adult involvement, and really control, increases dramatically (as does the cost to play). As I discuss recommendations later in the book, I will focus on recreational and travel type programs. I’ll leave elite to a later day, it’s a very complex subject and really needs its own book. The good news is that the vast majority of kids playing are not in elite programs, so the recommendations I will make can apply. One of the levels of play that I haven’t touched on yet within this spectrum is the sports camp. Hold that thought for a moment, I will get to it and it will play a major role in this book.

Organized youth sports programs are here to stay. We might long for those simpler times when kids played on the proverbial sandlot -- with teams chosen and rules applied by the kids themselves -- and adultification was at a minimum or not at all. But the old days are simply not going to return. So we are stuck with organized programs -- and with trying to make them work better for the millions of children who play each year.

Within the system of organized programs, can we do something else to remove this potential gut-wrenching that we adults can put ourselves through every time our kids take the field or run onto the court to play a game? I think there is, *and that is why I propose the sports camp model as a healthy antidote to our many acknowledged problems*. But first let’s look at what’s been tried and just doesn’t seem to work -- and why.

## **Why What’s Been Tried So Far Just Hasn’t Worked**

If we look at the previous lengthy list of recommendations from many, many well-written books over the past 15 to 20 years, nearly all presume the traditional team-league model – which places children on fixed teams, coached often by volunteer parents with varying degrees of training (sometimes none), and which play in a league with a fixed-game schedule.

This traditional team-league model is very different from the way younger kids played before youth sports became “organized,” beginning with Pop Warner Football and Little League Baseball in the late 1930s and early 1940s, followed later by soccer, basketball, lacrosse and many other team sports.

Visualize again children as essentially being “on stage” at every game for coaches and parents to see, as Dr. Murphy so eloquently explained. “Solutions” that presume this adult-oriented team/game-based model *do not work because they run headlong into the power of the strong, visceral adult emotions that Dr. Murphy argued are the real root causes of the problems in youth sports*. For example:

Do preventive measures such as parent education programs (typically brief in nature and sometimes just online), pre-season parents meetings, and parents conduct/behavior pledges really neutralize these strong emotions, or do they just hide them below the surface for a while before they reemerge the next time something “bad” happens to the child?

Do coach training programs contain nearly enough information about how to serve kids’ emotional and physical needs, or do they provide mostly information about the sport, technical skills, and tactical play?

Do signs on the field reminding folks to behave well offset the inner forces at work inside otherwise nice people who sometimes just can’t contain themselves in the heat of the game?

Coach and parent training programs have been around for years, offered by youth sports organizations themselves and by outside providers, both in-person and now online. Most of these programs have great content. But can course content alone overcome the power of parents’ inner feelings and emotions when their kids compete? In addition, average volunteers coach for only about 3 to 4 years and then move on (usually because their child ages out or moves on to another activity -- or simply becomes a statistic, one of the 70% of kids who drop out of organized sports by the age of 13).

The ongoing attrition rate leaves training and education programs to try to hit continually moving targets. Even if the first course for a parent or coach doesn’t stick but say the second course does, the adult may soon leave the sports program anyway. The “next generation” arrives, and the program must start all over again. Keeping pace requires a constant barrage of training, and even that training has no guarantee to really work. What is truly more compelling to parents than protecting their child from a perceived harm or injustice?

Let’s look for just a moment at what I wrote in the introduction to my 2001 book:

“Except for the most extreme violence or abuse in youth sports, the coaches and the parents are not bad people. They are caught up in, and sometimes corrupted by, youth sports systems that have gone astray. Such systems allow misdirected principles and priorities to take over. These are not bad people in charge; these are flawed systems in control.”

I started really with the same premise as Dr. Murphy did in 1999, which posits that the problems we see aren’t from bad people, but from good people put into bad situations. I know that this statement sounds like a “victims-of-their-environment” argument, but I have come to believe that today’s youth sports systems are analogous to the “bad homes” that can change good people and alter their behavior for the worse. I just didn’t take this far enough when I wrote my recommendations in 2001. My purpose is to do so now.

The more I have thought about this over the years, the more I believe that organizing younger kids into fixed teams and leagues, and putting them on stage every week for all to see, is just not a good idea!

The original idea behind organized youth sports was that some formalization of practices and games would help kids learn skills more systematically, to have more fun, and to be better prepared for sports at higher levels as they grew older. That idea seemed to make sense, but it also paved the way for coaches to adopt adult-style play models where winning trumps learning,

and where parents react strongly to what happens in more formalized games. Some youth sports organizations (the American Youth Soccer Organization, or AYSO, is a notable example) began on the premise that every boy and girl should play. But is this premise really an adjustment for the traditional team-league model that has had built-in incentives for coaches to cheat kids on play time, and for parents to become over-obsessed?

I believe that the evolution of youth sports contains an unintended consequence. Adults thought that they would make sports better for the kids, but instead they have made it worse. But we can fix it!

## **Developing a Genuinely NEW Solution**

The thoughtful proposals made in books to date in my opinion just don't go far enough. And my first book, despite what I wrote in the introduction, didn't go far enough. *We need to change the very play model of youth sports itself.* What does that really mean?

That's what I will address in this book. Aristotle said that people learn best by doing, and not merely from absorbing instruction about what to do. Books can point parents, coaches and league administrators in the right direction, but the key is not what these adults read or hear, but what they do. Books work best when they motivate doers.

This book will be different because I believe that my proposed solution is virtually guaranteed to work IF the adults – the doers – embrace its implementation. The solution is simple, straightforward, and easy to understand. No pledges, no hours of special coach training, no expensive outside consultants, no parent pledges, silent sidelines, or any of that. (What a relief!)

This is also a short book. I won't rehash any more of the stories and prescriptions from my first book in 2001, or from the many other good books before or since. There is no need to. If you already know there are serious issues, this book is for you. You very likely already know stories of emotional hurt and injury from your own experience.

But if you don't yet think there are real issues, and if you want to learn more, please read one or more of the great books I have mentioned so far, whether my first one or another author's. These books present lots of stories, evidence and examples of the problems.

*Then come back and read this one!*

This book is written particularly for adults who are in positions to implement true change for kids in the younger age groups: boards of youth sports organizations and leagues, including local affiliates and programs; parks and recreation directors; heads of agencies such as the Y, PALs, CYOs, and many others. But even if you're just a regular mom or dad, coach or parent, this book can help you too. Read it, talk about it, and perhaps get it into the hands of one or more folks who you think can make meaningful changes.

If this book ultimately changes the youth sports landscape, I probably will also have written myself out of a job giving talks. Short of that, *I hope at least to start a very different national conversation about solutions!*

**CHART: THE SPECTRUM OF ADULTIFICATION**



## CHAPTER 2: WHAT CHILDREN REALLY WANT FROM YOUTH SPORTS -- AND A BETTER WAY TO GET THERE

Over the past two decades, lots of qualitative research has shown what adults and kids want from their youth sports programs. This research has clearly shown that adults' needs in youth sports are very different than kids' needs. For example, many adults put winning and competition high on their list of priorities; but kids rank winning low on what's important to them, rather they value fun, learning, and socialization the most. For many kids, even getting exercise is more important than winning.

Two pioneer researchers in this area are:

- \* The Institute for the Study of Youth Sports (ISYS) started by Michigan State University in 1978 (1); and

(1) Seefeldt, V., Ewing, M., & Walk, S. (1992). *Overview of youth sports programs in the United States*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development.

- \* Dr. Ronald Smith and Dr. Frank Smoll at the Department of Psychology at the University of Washington. In 1979 they designed the Coach Effectiveness Training program (CET) to teach youth coaches about team-building, esteem-nurturing, and example-setting. Based on cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques, CET teaches coaches to understand how their behavior affects young athletes. CET also encourages coaches to improve children's skills and reward their efforts, and to control the "winning-is-everything" philosophy all too common in youth sports. (2)

(2) Smith, R. E., Smoll, F. L., & Curtis, B. (1979). CET: A cognitive-behavioral approach to enhancing relationship skills in youth sport coaches. *Journal of Sport Psychology*, 1, 59-75.

### The Institute for the Study of Youth Sports (ISYS)

First, consider this history from the ISYS website (<http://edwp.educ.msu.edu/isys/about/>):

"The Institute for the Study of Youth Sports (ISYS) was launched in 1978 after members of the state legislature became concerned about negative and unhealthy practices occurring in children's sports. The goals were to establish a world-class institute that would scientifically study the beneficial and detrimental effects of sports participation on children and youth, and then work to maximize the beneficial effects."

ISYS was founded nearly 40 years ago. The good news is that problems were recognized early in the development and spread of organized youth sports programs. The bad news is that we are still grappling with these problems more than ever. The specific mission and objectives of ISYS are to (again from the website):

"facilitate a paradigmatic shift in the way America judges success in youth sports -- place child development before winning;

eliminate myths and enhance positive health behaviors in youth sports;

lead the nation in ways to develop and advance coaches and youth sports leaders; and

be America's source of unbiased scientific and best-practice evidence on critical youth sports issues."

One of ISYS' most important contributions, from a renowned survey of over 8,000 teenage athletes across a wide variety of scholastic sports, was a ranking of the top ten reasons why kids play sports. Among teenage boys, the top 10 reasons were:

1. To have fun
2. To improve my skills
3. For the excitement of competition
4. To do something I am good at
5. To stay in shape
6. For the challenge of competition
7. To play as part of a team
- 8. To win**
9. My parents or close friends want me to play
10. To go to a higher level of competition

Among teenage girls, the top 10 reasons were:

1. To have fun
2. To stay in shape
3. To improve my skills
4. To get exercise
5. To do something I am good at
6. To play as part of a team
7. To learn new skills
8. For the excitement of competition
9. I like the coaches or teachers
10. For the team spirit

Notice that winning was 8th on the boys' list and did not even make the girls' top-ten list (it actually came in at 12th). Having fun is the top priority for both genders, and improving skills and enjoying competition were all more important than winning or losing. Even staying in shape (getting exercise) was more important than the score. Imagine kids saying that!

A similar survey was conducted with thousands of other teenage non-scholastic players, and winning was even lower on the lists for both boys and girls. Other studies have shown that the younger the kids, the less importance they place on winning and losing. If high school players don't rank winning very high, it is certainly not high on the list of younger children's needs. But adults -- parents and coaches alike -- all too often are concerned with winning youth games. The adults' needs are simply out of whack with the kids' needs. The question then arises, *whose game it is anyway?*

On his website, [www.changingthegameproject.com](http://www.changingthegameproject.com), John O'Sullivan makes this point directly. "[M]illions of kids," he says, "are playing sports in an environment not designed to make them better in the long term. They are caught up in an adult obsession to solely measure youth sports results in wins and losses, and it is killing youth sports in our country."

ISYS recognized the need for a paradigm shift well before the publication of the many popular youth sports books presented in the preceding chapter. I wrote my first book in 2001, 23 years after ISYS was founded. But that shift has yet to occur.

**Research by Smith and Smoll (University of Washington)**

Second, let's look at the work of two other prominent youth sports researchers, beginning in 1979, just a year after ISYS was founded. Dr. Ronald Smith and Dr. Frank Smoll, both of the Department of Psychology at the University of Washington, researched how coaches can best interact with their youth players by focusing on positive behaviors that would impact children's self-esteem and enjoyment while shunning the win-at-all-costs attitude. From their research:

"In the first of the outcome studies, Little League Baseball coaches were exposed to a preseason Coach Effectiveness Training program in which the behavioral guidelines were presented. Observations and player reports showed that trained coaches differed from controls in a manner consistent with the behavioral guidelines. Their players also liked them more, more strongly desired to play for them in the future, evaluated them as better teachers, and liked their teammates more. Children who played for the trained coaches also exhibited a significant increase in general self-esteem compared with scores obtained a year earlier, whereas [a] control group children did not. The greatest differences in attitudes toward trained and control coaches were found among children low in self-esteem, and such children appeared most sensitive to coaches' use of encouragement, punishment, and technical instruction."

Based on their findings, Dr. Smith and Dr. Smoll developed a comprehensive program, Coach Effectiveness Training (CET), which recognizes that kids' needs in sports are very different from those of many coaches, administrators, or parents. Over the past three decades, Dr. Smith and Dr. Smoll have published a number of great books, and scholarly papers, devoted to improving how adults coach children and better understand what's important in youth sports. (Simply search for them by name online).

But again the question arises, has the paradigm shifted to the saner youth sports world that they and many others have hoped for?

The research into what kids need isn't new. It's been around for decades, yet the problems persist. In my 2001 book, I emphasized where the buck stops:

"The solution to these problems is not for children to figure out how to meet adult expectations. Rather it's for the adults to look at youth sports through the eyes of the children, and to serve their wants and the needs while they are being children at play. This will require not only a change in adult attitudes, but changes in the very sports systems themselves."

Recognizing these needs unfortunately has not been enough. So what can adults, in positions to influence the direction of youth sports, do to better meet kids' needs, particularly at the younger age levels? How can we change programs to de-emphasize adults' concerns about winning at the expense of development, socialization, and even plain old fun?

Returning to the first chapter of this book, Dr. Shane Murphy eloquently discussed how easily parents and coaches can feel over-invested in their kids' sporting pursuits. The adults attend all practices and games, often intently watching and even judging their children's performance, and criticizing the children's mistakes (and the coaches too). In this environment of structured team-based practices and games, it is very difficult indeed to change the adults' focus on outcomes and winning versus the learning process. You have a game, a score, and a league with standings. What's the easiest thing for adults to say about a game? What's the easiest question to ask? Simply "what was the score?" Or "what place in the standings are we?"



In my three decades in youth sports -- speaking, coaching, conducting clinics, and serving on my local youth basketball board for many years -- I have asked about hundreds of games, and I have overheard parents and coaches talking about many, many more. About 98% of the time, the first thing mentioned is the score. Not the number of good passes made, rebounds grabbed, screens set, and other aspects of how the game was played. Rather it's the result. The score should not be the principal focus because it doesn't tell us anything about the quality of play, the skills learned and put to use, or even whether the kids had a good time.

Kids will also talk about the score (they may get it wrong, depending on their age), but they also talk about key plays and things that were exciting and fun. For the adults, the score leads into conversation about how the team is doing, whether the coach is good, and will the team make the play-offs. But the kids are concerned about other things, such as which friends they played with and what key plays they made.

*Parents and coaches need to remember that in youth sports winning is for today but fun is forever.* A simple experiment might begin to help set priorities straight. Ask the adults to think back to last month. What teams did the child play that month, and what were the scores? The adults probably cannot remember because recollections of particular games fade fast. Then ask the parents whether their kids learned anything about the game last month, and whether they had fun.

So what can change the adult-oriented conversation about youth games? *You need to change the "game" itself*, and that is what Chapter 3 will talk about! Please read on.

### CHAPTER 3: EXAMPLE OF A PROGRAM THAT TRULY FITS CHILDREN'S NEEDS -- AND THE ROLE OF THE PLAY MODEL

I begin this chapter with a statement that will be controversial, but will also form the basis of this book's solution to what ails youth sports: Simply put:

*In the younger age groups, we cannot fix what's wrong in youth sports by perpetuating the adult-oriented, traditional team-league model that nearly all youth sports programs use today. Period!*

Whew! That's only one sentence, but it takes a huge load off my chest. I do not say this lightly. As a youth sports reform advocate for nearly 30 years, I have been trying to get parents, coaches and administrators to serve youth athletes more effectively, but I have been trying to do so within the structure of today's typical programs. But let's go back to what I said in the Introduction of my 2001 book:

"We need to reform...*systems*. Behavior pledges and parents' classes, coaches' training and gag orders on spectators' yelling will not go far enough."

"To do away with the negatives and to rebuild youth sports systems that are healthy, productive and fun, adults need to take three steps: recognize the true sources of the problems, find solutions, and join -- or lead -- efforts for change."

I argued that the systems and structures of youth sports programs need to change. But since then, after fifteen more years of community talks, conference presentations and media appearances, I now realize that I didn't go far enough. Now we need to push for more meaningful change that will truly serve children's interests.

When we talk about "structure," that word can mean different things to different people. In a chapter I co-authored for Sandra Spickard Prettyman's and Brian Lampman's (co-editors) excellent book, *Learning Culture Through Sports: Exploring the Role of Sports in Society* (Rowman and Littlefield 2006), I said this about structure:

"[T]o remedy the ills of youth sports in America, adults need to change the very structure and goals of today's youth sports programs. We must reduce the emphasis on competition as the chief goal, and rather promote youth sports as a central aspect of education for every child who wishes to participate. Overemphasizing competition inevitably whittles down the number of kids who play, shutting out not only the ones who are made to feel they aren't good enough, but also the talented ones who get burned out from adult-imposed pressure. On the other hand, sports-as-education stresses skill development, healthy exercise and fitness, enjoyment, socialization, recreation, and just plain fun. The objective is to meet children's primary needs for fun and participation, and to assure to all children the benefits that come from meeting these needs."

I still fervently support these points about recalibrating competition and educational opportunity. Reducing the emphasis on winning and increasing the focus on sports-as-education are keys to what I would like to see happen. In 2001, however, I did not define the required structural changes from a more holistic perspective.

Here is an example of what I said about structure, again from my book's Introduction:

“Structures [include] the selection of elite teams at young ages and caste systems that rank athletic abilities in children and stick kids with labels -- often unfair labels -- that can last throughout their years in youth sports.”

My realization now is that these structural aspects above, while critically important, are just not broadly defined enough. For some people “structure” might mean how the overall program is managed. Details might include the types of people on the board of directors, whether volunteers or professionals coach the kids, the amount of training for volunteer coaches, the ratio of practices to games, the use of short-sided style games, and the nature of the facilities.

These structural aspects are also very important in a traditional youth sports program, but do they provide the real foundations for truly effective change? I received more insight about structure when I launched an online survey several years ago on my website ([www.bobbigelow.com](http://www.bobbigelow.com)). If you visit my website, you will see a link to the survey on the home page. I also have periodically summarized the results and made them available on the site (click the link at the right on my home page under “Take Bob’s Survey”). In the summary report, I write:

*“One of the interesting questions asked was ‘Do you think communities should consider ways to change youth sports programs (or add new programs) where the structure of kids’ sports is less formal, less driven by teams and standings, and/or more like pick-up play?’ This gets at the notion that when youth sports programs and leagues over-emphasize standings, winning, and how teams perform versus development of individual skills, the impact can be to substitute too much pressure on both kids and coaches for the objective of just having fun.*

Nearly 6 in 10 respondents (57%) have said yes to this question. The implication is that many people are open to considering alternative ways to structure youth sports programs, so that they might result in a better environment for the kids.

With this survey, I have defined structure then more broadly and holistically. The survey question above was framed in terms of youth sports being less formal, less involved with teams and standings, and more akin to pick-up play. The question I wrote for this survey didn’t assume the traditional structure of teams and leagues, but rather envisioned something “more like pick-up play.”

For this more fundamental look at structure, consider how the nature of youth sports changed once adults began in earnest to organize kids’ programs shortly after World War II. The change affected baseball, football, basketball, soccer, you name it. Before this “adultification” of youth sports, kids mostly played informally, showing up at the schoolyard or proverbial vacant lot to choose up sides and just play. Particularly for younger kids, most sports had none of the real structures as we know them today -- no leagues of fixed teams, no coaches, no formal game schedules, no standings, and no parents on the sidelines. Just groups of kids playing for the sheer enjoyment of playing.

After adults formed kids into leagues (which the children didn’t form themselves), all of today’s structures developed -- the preseason drafts, fixed teams, leagues, standings, referees and officials, rules for managing and organizing activities and settling disputes, protocols for selecting and training coaches, and even getting artificial turf fields for younger players. In other words, everything we associate with organized youth sports today.

Years ago kids had informal play. Today “we” have formal organizations, structures and systems for kids. These represent two vastly different play models for youth sports.

### **So Just What Is a “Play Model”?**

Rather than at this point provide an academic definition of “play model,” let me provide an example that shows what I mean. A play model that is dramatically different from traditional organized youth sports is well illustrated by an exciting program aptly called *Joy of the People*. The program was founded by Ted Kroeten, long-time high-level soccer player, and has been conducted in St. Paul, Minnesota since 2009, and here is what this program’s website says:

“Joy of the People . . . promotes the idea of soccer free play as a way to build healthy kids and communities. In 2009, JOTP partnered with the City of St. Paul to provide programming . . . that created an inviting environment of play. In 2012, we provided more than 1,200 hours of safe monitored Free Play soccer for kids of all ages at no cost. At JOTP, we believe that soccer should be inclusive, fun, creative, and cooperative long before it becomes competitive, growing their love of the game, discovering the Joy of play, Joy of friendship, Joy of creativity, and the Joy of the people.”

This innovative program’s website (<http://www.joyofthepeople.org/page/show/79895-powered-by-joy->) is a must-see for anyone involved in youth sports (and not just soccer). It is an incredible alternative that embraces “free play” to help kids simply play and learn sports. The website continues: “JOTP center is the leading working **free play model** in the USA . . . [and it] includes Futsal, street ball, inflatables, different surfaces, different balls and games.”

Notice the use of the term “play model.” I didn’t just make it up (wish I could say that I did, but I can’t). And the attributes of the JOTP program really define what a play model is.

Their play model’s key elements are: (1) the provision of facilities and equipment for kids to have the opportunity to play without adults structuring and controlling their activities; (2) the ability for kids who play independently to do so at no cost; and (3) the availability of optional paid programs for instructional skill development by qualified trainers. This model is really the opposite of today’s typical youth sports model of fixed teams, formal games and leagues. The philosophy puts the purest of children’s needs first: the need to just play and have fun (and in a nice, safe facility), and the need to gain new learning from qualified instructors whose primary objective is improving skills rather than winning games. (In fact instructors in this type of setting have no real incentive for who wins and losses – and that’s really important).

In speaking recently with Ted, he expanded on the notion of free play. Ted believes that free play is at its very best, and the most learning happens, when:

- \* It is located close to home and accessible to everyone;
- \* Everyone is included, i.e. there is no selection; kids do not necessarily choose their friends with they play, they must make them;
- \* And everyone plays -- no one is left out, there are no elites, just everyone gets to play and can succeed in his or her own way.

I think of the Joy of the People model as a great example of today’s version of how younger kids used to play “back in the old days.” Back then, kids went to the nearby vacant lot, or perhaps a local park or schoolyard (before fences were padlocked and users needed a formal permit to enter), chose up their own teams, and just played. Parents might have provided some informal

instruction, but the kids played for hours, then came home for dinner to parents who simply asked, “Did you have fun today?”

Joy of the People *has recreated this environment* by offering a nice, fun facility with great play spaces and equipment, plus instructional and camp programs if parents and kids want them. This is simply a terrific play model for kids’ sports!

So that’s an example of a very different play model than formal team-league youth sports. To design a better program to meet kids’ needs, you have to first decide how to *change your play model*, not just tweak some aspects of the current model your program is likely using. You don’t treat a major injury with a Band-Aid.

*This notion of having to change the play model itself is a major point of difference between what I am writing about here, and what most other books about youth sports have identified as “solutions” (including my first book back in 2001).*

In the next chapter I will discuss more specifically the *sports camp play model*, which can change the face of youth sports for the better, particularly for boys and girls in the younger age groups.

## CHAPTER 4: UNDERSTANDING THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF YOUTH SPORTS PLAY MODELS -- THE PRELUDE TO A SOLUTION

To define an alternative play model that can truly change the youth sports landscape, it is first helpful to define an overall framework for all possible play models in youth sports. By defining this framework, we can better understand an alternative model and how it can better serve children's needs as well as change the environment in which kids play (i.e., truly fix the problems we have been trying to solve). Play models can be defined by a series of key attributes:

- \* The degree of formal organization of the program;
- \* Whether the activity involves adults as well as kids;
- \* If adults are involved, whether they are volunteers, paid professionals, or a mixture;
- \* The presence or absence of formal teams;
- \* The presence or absence of formal games; and
- \* The presence or absence of a formal league.

(As a footnote about games, many people are familiar with the term "friendlies." Even though these usually occur outside of league-based schedules, I believe they can still be considered real games, especially if the parents and coaches feel they have a stake in their outcome.)

### **Is the Sports Activity Formally Organized, and to What Degree?**

This first attribute is the most fundamental. When kids and their friends play sports in their backyard, or in a park, schoolyard, or available neighborhood lot, they set their own play times, make their own teams, and set and adjust rules as needed. The backyard activity involves two or more kids who typically create a "game" rather than a practice drill. The game may be, for example, one-on-one basketball in the driveway, a few kids playing soccer (one shooting, the other as goalie), or a few kids playing some form of baseball with the number of bases and the field adjusted. The rules exist principally in the players' minds. Think of the classic "imaginary guy on second" as a runner in baseball when there aren't enough players for a full complement. The kids are creative enough to solve problems on their own!

When a larger number of children played, the game might have resembled a full game, perhaps at a local park. Everybody played. "Teams" generally existed for a particular game, but they were usually fluid and kids often rearranged them the next time they played. In forming teams for a particular day, the children typically considered that they were playing with friends and they made the teams fair so that all the "good" kids were not on one team. (When each team's "captain" chose up sides, the kids all knew their respective abilities pretty well.) Kids were smart enough to know that games are the most fun with reasonably balanced teams (and kids are still smart enough to know that today).

What I have described above is basically true pick-up play. It's spontaneous, and the kids themselves minimize planning and rules. Playing for fun is the chief goal.

Kids' sports gets more organized when various adult-centric structural elements are introduced. Here "structure" means adults who, believing they are well meaning, plan times when these activities take place, define locations, and decide other aspects including who plays, the number of kids who play at a time, the teams, the rules, officiating, and practices. Before too long, adult-imposed structure typically also means benchwarmers, even at younger and younger ages. Kids don't warm the bench when kids create the games.

In moving beyond pure pick-up play to more structured programs, the minimum adult involvement would be (a) some degree of demonstrating and assisting with skills (the classic dad or mom showing the child a few pointers), and (b) keeping an eye on the kids to be sure they are safe and to resolve any major conflicts. This basic involvement does not affect the nature of the pick-up play itself. *However once adults assume greater roles, organized structures begin to change the nature of a pure kids-only game.*

### **Are Adults Involved with the Kids, and What Do the Adults Do?**

The spectrum of adult involvement ranges from child-centric to adult-centric. For example, adults move just a little beyond pure pick-up play when they designate a regular park or school gym for games, arrange available game dates and times, supply some or all equipment (such as goals for soccer, and bases for baseball), and/or provide scheduled supervision for safety. These efforts are still child-centric though as they *support*, rather than *direct*, the kids playing. This notion of supporting versus directing is critical to understanding when adult involvement begins to move from child- to adult-centric.

Moving beyond this level of involvement on the spectrum, qualified volunteers (or even paid professionals) can provide scheduled skills clinics, as the Joy of the People program does. This is still child-oriented as learning rather than directing is still the goal. But adult involvement can move all the way to the other extreme on this spectrum, i.e., becoming the fully organized models that characterize most of today's youth sports programs.

As sports moves from the recreational model to more competitive travel and elite models, adults add such features as try-outs, cuts, more qualified (at least it is hoped) coaches, and more intricate rules that govern the league, and often they exclude many kids who seek to play. The "stakes" are higher for the parents, who see more competitive programs as their child's stepping stone to high-school play, college scholarships, and maybe even the pros. (Just as a side note, while lots of kids do play high school sports, which is great, for over 90% of them, the last game of their senior year will be the final organized game they will ever play. Less than 10% go on to play college team athletics. Making the pros? The odds are extremely small indeed!)

### **If Adults Are Involved, Are They Volunteers, Professionals, or a Mixture?**

Once adults involve themselves in kids' games, and decide what roles they will play, do the adults know what they're doing? This question may sound a bit brusque, but it is central to the kids' well-being in sports. Most volunteers are great people who donate their time and do a great job for the kids. Professional organizations that provide training and coaching resources can add significant value. That said, we must always ask two key questions:

1. How knowledgeable and well trained are the volunteers?; and
2. Are any professional resources geared to the kids' success in gaining skills, or more toward winning games to please parents (and also keep the coaches' paychecks coming)?

In most recreational programs, the bulk of adult involvement is on a volunteer basis. Volunteering for kids is, of course, a noble gesture that can benefit the local community, but volunteers often do not receive adequate training to work effectively with kids "on the field." Well-meaning volunteers can administer the league and handle logistics, and well-meaning coaches can be wholesome role models, but coaching kids for skill development and sports-as-education takes know-how and training. Some programs provide more than others. A player's

experience will be heavily impacted by the assigned coach, and coaching assignments frankly can be a crapshoot.

As parents and players graduate to more competitive programs, paid professional coaches and trainers generally enter the mix. Payment may or may not produce quality, but it can be easier to hold a paid organization accountable because it compensates coaches for providing a service. Professional coaches are more likely to have training and licensing, but payment brings no guarantees. Enrollment fees for sports programs that hire professionals will be more expensive, ranging from hundreds to the low thousands of dollars per year.

### **Are There Formal Teams?**

In typical organized youth sports programs, adults group kids into formal teams, each with a fixed roster, a team name, uniform, and assigned coach(es). When kids play on their own, they choose informal teams and the “rosters” may vary game to game. Yet, in the kids’ minds, they have “teams” for any given game, even if the rosters are assembled pick-up style. In fact, even in an assigned team’s practice session, children who are divided up to scrimmage will often say, “I want to be on so-and-so’s team.” Perceptions differ. The coach sees the scrimmage as preparation for the next formal game, but the kids (especially at younger ages) see the scrimmage as a game itself. In fact, when the kids grow bored by practice session drills, they invariably ask the coach, “When can we play a game?”

Now let’s consider a sports camp. Parents would often say that camps have no teams because the kids are just doing skills activities. Yet the kids all look forward to the “games” because a good camp invariably has the campers play (generally toward the end of the day’s session) with “teams” chosen, either by the kids or the camp instructors.

In both recreational and higher-level settings, another dimension of a structured model is the notion of having formal, fixed teams. However non-fixed (or flexible) teams, whose rosters change every game or at least periodically, have several distinct advantages:

- \* If teams are not balanced during a given game, the rosters can be rebalanced before the end (say, at halftime) to make the game more enjoyable and rewarding.
- \* Flexible teams let instructors or coaches move players around to achieve particular training objectives. (In soccer, for example, all the less developed kids on both sides could play offense, so they get more experience, while the game remains even.)
- \* Fixed teams accumulate win-loss records (even if formal standings aren’t kept), but flexible groupings of players can produce balance that allows everyone to win and lose pretty equally over time.
- \* Flexible teams encourage coaches to collaborate more and lessen pressure for winning or losing. Think again about the usual scrimmage within a single team’s practice session. There the kids see two “teams” in the scrimmage, yet the coaches (hopefully) will want to collaborate for everyone’s benefit. That’s a comfortable and fun learning environment for the kids, and for the adults to avoid stress and pressure!

Formal teams are the province of leagues while informal teams are the attribute of sports camps. But in both cases, the kids still get their “teams.”



## **Are There Formal Games?**

Formal games may seem a corollary of having fixed teams. But children can be arranged into teams (or perhaps here better thought of as groups of players) for the logistical convenience of organizing less formal games. Coaches can make the games more learning-based (while the kids still compete) by introducing various elements and rules to promote particular skills, and even by rearranging players at halftime to balance the game.

Here the coaches are working together more than trying to compete with each other *through* the kids. The games may still be called “games” rather than practices, but they can be managed as more of a developmental, learning-oriented activity. Think about the differences between games in a sports camp versus games in a typical travel league. The sports camp might assign kids to fixed playing groups for duration of the camp, but the games are treated very differently than typical youth sports leagues.

Formal games include these attributes:

- \* Two fixed teams play at a pre-defined location and time.
- \* Assigned coaches manage the teams.
- \* Games are usually officiated.
- \* A score (win, loss or tie) results that everyone knows about, even if it is not recorded for standings.

Informal games lack one or more of these characteristics. For example, a time to play may be assigned due to logistics of managing field availability. However there may not be assigned coaches, but rather trainers at a sports camp who rotate among groups of kids. Formal officials aren't likely used, and scores are not the principal focus.

## **Are Teams Organized into Formal Leagues?**

A set number of formal teams that play an assigned schedule of games constitute a league, and administrators oversee leagues. Rules typically govern the league's operation, including how children are registered, how teams are formed, and how games schedules are made. Geographical limitations may determine who can play on particular teams. Procedures exist for handling conflicts and other issues. Standings may or may not be kept (but usually are in travel sports).

Leagues are used in both recreational and travel/elite youth sports. The recreational league often is a “house” (or in-house) set up, depending on the number of available players in a community, while travel leagues more often play across communities due to limits via tryouts on how many kids can play.

Usually once you have formal teams, they will play a schedule in an organized league. But models can exist where kids assigned to fixed play groups could engage in other than strict league play.

## **Can the Nature of Play Models Impact both Play Environment *and* Skills?**

I have discussed six major attributes of play models. Because so many variables characterize a play model, the question arises whether a particular model – in addition to having an impact on the overall play environment -- can also influence fundamental skill development and the learning of tactics.

The quality of elementary and secondary education depends on how a district's schools operate (for example, the type of classroom, degree of homework, training requirements for teachers, selection and use of standardized tests, curricular formation, and even whether kids should wear uniforms). In short, the nature of the educational model has an impact on the children. If we also see and value children's sports as an educational activity, do the play model's various elements affect the quality of sports education? This is one of the book's key questions and a hugely important consideration.

*The reason is that if we can identify a play model which not only fixes the issues in youth sports but also provides better skills and learning for the kids, we get a double bonus! And that's exactly what I believe we can achieve.*

Over the past few years, I have conducted quantitative research that shows that the type of sports play model *does* impact the learning of skills on a quantitative basis. The remainder of this book will explain this impact and recommend how communities can take advantage of this learning. So it's possible to adopt a play model that not only solves many important issues in youth sports, but also be superior in how much kids learn. Most parents want their kids to have fun and learn as much as possible. There is a play model that can do both! And it's easy to implement too, but more on all this coming up soon.

First, it is helpful to boil down all of the above characteristics discussed in this chapter into three broad play models:

1. Pick-up play, where there is little or no formal organization.
2. Training-oriented programs that are typically represented by youth sports camps or "academies."
3. Formal team-league based programs that are characterized by fixed teams, formal games, and scheduled activities.

The studies I have conducted focus on numbers 2 and 3. Please read on!

## CHAPTER 5: PLAY MODELS -- IMPACT ON THE PLAY ENVIRONMENT AND KIDS' SPORTS SKILLS

Now that we have defined the landscape of play models, I turn to a key purpose of this book, namely to provide new empirical research that identifies the impact of play models on children's skills, particularly at the younger age levels.

In my community talks over the years, I have focused on improving the youth sports environment by paying greater attention to fundamental skills than to tactical play and trying to win games. Based on many years of experience, I believe that, especially at younger ages, a sports camp environment can boost kids' skills more effectively than "travel" programs can. I believe this because by making winning and losing more important, travel leagues pressure coaches to spend more time on tactical play at games, and less time on basic skills.

Travel leagues also motivate parents and coaches to get over-involved in the outcome of games, thereby putting excess pressure on youth players and inviting many of the problems which Chapters 1 and 2 discussed.

The problem does not exist only in travel leagues, however. Even recreational leagues with fixed teams and game schedules can lead parent coaches to overemphasize wins and losses, parents to yell too much from the sidelines or bleachers, and kids to get shortchanged on skills acquisition and development (and even on equitable playing time).

Now for this book's central focus: *There is an alternative play model that can provide a wholesome play environment and increase children's skills, better than formal team-league based programs.* This model is the second one described at the end of Chapter 4, namely the model typically followed at youth sports camps and academies. (Most sports camps are "day" camps, and this is the type I am referring to in this book.)

### Why Sports Camps Create a Better Environment for Kids

First, let's look at the question of play environment. If you are one of the many parents who have been on the sidelines of youth games and have also watched one or more sports camps, you have probably observed the difference. Without a stake in fixed teams that win or lose scheduled games, parents (and coaches and players) are much more relaxed at camps. The kids play to have fun and learn. Parents can sit back and read the proverbial paper and not have their eyes glued to a formal game, watching every play. Parents often simply drop off their kids at the start time, pick them up after camp is over, and do more adult-oriented things in between, such as going to work, shopping, and tending to things around the home.

As soon as the family arrives at camp, the "raw material" is instantly in place for a saner youth sports environment. I have not conducted a formal study on sports camp environments, but I hope that most of us who have attended a camp have experienced that camps are simply more focused on fun and skills, and frankly on the joy of simply playing. Once the "game" is taken out of the equation, parents no longer need "worry" about any outcome other than whether their child has fun and learns new skills.

In a model based on fixed teams, leagues and game schedules, you mostly hear parents and coaches on the sidelines and bleachers, not the kids. At camp, you can actually hear the kids (and instructors) because calling out "go Billy, you got the ball!" is just not really appropriate.

In its landmark 1993 youth sports study of games played under the traditional team-league model, the Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission (MASC) found that:

- \* 45.3% of the youngsters surveyed said they had been called names, yelled at, or insulted while participating in sports;
- \* 21.0% said they had been pressured to play with an injury;
- \* 17.5% said they had been hit, kicked or slapped while participating in sports; and
- \* 8.2% said they had been pressured to intentionally harm others while playing sports.

(Source: *Recommendations for Communities*, a National Alliance for Youth Sports report)

This study was conducted over 20 years ago, but there is little indication that things have improved based on my many years of observing youth sports at the community level.

The National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS) estimates that about 15% of youth league games see a confrontation between parents or coaches and officials, and a national summit on Raising Community Standards in Children's Sports concluded that youth sports is a "hotbed of chaos, violence and mean-spiritedness."<sup>1</sup> In a 2001 survey of 3,000 kids conducted by *Sports Illustrated for Kids* magazine, 74% of youth athletes reported that they had watched out-of-control adults at their games; 37% of the athletes had watched parents yelling at children; 27% had watched parents yelling at coaches or officials; 25% had watched coaches yelling at officials or children; and 4% had watched violence by adults.

One way to assess the environment or atmosphere of a formal game-based program versus a camp-type program is to (a) compare how many parents or relatives attend versus the number of kids participating, and (b) how many of these adults are typically being over-vocal at the event. Especially at the younger age levels, I would estimate that up to 90% of the players have one or both parents attending formal games. (Parents who don't attend likely have a conflict, and the player got a ride with another teammate or the coach.) I would also estimate that 25% or more of the parents present range from providing occasional instructions to their child to becoming truly over vocal, and a few even get out of control. These are hefty numbers.

Meanwhile at most camps I have observed, less than 25% of parents even hang around and very, very few get vocally involved. (Gee it's really great to mainly hear the kids!)

### **Sports Camps also Focus Principally on Skill Development**

Now, let's turn to the topic of skill development, the second part of my hypothesis. Most youth sports camps market themselves as teaching skills in a fun environment for kids. Most often, parents enroll their children in the "off season" for the sport they are playing, especially in the summer.

Camps emphasize learning, skills, and fun, just what kids need most. These are quotes from some sports camps' websites:

"[C]oaches are carefully selected by Challenger from over two thousand potential candidates. They are all committed and talented coaches, but more importantly they love children and understand how we teach new skills, build confidence and have fun all at the same time!" (Challenger Sports Soccer Camps)

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<sup>1</sup> JIM THOMPSON, *THE DOUBLE-GOAL COACH* 5 (2003).

“For the youngest players just beginning the game, our programs focus on fun, exciting games to build confidence and teach the fundamentals, with maximum participation in a fun oriented environment.” (UK International Soccer Camps)

“Sports are FUN, but they are more fun when you get better! Our professional, passionate, and positive coaches will help your child become a better player and a more inspired athlete. Camp provides the perfect opportunity to improve skills, make new friends, laugh hard, and smile a lot.” (US Sports Camps)

Meanwhile, traditional youth sports leagues, especially more competitive leagues, emphasize formal schedules of games, wins and losses, standings and play-offs, all of which can contribute to more focus on tactical play to win games. If you’re a paid coach in a travel league, for example, it’s hard to justify next season’s coaching fee (if you are rehired at all) after posting a poor win-loss record this season.

John O’Sullivan, author of *Changing the Game*, says this very well in a 2013 online article (*Youth Soccer Insider* from [www.socceramerica.com](http://www.socceramerica.com)):

“America is obsessed with rankings. From NCAA football and basketball to top high school recruits across the sporting spectrum, the American sports fan has no shortage of statistics and ratings in every professional and college sport. Unfortunately, team rankings have leached into youth sports as well, where any benefit they bring is far outweighed by the negative consequences of rating young athletes and teams during their developmental years...On Oct. 14 (2013), the web site GotSoccer.com, the most well-known youth soccer ranking site, decided to expand its ratings and begin ranking 9- and 10-year-old soccer teams in both small-sided and full-sided game categories. In the words of CEO Gavin Owen-Thomas, ‘We’ve always received a tremendous number of requests to rank the younger ages and I believe the time is now right.’ Really? Right for what? Right for who? It’s certainly not right for the kids who are actually playing!”

I think this says it all.

### **A Chart Summarizing How the Sports Camp Model Can Address Youth Sports Issues**

I think a summary chart is helpful to show how the sports camp model can provide a solution for what ails youth sports. The chart is at the end of this chapter and contains four key elements, going from left to right:

- \* A statement of the underlying problem as discussed in Chapter 1, the adultification of kids’ sports.
- \* A summary of the specific impact of adultification, including over-emphasis on tactics versus fundamental skills, over-invested parents, too many elite teams at young ages, over-use injuries and limited opportunities for later bloomers.
- \* The solution: changing the very structure of youth sports programs. This really *redefines how adults and kids interact in the context of a new program*. Sports camps are a very different approach for this interaction.
- \* Finally how sports camps create a better alternative for kids.

I think it’s a handy framework and hopefully you will too. It puts into context the importance of the camp model and why my new research was so important.

## **My Decision to Conduct New Research on Skill Development: a Youth Sports Day Camp Environment versus Traditional Travel League Play**

Because sports camps for kids focus mainly on developing skills, and traditional youth sports leagues typically focus on other objectives such as wins and losses, I decided to quantify the impact of these two play models on skill development. For this study, I selected a local community's in-season travel basketball program and compared it to a summer youth basketball day camp (I live in the Greater Boston area). I focused on 5th to 8th graders because many experts consider these years to be a prime learning period for kids (as do I).

**The travel basketball program:** This was selected from a local Boston suburb and studied during the winter, 2014 season. The program had three teams of 5th and 6th graders, totaling 27 players. I will keep the community's name confidential in this book, but I am happy to discuss the study further with anyone who contacts me for additional information. I selected this program because I believe it reflects a typical travel basketball program. The next chapter provides details about the study.

**The youth basketball camp:** This camp was selected from among a number of quality summer day camps that operate in the Greater Boston area. One of the important reasons I selected this camp is that, unlike many summer camps that run for one or two weeks, with sessions every day, this one ran for several weeks over the summer with two sessions each week. Therefore, it closely matched the format of a traditional league program whose practices and games are spread out over a number of weeks. This study involved 18 players during the summer of 2014. I am also keeping the name of this camp confidential in this book, but again feel free to contact me for further information. Again, study details will be in the following chapter.

In a nutshell, I sought to quantify the change in the kids' fundamental dribbling, passing, and shooting skills on a pre-post basis (that is, the change from the first session to the last). The study encompassed 20 hours of elapsed playing time across practices and games for the travel program, and also for the summer camp sessions, the latter included skill sessions and training scrimmages/games. My findings are presented in the next chapter. *Net, net though I will say this: The Model Matters!*

### **Questions about the Study and Methodology**

As soon as anyone announces a study, questions arise about how it was conducted, including the overall study design as well as statistical aspects such as size of the sample, controls, and measures of validity. I will be quite up front about the scope and characteristics of this study.

Conducting any quantitative study of how kids' skills change in a program is very challenging because you need the program directors, coaches, and parents to agree to participate. That's not as easy as it may sound because any study seeks to place parameters around a "live" program that people have paid for. They may be willing to cooperate, but may not simply agree to alter their program to fit all of the design parameters just because you're doing a study. So you have to find a program on an "as is" basis that matches the play model to be examined as closely as possible. The program's coordinators must also agree to maintain its overall conditions as much as possible, and also allow you to run the kids through skill assessment exercises and data collection before and after the selected study period. In addition, the coaches involved have to agree to keep track of attendance and the play conditions.

So when you conduct say a medical study at a hospital or clinic, you have patients who gladly want to participate and conditions can be maintained and data collection made in very controlled conditions. Qualitative surveys on people's opinions are pretty easy as well, especially these days with a number of easy-to-use, inexpensive online services to choose from.

But not so gathering data on kids in actual "live" programs. Ideally it would be great to set up and enroll children in pure "laboratory" study programs, but the issue is that parents may fear "wasting" a season or camp (that they have to pay for) if they believe the study for some reason might short-change their kids progress.

Getting parents to sign up just for a special study would then likely mean that the researcher would have to pay for the study program (at a significant cost); and that any parent agreeing to participate is potentially giving up an alternative program that they may otherwise have chosen. Studying children in an academic setting is easier because tests are regularly administered and scores are kept. Studying how kids play, and measuring the impact on their skills, in a youth sports setting is much more challenging.

Mountains of statistics are kept, of course, in the big time sports you watch on TV – heck, you need to give those commentators lots to talk about. But ask a typical youth coach if he or she has the numbers for their kids beyond points scored. The vast, vast majority just don't. And points scored is not the proper measure for children for assessing progress their on key developmental skills. In soccer, for example, only a very few kids ever score goals while the majority have other roles, such as trying to control possession and pass at midfield, or be effective on defense. In basketball, while all kids can potentially shoot and score, the actual shooting percentage among kids is very, very low and also highly variable; therefore it is difficult to use shots taken and made as a reliable measure of performance. For younger players, ball handling and passing is much more important anyway. I can talk about other sports as well, but hopefully you get the point.

These points being made, I know of no other study in the U.S. that has attempted to quantify the impact of different play models on kids' skills. Many other studies (usually survey research) have sought to measure what kids see as important (such as the Michigan State University Institute of Youth Sports research on what kids think is most important, Seefeldt and Ewing), coaching effectiveness from parents and children's viewpoints (Drs. Smoll and Smith, at the University of Washington), and many others over the past two to three decades.

Qualitative studies have great value to be sure. But what if you could say to a parent that one type of program will produce superior skills over another? Which would you choose?

Here are some important questions that readers will likely ask, and that I will now seek to answer in advance:

**This is only one study, and is one enough to draw conclusions?** This, of course, is a great question. Yes the next chapter will present one study, and I believe that the results provide *directional* learning for youth sports programs to consider carefully. Because I know of no other similar studies, I hope that this one will spur other researchers to conduct more studies, because this type of data is important to evaluating youth sports programs.

**Is the study size large enough, that is, is it a representative sample?** Mine is a smaller study, to be sure, and I would prefer sample sizes that would range from 30 to 50 kids (or even higher). But it's logistically more difficult to line up programs of that size

in the selected age groups, because larger size means more team managers, coaches, and parents, plus a larger scale of data collection. Many directional studies in medical research have smaller numbers of participants, but these studies have value if they produce evidence that the test group benefits over the control. Directional studies can lead to larger studies and ultimately new treatments.

**The research involved youth basketball. Can the findings be applied to other youth sports?** As the first quantitative study of its kind, I cannot say for sure that basketball research is valid for other sports. But based on my many years of experience, my hypothesis is that this study's learning would apply to soccer, lacrosse, and hockey as team sports, as they have similar characteristics to basketball as more free-flowing games. Sports such as baseball and football, which are based more on fixed plays, would likely need their own studies.

**Were the programs' parameters tightly controlled?** I believe that each program studied was typical of its genre. The travel program had a mix of practices and games each week; the camp similarly consisted of two sessions each week, one a training session and the other an informal game on a different day. The data on the players' skills were collected from each program for 20 hours worth of total activity time. Each program's activities as observed were what I expected, with the travel program consisting of experienced volunteer coaches, higher-skilled players (for their ages), and the standard format of youth league games. The camp was run by a director with many years of experience, assisted by local trainers hired to help with drills and other camp activities. Neither program encompassed any atypical features, such as celebrity trainers or coaches. I knew each program's components but could not micro-manage the specific drills and skill activities. This mix is actually good because it cannot be said that each program's particulars were "engineered" to produce a desired result.

**I conducted the study, so could I try to make the results work just to support this new book?** This is always a question the skeptics can ask, and it is not a totally unreasonable one. I guess the best thing I can say is that I am putting my reputation and experience behind this study, and others I have conducted in prior years. I am writing about a study that I believe represents an honest effort to evaluate two play models and their impact on children in sports. I will feature this study in upcoming speaking engagements. I guess that with any new research, the question will arise about not only how it was conducted but also who conducted it. A long-time analyst, with whom I have worked for years, filmed the exercises that we used for skill measurement. He and I both reviewed the videos in the evaluation process, so we had more than one set of eyes. Each skill was broken down into several very specific sub-elements that were each scored, in order to produce a total score for each skill (dribbling, passing, lay-ups).

Again, the intent here is to present some unique research and start a broader (and I hope national) conversation. I hope that more studies by others will follow.

With these comments in mind, Chapter 6 explains the study in detail and presents the findings. Again, please read on.



# HOW A SPORTS CAMP MODEL CAN CHANGE YOUTH SPORTS

**The Underlying Problem**

*Adults took over youth sports from the kids:*

Caused "adultification" where over-involved parents and volunteers used adult-level reference points to design and operate highly structured fixed team-league programs that are *very different* from the natural way kids used to play

**Specific Impact**

- An over-emphasis on tactical and game outcomes at expense of learning fundamental technical skills

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- Over-structured play environment along with over-invested parents (Dr. Murphy)

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- Elite teams at young ages

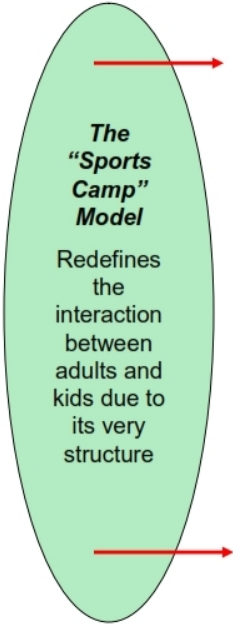
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- Over-use injuries from year-round play

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- Late bloomers cut out

**"Structural" Solution**



**How the Camp Model Works**

- Kids are less formally organized & focus on learning skills and appropriate competition
- Camps create superior technical skills
- Any adult volunteers free to collaborate and not compete through kids
- Informal play groups result in less adult over-investment
- Kids can be grouped by appropriate skill levels without politics of "a" and "b" levels
- Kids are not "pre-selected" by camps - needs of all ability levels can be served
- Adults less likely to "hang around" for every event - kids take more ownership
- Overall less pressured environment

## CHAPTER 6: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF THE IMPACT ON KIDS' SKILLS -- SPORTS CAMP MODEL VERSUS TRADITIONAL TEAM-LEAGUE MODEL

This chapter's title admittedly is a mouthful, but it accurately describes the study I conducted in 2014. So let's get right to the specifics.

### Selecting the Programs to Study

For the "control" program, I selected what I believe represents a typical community travel basketball organization. This comes from my many years of experience in youth sports, speaking to administrators and communities, visiting and observing programs all over the country, conducting hundreds of coaches' training clinics, and serving on my home town's youth basketball board for almost two decades.

I would certainly love to study both models by observing several programs within each type in various parts of the country. But as I discussed in the previous chapter, the challenge is getting program administrators to agree to a study, make teams available, and the whole host of other factors covered in Chapter 5.

For this study, selecting a local program was important because it made the program easily accessible. I contacted several communities before both a local travel basketball program, and a youth basketball camp provider, agreed to participate.

**The travel basketball program** is administered by Dan, a paid recreation program supervisor for his community. The program has had the usual assortment of boys and girls teams from fourth grade through eighth, and depending on the number players enrolled, there is generally an "A" and "B" team in each grade. The players have tried out from among kids in the recreational program. They play a set schedule of league games with surrounding communities in greater Boston from December through March. The typical week had a one-hour practice in a local school gym, and a one-hour game slot which consisted of four eight-minute quarters, plus warm-ups and half-time (so most of the hour is actually used). Coaches were experienced parent volunteers. I have known Dan for year and he runs a great program.

**The summer basketball camp** enrolled travel-level players and has been run by Joe, a local community college basketball coach for ten years who has also coached in-town teams, travel and AAU teams. He has been involved in basketball as a player, coach and parent for over 50 years, and is supported by his son and a staff of experienced, younger former high school and local college players. For eight weeks, the camp hosted one 90-minute training session each week plus a one-hour informal game. I have also known Joe for many years, and he does a great job.

Note that knowing the administrators of the two programs certainly helped in gaining their agreement to participate. It also was important in that I had confidence that each program was well run, and represented its play model well. A larger study would involve selecting communities I didn't know, and it's possible that any given program that you are not familiar with might yield unrepresentative results simply because it's a crummy program. If you want to conduct this kind of study, I feel it's critical to know each program is a good one.

## The Study's Key Criteria

There were several important criteria:

**Total time period:** I studied the players for 20 hours of total elapsed activity time. The travel players had approximately an equal mix of practices and games, and the summer camp had a 90-minute training session and a 60-minute game session each week. In the camp, then, about 60% of the total time was skills training and 40% informal games. This mix is slightly different from the travel program, but camps by nature spend more time on skills and drills. I selected the 20-hour time period as a minimum during which, based on my experience, skills improvement can be observed at the youth level. We just won't see a big jump in 5 or 10 hours. On the other hand, 25 to 30 hours may exceed the length of some single seasons and camps, so I selected 20 as a reasonable number. If a noticeable change in skills does not occur by 20 hours for most youngsters, something is wrong.

**Nature of the time period:** This is important because any travel/game program will extend over several weeks, but a camp can consist of a number of hours all crammed into one or two weeks. The camp I selected ran over several weeks during the summer, two sessions each week, so it was very similar in that respect to a game-league arrangement. I wanted to avoid the issue of whether packing 20 hours of camp activity in a short time period could affect the results. This is because it might be argued that some "learning decay" occurs when activities are spread out over several weeks. We do not yet have a quantitative youth sports study that looks at the impact of activity hours relative to elapsed time period, but this arrangement basically avoided that issue.

**The players' ages:** The travel teams were made up of 5th and 6th graders, and the camp program consisted of mainly 6th, 7th and 8th graders. The campers had just completed 5th, 6th and 7th grades respectively. While not an exact match, the just-graduated 5th and 6th graders match up to the travel players except for a few months' difference, and the 7th graders were basically only one year older. The relative increase in skills from a base level was ultimately assessed, so that while a 5th or 6th grader will start from a lower base than a 7th grader, the relative increase is really what matters. Both ages have plenty of room to grow, and kids have a broad range of abilities.

**Type of pre-post activities and skill evaluations:** Based on my experience watching thousands of kids of all ages play basketball, I decided to perform three evaluation exercises to set a base, and then compare the post measurement to, 20 elapsed hours later. I chose one dribbling, one passing, and one shooting exercise, these performed by each player alone. These exercises are described below. Each player was filmed doing each of the three exercises, and the video clips were compared and scored on a pre-post basis. I considered also looking at the players while they scrimmaged or played games, but I decided to stick with only skill drills because on any given day, and in any given part of a game, any player can have a good or bad period, and individual performance is more variable for younger players (let alone high school and even college players). In addition, an evaluation while playing can be very subjective.

## **The Number and Ages of the Players, and the Study's Timeframe**

### **Travel Program**

In the travel program, I studied three teams -- an A and a B team of 5th grade boys, and one B team of 6th grade boys. My key objective was to look at players above the pure recreational level, where the commitment to improving skills is higher, and overall playing ability is better than typical recreational programs. The kids' foundation skills are also higher. I selected the 5th and 6th grade ages as a middle range in youth basketball, which typically runs from 3rd grade to 8th, when kids either "graduate" to high school play, continue playing recreationally, or drop out.

Ideally I would have liked to have a girls team included in the study, but these were the available teams that agreed to participate. Boys and girls are different, but at this stage I would not say there are any inherent differences in the relative rates in which either gender can learn for a given period of activity time.

Nineteen 5th grade boys, and eight 6th grade boys, met the study criteria of completing 20 hours of total activity time. This again was split between practices and games over a period of six weeks during January and February of 2014. Four weeks had three one-hour activities, either practices and/or games, and two of the weeks had four. The three teams had a total of 31 players, but four kids were not included in the study results because of absences.

### **Summer Basketball Camp**

A wide variety of kids enrolled in the camp program, ranging from 4th to 8th grade, with most of the players in the 6th to 8th grade range (they had just completed 5th to 7th grade). I was able to measure 18 total players -- two who were younger going into 4th grade, four who were going into 6th grade, six who were going into 7th grade, and six who were going into 8th grade. Most were boys, except three of the 7th graders were girls.

Ten of the 18 players then had just completed 5th and 6th grade, so they were close in age to the boys studied from the travel teams. Two of the kids were younger, and the other six were a year older because they had just completed 7th grade. The number of girls turned out to be small, but comparing mostly boys from the camp program made sense.

These 18 kids met the criteria of 20 hours of total activity time over 8 weeks during June and July, 2014.

### **Exercises Used to Evaluate Skills**

Coaches can use all kinds of drills to assess a player's skill level at a given age. From the many years I have watched games and conducted clinics, I selected three drills that I believe (a) represent a player's development at a given point, and (b) can show how development can change and potentially improve over a 20-hour period. The latter consideration is especially important because some skills are too advanced to be helpful if the vast majority of kids of a given age are generally not very good at them. Showing change would be difficult and the value for the study low.

For example, kids' shooting ability at younger ages is very poor because they are nowhere near fully grown, their strength is low, and their form is not good. A typical 6th grader at best would be lucky to average 15% shooting success at any real distance from the basket while actually

playing. This of course is low in the absolute, so measuring meaningful change is difficult. An average 6th grade player might hit 10% of shots from a distance of 10 feet while moving in a game; a below-average player would be at 7-8%, and above average at 12-15%. Only rarely would a player at this age consistently shoot 20% from that range. Plus most kids' shooting percentages at this age are highly varied from game to game, and week to week.

If a child is measured at 10% shooting for 10 shots (1 of 10) and then hits 20% for the next 10 (2 of 10), does that mean he improved 100%? Not at all. There is a wide range of variation and little consistency among kids, and at a very low base level. Shooting is a helpful indicator at advanced levels -- good high school players, college and the pros -- but shooting is a virtually useless indicator at young ages because the kids aren't tall enough, and strong enough, to develop much form. In most cases, they mainly heave up the ball and hope it goes in.

An activity that offers a younger player a higher chance of success provides a much more meaningful measure. For example, by the time kids reach 5th and 6th grade, many can dribble competently so evaluating dribbling movement is a much better choice. The same holds true with passing and other types of fundamental movement, both with and without the ball.

With these considerations in mind, the three skill activities I selected were:

1. Dribbling with a ball in control through a series of chairs in line;
2. Throwing out a ball, catching it off the bounce and making a controlled jump stop, then passing it around a fixed object off a wall, and attempting to catch the return bounce; and
3. Performing a lay-up by putting up the ball to a marked spot on a wall (not a basket).

I'll briefly describe why I selected each of these:

**Dribbling through chairs with control:** Dribbling is basketball's most fundamental ball skill, especially at the youth level. Most kids at the ages I studied have pretty decent dribbling skills, but of course there is a broad range. Some children can competently put together a series of dozens of dribbles without a misstep, but others may make only a few. This exercise was designed to observe how the players handled the ball while cross-over dribbling in between a series of three chairs, dribbling up the line of chairs and back twice. This included the reverse transition move at the end of the row of chairs in order to dribble back in the other direction.

This skill shows hand-to-ball control, including positioning of the fingers to the surface of the ball, movement of the hand and ball together, placement of the dribble dynamically relative to the player's body movement, the height of the dribble, body positioning (is the ball low and are the player's knees bent?), lateral transition movement by the player, and cross-over dribbling ability. Coaches can potentially work on all of these discrete skills in either a team-based or sports camp environment. The set up of the drill is shown in Picture 1 below.



**Picture 1 – Dribbling through Chairs**

**Throwing out a ball, catching it on the bounce with a jump stop, and stepping up to and passing around a fixed object:** Whenever I choose skills for younger players, I consider the effect of gravity. Dribbling is the easiest skill because the player is going *with* gravity as the ball bounces between his or her hand and the court. There is no force on the ball needed to work against gravity. With passing, a player must not only try to control the ball's direction and placement, but also play the ball with sufficient force to successfully overcome gravity so that it goes the desired distance. Passing may seem simple for an older player (and it should be), but it still challenges developing children. This is why passing became the second skill I used to measure before-and-after progress.

This activity actually consisted of a four discrete *serial* skills, and it is more complicated than it sounds. Players were asked to stand a two-step distance from a fixed object (a step ladder representing a stationary opponent) placed near a wall, and do four things: (1) throw out a ball a step in front of them using a reverse spin, (2) make a clean jump stop forward to catch the ball off the bounce, (3) make (ideally) a one-footed step forward to the side of the ladder, and bounce pass the ball around and behind it to the wall, trying to hit the wall at the height of a player's hands, and (4) catch the ball off of the return bounce from the wall.

These skills show the player's judgment on how far to throw out the ball and with a proper backspin, so it can be caught off a single bounce with two hands, and with a single jump stop. After the player catches the ball, he must take a step forward into position to pass the ball around the ladder (again representing an opposing player), and make a bounce pass around and behind the ladder to a point on the wall that is close to the height of a teammate's hands. Finally, the return bounce off the wall should be caught.

Therefore several skills are included, any or all of which can be improved by practices and games. A snapshot of the passing is shown in Picture 2 below.



**Picture 2 – Passing around a Fixed Object**

**Performing a lay-up off a wall:** This final skill requires the most work against gravity because the player must move with the ball upward, and attempt to lay it up off the wall at a target spot, represented by a taped “X” on the wall. Lay-ups are the most difficult skill for younger players. They involve making a proper dribble run with good form, timing the jump to the basket, moving off and up from the proper foot, laying the ball up with the hand -- with the proper force and technique -- so the ball goes smoothly into the basket and does not bounce off the backboard away from the rim.

Many inexperienced coaches have younger kids warm up in a lay-up line rather than do more fundamental skills that work better with gravity. Kids will not typically perform a good lay-up until they gain height and strength in middle school and early high school. So I did not use an actual basket, which is more difficult to try to sink than hitting a point on a wall. In addition, using the target on the wall removes any worry about making the basket as opposed to showing form.

This drill shows a player’s ability to make a smooth and well-timed dribbling run to the basket. The player must decide when to begin the jump move, must master the quality of the jump itself off the proper foot, and must manage the hand motion with the ball.

Again, several serial skills are involved, and practices and games can improve one or more of these skills. A snapshot of the lay-up is shown in Picture 3 below.



**Picture 3 – Lay-up off the Wall and at a Target**

### **How the Data Was Captured, and Prepared for Review and Analysis**

Each player from both study groups -- the travel program and the camp -- was put through the three drills on a pre-post basis, with approximately 20 hours of total activity time (practices, training sessions, scrimmages, and games) between the pre and post measurements.

Each player's three drills were captured on video, close up, so that we could closely watch and evaluate the skills. The video camera was set up (a) to be in the best position to "see" the player's skills while performing the activity, and (b) to be as unobtrusive as possible.

The video for each player was edited to show only the skill activities in six segments (the three drills, each pre and post). The clips for each player were arranged to show each skill in succession on a pre-post basis (dribbling pre was followed by dribbling post, and so on) so that we could quickly compare and evaluate the player's performance for each skill.

We assembled the skill evaluations on worksheets, and compared the pre and post data (the scores) for each player. Pre and post averages for the total player groups were also calculated.

The size of the groups was not large, and certainly as I have said I hope that larger studies will be conducted in the future. But this study is a beginning, and my goal has been to provide directional results and recommendations, and to create a new and national conversation about the best play model for kids.

### **How These Exercises Were Evaluated and Scored**

I used the video to review each player's performance in each of the three drills, pre and post. So I had a total of six video clips per player, and I compared the pre and post for each drill side by side. The drills were scored on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very unskilled, 2 below average, 3 average, 4 above average, and 5 markedly above average. The ratings took into account the child's age and where, based on my experience, the child should be at that age. Half-points were used to discriminate further when such finer gradations seemed warranted (2.5, 3.5, and so forth).



Most kids fall into the 2 to 4 range. I observed a very few 1's or 1.5's which show very deficient coordination and ability, and a handful of 4.5's. No child was observed as a 5 in the study, and such a child would have to be basically a "prodigy" at a very young age. These are very few and far between.

The most important preamble to rating younger kids is that their skills are all well below what I would consider proficient in any absolute sense – and that's okay because after all they're kids! After conducting hundreds of clinics and watching many more youth basketball games, I have never witnessed a polished middle-school game, let alone a polished game by elementary school-age players.

Having said all of this, kids' skills do grow and evolve, and we can measure progress even though they are not very good in an absolute sense.

In looking at each skill, I "segmented" the activity into several components. Take dribbling through the chairs, for example; with a detailed look, one can see these sub-skills using the criteria, here framed as questions:

- \* Hand control of the ball -- Are fingertips used?
- \* Height of the ball -- At waist or below?
- \* Knee position -- Bent properly or too straight?
- \* Head position -- Up mostly?
- \* Side-to-side body movement -- Controlled and smooth?
- \* Cross-over motion -- Controlled and smooth?

Ball control can be seen in terms of how the hand interacts with the surface of the ball. Slapping the ball is very common at younger ages and among unskilled players. The transition to smooth fingertip control takes time, and even elementary school players on travel teams are still learning this control. Kids often dribble the ball too high, which impedes speed and control. A huge problem, which also applies all too often to older players (even in high school and college), is not sufficiently bending the knees to maximize control over the body while playing. Head position needs to be up; too many younger players (and older ones too) look down as they dribble. It's obvious why this is so critical to playing the game, in order to see what is going on, and quickly assess options and make the next movement with the ball. Both head and knee position tie into how players move laterally. Cross-over technique provides insight into a player's ability to use both hands in a coordinated fashion.

For passing around the object, these were the key elements:

- \* Bounce pass throw out -- Spin and distance good?
- \* Catch and jump stop -- Clean and controlled?
- \* Body position for the pass -- Lower and step around?
- \* Pass height around the ladder -- Middle of body, or below?
- \* Pass around back of the ladder -- Yes, or off to one side?
- \* Catch passed ball off the wall -- Good catch or not?

The techniques of the throwing the ball out by the player involve a reverse spin so the ball will bounce close to where the player will next make a catch off the bounce, and then hopefully a clean jump stop. The next skill is the correct body position to make the pass around the stationary object (the ladder that represents a stationary opponent) which includes bending the knees and maintaining hand position on the ball. The pass should be made at a lower height so that it would go under the arms of a defending opponent. It should also be made around and behind and not simply off to the side. As the drill was conducted near to the wall of the gym, the

pass should also be made with sufficient bounce so that it can reflect back close to the passer's hands, and so that a catch can be made.

As you can see, the exercise may look simple but several detailed serial "sub-skills" combine when a player performs this drill correctly.

And for lay-ups off the wall, the important aspects were:

- \* Dribble to the wall -- Controlled and smooth?
- \* Lay-up technique -- Smooth off of one foot?
- \* Release of the ball -- One hand or two?
- \* Accuracy of placement -- Close to the "X" or not?

I used an "X" taped to the gym wall as the lay-up target for the players to aim the ball. I wanted to focus more on the technique than on having the kids worry about trying to make the basket. The dribble to the wall is not unlike regular dribbling on the floor, but while you dribble you have to set up your jump, so there is an added element of skill. The jump technique is well known and very important, including the basics of jumping off the proper foot and, in the case of older and taller players, seeking to release the ball with one hand versus two. Then finally, the accuracy of placement is controlled by the hand position and the release of the ball.

In assessing the players, then, I considered all of these specific factors to develop three scores, one for each skill, and on a pre-post basis. I will discuss the scores in the next chapter, which reports the results of the study, and drives the conclusions and recommendations.

### **How Much Can Someone Actually Improve in 20 Hours of Play Activity?**

This is a unique study, rating how kids perform and improve according to their play model. A key element in formulating a hypothesis is how much can kids in an ideal world actually improve in 20 hours of activity? And why is 20 hours an important guidepost?

If we enroll our child in a program, whether a travel team or sports camp, 20 hours covers 10 weeks of travel team play with a one-hour practice and one-hour game time slot each week (or less weeks if there are more activity periods each week). That's a pretty typical season. For a sports camp, that's a half day of training for an entire week. We could use a longer period, but if most kids do not measurably improve in 20 hours of play, there's a problem with the activity's structure and/or the nature and quality of the instruction itself. Even without adult intervention, we would expect that kids would get somewhat better on their own after playing for 20 hours.

How much improvement can we reasonably expect? We hope it's more than zero, but it definitely won't be 50%. The improvement falls somewhere in between. But should it be 5%, 10%, 15%, 20%, 25%? This is a critical question for any youth sports coach or parent. The number one concern of kids, and thankfully of most parents, is having fun. This concern can be assessed basically by asking the question "did you have fun?," and by judging the degree and honesty of the answer. "How much did you learn?" is typically the next question. That's much more difficult to answer. The key objective of this study was to answer that very question.

Next we turn to the results. Once again, please read on.

## CHAPTER 7: RESULTS OF THE PILOT STUDY OF A SPORTS CAMP MODEL VERSUS A TRADITIONAL TEAM-LEAGUE MODEL

This chapter presents the study's key result. What did the study show?

**The travel basketball teams:** The total increase in skills, for all 27 players combined in the study, and across the three skills measured, was **+4.5%** for kids who showed an improvement. We found improvement in 19 of the 27 players. (One of the interesting findings among the travel players is that we judged that 8 of the players showed no measurable change. We cannot be sure why this was the case, other than hypothesizing that over-emphasis on preparing for games did not translate into measurable improvement in fundamental skills). This means that the average for all 27 players was even less than +4.5%. I will discuss in detail what this type of result means, given that it appears very low.

**The basketball camp program:** The total increase in skills, for all 18 players in the study combined, and across the three skills measured, was **+15.0%** for kids who showed an improvement. We found improvement in 17 of the 18 players. (In only one player could we not measure a change.)

These numbers mean that the difference was **+10.5** percentage points in favor of the sports camp for kids who showed an improvement. (If we took into account the several travel players who showed no measurable improvement, this gap would be even higher.) At first blush, 10.5% doesn't seem like much. But this percentage gain came after 20 hours of sports activities, or about one season's worth, based on my definition of a season. If we look at what the cumulative effect would be for multiple seasons, or for multiple groups of 20 hours, the differences in improvement become very impressive indeed.

I fully believe that the gain for the sports camp model versus traditional team-league play at younger age levels would likely continue in some fashion over multiple time periods. In two seasons, assuming the skills gain continues at the same pace and difference, the advantage becomes +22% greater; in three seasons, it grows to +35%; and in four seasons, it becomes +49%, *or almost 50% greater!* The method is to multiply 1.105 times itself for however many seasons, or groups of 20 hours, you want to examine; so  $1.105 \times 1.105 = 1.221$  for two seasons = a 22% added gain rounded, and so on.

One season's skills gain for the camp model over the traditional team-league model may seem small, but the cumulative increase over time can be huge. Who would not prefer that kind of gain for their children?

The question does arise: would the 10.5 percentage point skills advantage measured for a 20-hour period continue into successive periods? That's a great question. This study did not look beyond the 20-hour period, and a "longitudinal" study (that is, covering a longer period) would be necessary to answer this question. And I encourage researchers to undertake this kind of study.

We frankly need more research throughout youth sports so that decisions about how to design and conduct programs can be made *based on data* rather than from anecdote or from inertia to simply continue doing what has always been done.

## **Definition of the Skill Ratings**

The skills observed were delineated on a 1 to 5 scale, and in some cases in quarter or half-point increments, with 3 being average for the age and school grade. A 1 rating is basically a score of poor for a very developmental player with possible coordination issues. A 2 rating is below average, or a rating of fair, but still shows some improvement while playing. A 3 rating characterizes the average player for the age group, and where a majority of kids fall. A rating of 4 is above average, i.e. a judgment that the child is very good; players with this score demonstrate superior skills. A rating of 5 would be rare, and reserved for a highly-skilled player who could literally dominate a game. Most players scored between 2 and 4, with only a very few either lower or higher. The ratings reflected a player's age, and not the player's skills on an absolute scale (that is, if you rated youngsters against absolute high level NBA-level skills, every kid would be way less than a 1).

The increase or gain in skill is a simple calculation. For example, a pre-rating of 3.0 for dribbling, and a post-rating of 3.5, translates into a 17% increase. For the vast majority of kids, an increase for any one skill would be a 1/2 or 3/4 of a point at most. One point over a base of 3 is 33%, which would be quite an improvement but not likely for most kids in 20 hours of activity.

A player's total improvement is based on the combination of all three ratings, with each skill receiving equal weight. One might argue that dribbling should receive more weight than shooting because dribbling is a more important skill for younger players. But averaging the three skill activities seems appropriate in a directional study because both travel teams and sports camps should address all skills.

Again, several kids on the travel team showed no improvement. In theory, players should not backslide or show no improvement unless they decide not to play to their ability as the season progresses. No development is possible, but I can attribute these few players' results to the fact that kids' performance can vary in tests. One player in the sports camp also showed zero improvement. However, as I said at the beginning of this chapter, it is possible that in a team-based environment where winning games is a prime focus, some kids may not measurably improve in basic skills, at least in a given period of time. Meanwhile, if kids go to a sports camp and do not get better, the camp is likely doing something wrong.

What seems most appropriate for the purposes of this book, then, is to base each group's total change on kids who demonstrated some degree of improvement. More research is required to delve into the issue of why some kids may not show improvement.

## **Discussion of the Data: Travel Basketball Teams**

The actual data for the travel basketball teams is shown at the end of this chapter as Table 1, with each player listed by first name only. The table shows data on each player's gender, school grade, and the three "pre" measures on the 1 to 5 point scale for each of the three skills observed (as described in Chapter 6). The table then also shows each player's three "post" measures for each of the three skills observed, the total points for pre and post (the three skills added together), and the player's skill percentage increase based on dividing the total points of the post skills by the total for the pre skills.

As I said before, 8 of the 27 players showed no observable or measurable improvement, so I based this group's results on the 19 who showed some positive improvement.

Table 1 lists these 19 players in descending order of percentage improvement, along with their first name and grade (either 5th or 6th grade). The scores for each skill, both pre and post, are shown and in quarter-point increments. The total points from each set of three scores is calculated, one total for pre and one for post, and the percent improvement is calculated by dividing the post total by the pre total.

So for example, Peter showed the greatest gain, at 13.6%, with a pre total of 5.5 points and a post tally of 6.25 points. Sean had one of the lowest at 2.2%, with 11.25 points pre compared with 11.5 points post.

These ratings beg the question of whether a 2.2% gain is meaningful. Sean was already above average in the three skills, and the only skill on video that showed a gain was passing the ball, 3.75 to 4. In reviewing the video for his passing drill, and with the level of detail relative to assessing sub-skills as described in Chapter 6, the specific passing “sub” skill areas that improved were in how he threw out the ball for the initial bounce – with the spin and distance well controlled – and then the catch itself and jump stop, which were performed cleanly. Other aspects of the passing drill were the same. These are important sub skills, and just two of many, so when figured in with all of the others, the calculation is 2.2%. Meanwhile Peter’s improvement was also based on better passing, but to a higher degree.

Why can kids show either a very small measured improvement, or none at all, while playing on a travel team? One reason can be that the videotaping captures only a brief snapshot and the kids might be nervous under pressure. That said, however, when several players show no observed improvement, this finding suggests other factors are at work because not everyone will be nervous.

One or both of two factors I believe can explain the outcomes observed in a travel environment:

1. Coaches’ drills don’t focus on the types of fundamentals I was measuring, that is, drills focus on skills that are too advanced for the player’s age; and/or
2. Coaches spend too much time on tactics to prepare for games, sacrificing more fundamental skills in favor of shooting drills and “executing plays.”

These factors are consistent with what I have observed over the years. At 5th and 6th grades, kids still need a lot of work on aspects of basic dribbling and ball handling, passing technique, and shooting form. Heck, this need is also true of most high school players, even though they start from a higher base.

But most coaches “accept” that the base skills are already okay (for example, “the kid already dribbles well”), so they work on more advanced skills. Advancement may include lots of crossover dribbling, dribbling with two balls, and fancier moves such as dribbling through the legs. This is all great stuff when the foundation skills are well set, but when a player still can improve significantly with one-handed dribbling, why spend too much time on using two hands at once? But “fancier” looks good for the parents and makes coaches feel that they can show that they know what they’re doing.

By spending too much time on tactics to win the “big” game, many coaches also shortchange basic skills. But many coaches want to win, especially in travel leagues. Without winning, it may be difficult to justify why you should coach in the first place. Once again, though, the imbalance between tactics and skills begs us to question the play model itself.

The alternate play model of course is the sports camp. Why is it better for younger kids? Because camps focus on skill improvement and not on winning league games. Young players need to work on their skills first and foremost. Game play won't really be that important until middle school and beyond.

### **Discussion of the Data: Sports Camp**

Table 2 at the end of this chapter shows the actual players' data for the sports camp, with each player again listed by first name only. This table shows data on each player's gender, school grade, the three "pre" measures for the three skills observed (again as described in Chapter 6), the three "post" measures for the three skills, the totals for pre and post, and the player's percentage increase.

17 of the 18 players showed some degree of improvement. Only one showed no measurable improvement.

The sports camp group's average age and grade profile was slightly higher than that of the travel teams. As discussed earlier, it is very difficult to obtain ideal conditions when dealing with actual programs. Most of the players were basically equivalent in age. Remember that while most of the youngest players were going into 6th grade, they had just left 5th grade so they were measured just five months after the 5th graders in the travel team study. Only the six kids going into 8th grade (that is, having just finished 7th) were really a year (or a bit more) older. Based on my experience, and on the fact that improvements were measured relative to age, being older or younger within the 5th to 8th grade range conferred no inherent advantage.

As you can see, some of the percentage improvements at the camp were significantly higher than even the better of the improvements among the travel players. Seven of the campers improved more than the best gain among the travel players.

The biggest single factor I believe in this difference is that a sports camp spends much more time on fundamental drills that address basic skills. So if the passing mechanics are better, it's because the passing drills focused on those mechanics, i.e., body position, judgment of passing around an opponent, and how the ball is released and caught.

Pure and simple, sports camps produce better fundamental skills because that's what they are supposed to do. Improvement becomes almost a self-fulfilling prophesy. So why study and compare the two models when we know that sports camps are likely to do better? The reason is to quantify this advantage, and thus to identify the *opportunity cost* that a less effective play model exacts on younger players. And as I said before, when this advantage accumulates over a number of seasons, the sports camp model's prize can be huge.

### **Why Does a Sports Camp Outperform a Conventional Team-League Environment?**

Compiling a study's data is only the first step. Because multiple interpretations are possible, the data serves a useful purpose only when the researcher determines the meaning of the numbers found. One of the key factors I have spoken about is that travel programs can focus too much on tactical play versus fundamental skills, but sports camps seek primarily to boost basic skills. The greater focus on tactical play by conventional team-driven programs can potentially have two key effects:

1. These programs generally spend less time on skill activities at practices versus "plays" to win the next game. For example, too much time on the pick-and-roll to try and

score versus better fundamental passing and ball handling drills that help prevent excess turnovers in games.

2. Even for the time these programs spend on skill activities, the type of drills used might be less oriented to the kinds of skills whose continued development is best for younger players. Example, too much time on shooting three-pointers versus put-backs closer to the rim.

But there can be a third factor too, and maybe this is the most important one. Kids who do the drills more often used for tactical team-based play may find them too routine and inherently less fun. By definition, tactical drills are more task-driven. Yet melding skills with fun games at younger ages better serves the cause of continuing skill development.

Kids might simply pay less attention to tactically-driven drills and thus might not gain much new learning. This key question must be asked: *does say a 25% reduction from maximum possible attention to detail in a more task-driven drill lessen its ability to create new learning by a disproportionate amount?* So, if a child is 25% below his or her maximum focus, could this deficiency mean a 50% drop in learning value (in other words, is it a curvilinear relationship)? Can this deficiency help explain why the study found a bit less than a 5% average gain for the travel kids?

I can only hypothesize this cause-and-effect, which certainly presents a more specific area that merits further research. Think of the issue this way: when kids don't pay attention in the classroom, how much learning do they lose that day? How much do children underperform when they have a boring teacher? Conventional wisdom is that some learning is lost and it's probably not insignificant. By the same token, does a similar effect happen in youth sports when drills for younger kids are too focused on winning the next game (and thus are potentially more task oriented), and not focused enough on learning through activities that also maximize fun? Based on my many years of experience observing youth players, I personally believe that the answer is yes.

### **So What Should We Do Given the Study's Findings?**

Based on what the study as well as my experience, I have two recommendations:

**First, more research with larger studies and additional factors is needed.** I have pointed out already that the number of players in my study is not as high as would be ideal statistically. Yet I believe that the results are directionally instructive and can justify a call to action. A true longitudinal study (one carried out over a period of years) is also needed to examine how one season's results might be extrapolated across multiple seasons or years. Two factors involving kids can impact the effect of play models over time:

**Children's growth and development, as measured by their physically developed age, can vary greatly when compared to their chronological age.** In general, there can be up to a 5-year variation in physical development as compared to child's chronological age. We have all seen this -- kids at 11 who look like they are in late middle school, while conversely some 8th graders look like they are still in elementary school. The impact of a play model on a child of a given chronological age may be influenced by the child's development age. The more developed young athlete may benefit from a camp model more over successive seasons due to the very fact he or she is already stronger and more adept in other ways than chronological peers. Again,

studies over a longer time period are needed to incorporate the possible separation of kids by physical development within a study.

**The specific age at which a child enters puberty has a huge impact on skill development.** For example, when a boy hits puberty, his size, strength and speed will develop with the increase in testosterone. This increase will impact his performance especially in sports such as basketball and football where height, weight and strength are key factors. For girls, puberty generally means a rapid increase in height but muscle development may lag for a year or two. Across both genders, the height versus weight distribution will change, affecting balance and coordination. I often say that kids have to grow into their bodies during and following puberty, so the “gawky” taller kid in 6th grade may develop into the far stronger and coordinated one in 8th grade, and so on. This growth also has a huge impact on performance.

With variables such as these, I strongly invite other researchers to explore more specific issues about learning absorption, retention, and development by constructing larger studies with such other factors as more players and other team sports, different age groups, and other ways to measure skills. A thorough discussion of the many aspects of additional study design is beyond the scope of this book, but let’s be clear: I have seen enough to date, combined with my own experience, to issue a call for action in the best interests of younger players.

**Second, we can begin to change the play model for younger kids now.** If this study’s results are anything close to what future studies could show, the 10+% difference in skills in favor of camps comes out to almost a 50% greater gain after just four periods of 20-hour sports activity. That’s good news. But I have even two better pieces of news:

**1. The camp model presents *no* downside for younger kids.** Their skills certainly won’t get worse by moving from a team-league based model, and a camp-style environment still teaches them to play the game.

**2. There is a *huge* upside to improve the play environment by addressing most or all of the sins of youth sports that I discussed in the early chapters.** There can be:

- \* Far fewer out-of-control parents and coaches who are over-invested in the outcome of kids’ games;
- \* Far fewer kids verbally abused by parents or coaches on the sidelines;
- \* Much less emphasis on winning and losing; and
- \* Much less exclusion of kids who might be later bloomers.

This healthy combination of benefits can address all the other as-yet-unsolved issues that drain the fun from sports for so many kids, and induce too many of them to quit prematurely.

**Imagine there is a way to truly fix youth sports with a model that eliminates these sins *and* drives better skills for kids.** It just doesn’t get any better than that!

## The Next Chapter

Chapter 8 will now briefly discuss two other studies I have conducted in recent years. Each one also showed the positive impact of an alternative play model versus a more conventional approach. I base my recommendations not just on the most recent study, but also on the outcomes of these two earlier ones. *This shows that the model matters.* Chapter 9 will then discuss specifics about how I would change the play model in a typical community.



**DATA TABLES**  
**Table 1**

<b>TRAVEL BASKETBALL PROGRAM</b>						<b>Pre-Post CONTROL Scores</b>					
19 players with measured improvement total on 3 boys teams, 5 <sup>th</sup> & 6 <sup>th</sup> grade						PRE video on 1-16-14		POST video on 2-27-14			
20 hours total activity comprised of practices and games											
<b>% Gain in Descending Order</b>											
<b>Player Name</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>PRE SCORES</b>					<b>POST SCORES</b>				<b>% Gain</b>
		<b>Dribble</b>	<b>Pass</b>	<b>Layup</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>Dribble</b>	<b>Pass</b>	<b>Layup</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	
Peter	5	2.25	1.75	1.50	<b>5.50</b>		2.25	2.50	1.50	<b>6.25</b>	<b>13.6%</b>
Josh	6	2.00	2.25	3.00	<b>7.25</b>		2.75	2.25	3.00	<b>8.00</b>	<b>10.3%</b>
Ryan	6	2.50	2.25	2.50	<b>7.25</b>		2.50	2.75	2.75	<b>8.00</b>	<b>10.3%</b>
Dennis	5	3.00	2.25	3.25	<b>8.50</b>		3.00	3.00	3.25	<b>9.25</b>	<b>8.8%</b>
Stratis	5	3.00	2.75	3.50	<b>9.25</b>		3.25	3.25	3.50	<b>10.00</b>	<b>8.1%</b>
Rory	6	2.75	3.00	3.25	<b>9.00</b>		3.00	3.25	3.25	<b>9.50</b>	<b>5.6%</b>
Matt	6	3.00	3.00	3.50	<b>9.50</b>	#	3.50	3.00	3.50	<b>10.00</b>	<b>5.3%</b>
Adam	5	3.75	3.00	3.75	<b>10.50</b>		3.75	3.50	3.75	<b>11.00</b>	<b>4.8%</b>
Ernest	5	3.00	3.00	2.75	<b>8.75</b>		3.00	3.00	3.00	<b>9.00</b>	<b>2.9%</b>
James	6	3.00	3.00	2.75	<b>8.75</b>		3.50	2.75	2.75	<b>9.00</b>	<b>2.9%</b>
Henry	5	2.50	3.00	3.50	<b>9.00</b>		2.50	3.25	3.50	<b>9.25</b>	<b>2.8%</b>
Xander	6	3.25	3.50	3.00	<b>9.75</b>		3.50	3.50	3.00	<b>10.00</b>	<b>2.6%</b>
Ben	5	3.25	3.50	3.75	<b>10.50</b>		3.50	3.50	3.75	<b>10.75</b>	<b>2.4%</b>
Noah	6	3.00	3.50	3.75	<b>10.25</b>		3.25	3.50	3.75	<b>10.50</b>	<b>2.4%</b>
Myles	5	4.00	3.25	3.50	<b>10.75</b>		4.00	3.50	3.50	<b>11.00</b>	<b>2.3%</b>
Brendan	5	4.00	3.25	3.50	<b>10.75</b>		4.00	3.75	3.75	<b>11.00</b>	<b>2.2%</b>
David	5	4.00	3.50	4.00	<b>11.50</b>		4.25	3.50	4.00	<b>11.75</b>	<b>2.2%</b>
Sean	5	3.50	3.75	4.00	<b>11.25</b>		3.50	4.00	4.00	<b>11.50</b>	<b>2.2%</b>
<b>Totals</b>					<b>179</b>					<b>187</b>	<b>4.5%</b>

Table 2

YOUTH BASKETBALL SUMMER CAMP							Pre-Post TEST Scores				
17 players with measured improvement total							PRE video on 6-22-14		POST Video on 7-28-14		
20 hours total activity = 1.5 hrs training plus pick-up game each week											
% Gain in Descending Order											
Player Name	Going into	PRE SCORES				POST SCORES				%	
	Grade	Dribble	Pass	Layup	TOTAL	Dribble	Pass	Layup	TOTAL	Gain	
Jarred	6	2.00	2.50	3.00	7.50	3.50	3.00	4.00	10.50	40.0%	
Courtney (girl)	7	1.50	1.50	1.50	4.50	2.00	2.00	2.00	6.00	33.3%	
Tiffany (girl)	7	3.00	2.00	3.00	8.00	3.50	3.00	3.50	10.00	25.0%	
Brett	8	2.00	2.00	2.50	6.50	2.50	2.50	3.00	8.00	23.1%	
Talan	3	3.00	3.00	3.50	9.50	4.50	3.00	4.00	11.50	21.1%	
Connor	6	1.50	1.50	2.00	5.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	6.00	20.0%	
Cameron	8	3.50	3.00	3.00	9.50	4.00	3.50	3.50	11.00	15.8%	
Anthony	7	2.00	3.00	2.50	7.50	2.50	3.00	3.00	8.50	13.3%	
Andrew	6	2.50	3.00	2.50	8.00	3.00	3.50	2.50	9.00	12.5%	
Matt	8	2.00	3.00	3.00	8.00	2.50	3.00	3.50	9.00	12.5%	
Spencer	8	3.00	3.00	3.00	9.00	3.50	3.00	3.50	10.00	11.1%	
Dan	8	3.50	3.50	3.50	10.50	3.50	4.00	4.00	11.50	9.5%	
Kristopher	7	2.00	2.00	1.50	5.50	2.00	2.50	1.50	6.00	9.1%	
John	6	2.50	2.50	3.00	8.00	2.50	3.00	3.00	8.50	6.3%	
Liam	7	2.50	2.50	3.00	8.00	3.00	2.50	3.00	8.50	6.3%	
Evan	4	3.00	3.00	3.00	9.00	3.50	3.00	3.00	9.50	5.6%	
Clay	8	3.00	3.00	3.00	9.00	3.50	3.00	3.00	9.50	5.6%	
<b>Totals</b>					<b>133</b>				<b>153</b>	<b>15.0%</b>	

## **CHAPTER 8: TWO MORE STUDIES WHICH SHOW THAT THE PLAY MODEL MATTERS**

Chapter 7 presented the results of my most recent study, which found that the youth sports camp model outperformed the traditional team-league model for developing specific, measured skills. A few years ago, I also studied the impact on skill development of two basketball play structures specifically on younger children. One structure was half-court, 3-on-3 play, and the other was traditional 5-on-5, full-court play.

Let me make a quick point here: I studied the potential impact of 3-on-3 half-court versus 5-on-5 full-court play in basketball. 3-on-3 is short-sided play and is similar in concept to other youth sports where short-sided play can yield more touches on the ball (or puck) and also more space for kids to maneuver in. These other sports include soccer, lacrosse, hockey, football, and other sports that can enhance skill development by decreasing the number of kids playing in each “game” at one time, while increasing the number of games happening at once. Short-sided play is now well-accepted in most youth soccer and youth hockey programs, but it remains very much the exception in youth basketball. My hope is that youth basketball will catch up by changing.

In 2008, I conducted my first of these studies in Rockland, Massachusetts. I am fine with mentioning the town here because I did not seek to compare one community’s program with another’s, but rather selected an age group and divided the players into two groups. The 2008 study was conducted over several weeks during the post-season, May and June. The program was for basketball skill development, and consisted of training activities and scrimmages. One study group played traditional 5-on-5, with the training activities oriented toward that structure. The other group played only 3-on-3 to allow more touches of the ball without focusing on traditional game play.

The Rockland study, consisting of 5th and 6th grade girls, ran for 10 scheduled sessions over 5 weeks. Each session lasted two hours, for a total of 20 hours of activity.

In 2009, I conducted my second study of 3-on-3 versus 5-on-5 play, this time in my home town of Winchester, Massachusetts. This study consisted of 4th grade boys in the Winchester youth basketball program and took place in January through March. The program consisted of nearly 15 hours of total activity on 9 successive Saturdays, 90 minutes a session. This total was a little less time than my other studies, but I believe it was long enough to produce useful directional learning.

Before I get to the results, let me digress for a few pages about why I believe 3-on-3 play better enables younger kids to better learn basketball, and why I have advocated this structure for many years.

### **Why 3-on-3 Play (Small-Sided) Is Important for Skill Development in Younger Kids**

At the elementary school level, 5-on-5 full court play invariably means that two to four kids dribble and handle the ball a disproportionate amount of the time. The less developed players with fewer gross motor skills end up on the periphery with scant ball-handling opportunities. I’ve seen this in hundreds of youth games over many years.

On any team of 5 players, the most skilled kid, who is only 20% of the team on the floor, may get up to 40% of the ball handling opportunities. The least skilled player may get only 10% or even less. If children don’t get the ball much, they simply can’t learn to play.

This is why I have always advocated playing 3-on-3 at younger ages. In addition, playing “half court” 3-on-3 slows down the pace of the game and allows kids more time to work on fundamental skills including dribbling, footwork, positioning, and passing. By eliminating the transition part of the game that accompanies 5-on-5, full-court play, many of the typical turnovers are also eliminated, which makes every starting possession by a group of players potentially more productive. Kids frantically running up and down the court chasing loose balls consumes a lot of time with low quality play that teaches them very little. Some kids will get very little quality play in a 5-on-5 game which combines fewer touches per player with many frantic turnovers.

Unfortunately, my advocacy generally falls on deaf ears because most parents and youth coaches believe that their kids need to start playing “real” games early to prepare them for their later “careers.” Yet, for many years now in youth soccer as an example, it has been widely accepted that short-sided play is best for younger kids, rather than 11-on-11 which years ago was even used for 6 year-olds! Youth hockey has also benefited from short-sided play.

Let me explain the characteristics of a good 3-on-3 game for basketball in the younger age groups. This structure:

**Allows half-court play.** Most gyms in America have two side-to-side courts that run perpendicular to the main full-size court, providing four more half courts. By letting 24 kids play on the floor at one time, 3-on-3 half-court play better uses gym time and space, which is at a premium in many communities.

**Provides a more even distribution of touches.** Three players are sufficient to move the ball with both “width” and “depth” of play (the classic “triangle”). The weakest player now can get around 25% of the touches, even if the other two share around 75%. That’s up to three times as many as in a 5-on-5 situation, where the weakest player can get 10% or less. Think about it, 25% or more of the touches versus just 10% or even less. That’s huge! These numbers work in youth soccer and hockey as well.

**Provides more touches overall for everyone.** Because the ball doesn’t have to be continuously “advanced” from back to front court (but only “taken back” to the top of the key or foul line), more time will be spent passing the ball among multiple players. With the sloppy transitions in 5-on-5, full-court play, 25% or more of the playing time in my experience can be essentially wasted.

**Eliminates full-court presses that slow the games and cause frantic attempts at passing and dribbling.** With 3-on-3 play, the “pace” of the game is slowed considerably to allow more effective learning and practicing of skills. I often call full-court hoops for elementary school-aged players “STAMPEDE ball.” The speed of children running typically far outstrips their ability to handle the ball, and work at a moderated pace on the key offensive skills, namely, dribbling, passing, and shooting.

**Allows meaningful player-on-player coverage rather than zones.** Player-on-player offense and defense can focus much more on fundamental skills. In the 5-on-5 game, coaches can “win” by using zone defenses, but that strategy doesn’t help all (or even most) players develop.

**Creates a less congested basket area.** In 3-on-3 play, only 6 kids can ever be close to the hoop instead of 10 all crammed in. Less congestion allows for freer movement to

open spaces when “moving without the ball.” In addition, individual and team defensive play can be developed more quickly, and with less confusion, as kids learn to guard their opponents. For rebounding missed shots (and the vast majority are missed at these ages), less congestion means more meaningful rebound attempts, that is less kids’ hands thrust frantically up in the air, so kids can learn improved jumping, timing, and catching skills. Shooting is very developmental, but children can at least have a bit more time to set and take a shot.

**Can use extra players as receivers on the half-court sidelines.** In 3-on-3 play, there is the option to have two other teammates positioned -- one on each sideline; and the kids playing on the court can make and receive passes to and from these teammates. This arrangement gives a much-needed boost to offensive players because the defense is always more “skilled” (or really, less unskilled) at these ages. (Defenders don’t have a ball to hold to make them more uncoordinated and off-balance.) Offensive players are less likely to have their dribbles and passing curtailed because they’re overplayed or no one is nearby. With two teammates on the sidelines, kids have more options in a less congested playing area. Less congestion spreads the players on the court wider and lets them use the whole space available. Plus two players who aren’t in the game at the moment now have something to occupy their attention (an analogy to letting kids coach the base-paths in baseball and softball).

**Allows rules which require that every offensive player touch the ball at least once before the team takes a shot.** This rule is easy to manage with only six kids on the court, and ensures the development of ball handling skills. The kids focus on basic “team” play (sharing) before wildly shooting the ball. Moving without the ball and getting open is an important concept that they can learn in stages long before they can shoot with any degree of success. At older ages, most players on the floor do not have the ball most of the time; they must learn to play when they do not have the ball.

**Can lower the height of the basket for younger players.** A 10-foot hoop for a 5-foot, 100-pound child (with infinitely less upper and lower body strength, gross motor skills and balance than a 6-foot, 180-pound adult) is analogous to that adult’s shooting at a 20-foot basket. I dare any adult to try to shoot a mechanically sound shot at a basket that high. Most 5th graders do not actually *shoot* at 10-foot-high hoops; they simply HEAVE the ball. I recommend using 6-foot-high baskets for grades K-2, 8-foot-high for grades 3-4, and 9-foot-high for 5th and 6th graders.

**And can allow for no 3-point shots.** In my “utopian” youth basketball world, I wouldn’t allow these until high school JV. And hundreds of pro, college and high school coaching colleagues support this statement. Kids need to learn how to shoot successfully and build proper technique from shorter distances, that is shooting from “in front” of their torsos and heads, and not “heaving” the ball out to the side. Avoiding longer shots is easier in a 3-on-3 half-court game.

### **Back to the Two Studies of 3-on-3 Half Court**

Sorry to digress, but I think it is important for background to understand why I was eager to look at the potential impact on 3-on-3 half-court versus traditional 5-on-5 full-court play. My hypothesis was that with more touches in total, and a better distribution of touches among players, plus the less frenetic pace of the game, the kids in a 3-on-3 environment should get better skill development.

The study details and results were as follows:

### **Rockland Study (5th and 6th Grade Girls)**

#### **Overall Design**

- \* Included two groups, test and control, of girls in grades 5 and 6.
- \* The study covered ten sessions of 2 hours each, for a total of 20 hours of total activity.
- \* This period was a post-season camp during May and June.
- \* 13 players started in each group.
- \* Each group played in the gym at same time, using the “side-to-side” baskets in a typical gym.
- \* Each group was selected to be as equal as possible in skills at the beginning of the study.
- \* The control group was kept to a typical 5-on-5 full-court play program with a typical style of volunteer coaching. This group used 10-foot-high baskets.
- \* The test group received the trial approach consisting of fundamental skill activities within a 3-on-3 context (for example, dribbling and passing without zone defense or transition pressure), and 3-on-3 half-court play for scrimmage games. The test group used 9-foot baskets which can impact how kids shoot.
- \* Four skills were studied: (1) dribbling skills up and back using three cones, with dynamic movement to each cone followed by static dribbling at each cone to assess fingertip control; (2) shooting success from set points close in to the basket, from three close-in positions, five shots total; (3) lay-up success to the basket from both sides, from a starting position at the corner of the “paint”; and (4) lay-up form in dribbling to the basketball and delivering the shot attempt.
- \* To document skill changes at the beginning and end of the study, the groups were videotaped pre and post test.

**Discussion about shooting:** In the sports camp versus traditional team-league model study discussed earlier, I used only lay-ups off the wall rather than an actual basket. In this Rockland study, I used actual shooting although I assessed both shooting success and form for lay-ups. Because my thinking has evolved over the years, my most recent study placed greater emphasis on skills other than shooting.

**Video Record:** The assessment activities, that is, dribbling cones, set shots and lay-ups, were videotaped for analysis.

**Attendance:** All players assessed in the control and test groups attended at least 8 of the 10 scheduled sessions. 9 in the control group and 12 in the test group met this criterion, so at least 16 hours of total activity was captured for each of these players. The number of players was less than I would have ideally hoped, but what was achievable in this study. The data then needs to be viewed in this context and once again as directional.

**Assessment and Skill Ratings:** I scored the players on a 1 (low) to 5 (high) scale in ½-point increments, with 3 as an average. Based on the skills of the players studied, no players wound up being rated below a 2 and no one above a 4, and half points were used at 2.5 and 3.5 when appropriate. Because every girl played in a basketball league and we had no first-timers, no players were assessed at just a developmental level (a score of 1 or 1.5). On the other hand, none of the girls played in a “elite” league and none exhibited age-appropriate skills that would warrant a 4.5 or 5 rating. Effectively, then, the ratings were at five levels: 2, 2.5, 3, 3.5 and 4.

**The Pre-Post Measurement:** This assessed whether players’ skills remained the same or increased. Some players stayed the same, and others showed increases ranging from 0.5 point to 1 point. No players were assessed as having increased skills beyond 1 point, and this degree of increase would not be expected with an 8- to 10-session program (16 to 20 hours total).

**Results:** Ratings were summed up across the four skill areas pre and post for the control (5-on-5) and test (3-on-3) groups. The combined skills for the control group increased just 3%, and those for the test group increased 10%. The 7% difference is modest, but again the study was directional, and the inclusion of shooting I believe would tend to be a moderating factor because shooting is a more difficult skill at younger ages. But even this modest advantage for a single session would mean a 31% advantage for four sessions. Over time, then, that 7% can pay dividends. (Should the reader wish additional detail about this study, please feel free to contact me.)

### **Winchester Study (4th Grade Boys)**

#### **Overall Design:**

- \* Included two groups, test and control, of boys in grade 4.
- \* The study period covered nine sessions of 1.5 hours each, for a total of 13.5 hours of total activity. This study occurred during the regular season, but with added session on days added onto the regular team-league activity. The number of total hours was less than I would have liked but was what could be made available.
- \* Each group played in the gym at same time, using the “side-to-side” baskets. Groups were separated by a divider across the center of the basketball court.
- \* Each group was selected to be as equal as possible in their current skills.
- \* The control group kept to a typical 5-on-5 full-court play program with a typical style of volunteer coaching. This group used 10-foot-high baskets.
- \* The test group received the trial approach consisting of fundamental skill activities within a 3-on-3 context (for example, dribbling and passing without zone defense or transition pressure), and the 3-on-3 half-court set-up for scrimmage games. This group used 9-foot-high baskets.
- \* Two main skills were studied:

**1. Dribbling skills.** Each player made two dribbling runs of approximately 30 feet up to a cone, doing 10 dribbles with each hand (including a crossover) in a static position, and then dribbling back to the starting point. These activities were filmed

so that hand-to-ball control could be assessed. The ability to dribble lower, faster, and in greater control of the ball (including both right and left hands) was the criterion for improvement.

**2. Jump, Stop, Pivot and Pass Skills.** Each player made two runs which were filmed from the side. The activities consisted of each player throwing the ball out in front of him several feet with a back spin, making one jump and stopping cleanly on both feet to catch it; and then making one dribble and in a continuous motion pivoting 180 degrees and releasing a chest-high pass at a target wall 20 feet away. These runs represented a series of five linked skills (serial skills): (1) throwing the ball out with backspin, (2) catching it with a jump and clean stop, (3) dribbling once, (4) pivoting 180 degrees, and finally (5) passing the ball at chest height to a wall.

\* To document skill changes at the beginning and end of the study period, the groups were videotaped pre and post test.

**Discussion about not including shooting drills:** In this study I decided to not include a shooting activity because the kids were younger than in the Rockland study.

**Video Record:** The assessment activities were (1) close up video of dribbling skills, and (2) close up video of the jump, stop, pivot, and pass exercises.

**Attendance:** All players assessed in the control and test groups attended the scheduled sessions, including the pre-post videotaping. 8 in the control group and 11 in the test group met this criterion. Because of various activity conflicts, some children did not attend enough sessions.

**Discussion about numbers:** As in the Rockland study, the number of players was less than ideal, but the number was what was achievable in this study. Again, the data then need to be viewed in this context and as directional.

**Assessment and Skill Ratings:** The players were scored on a 1 (low) to 5 (high) scale, with 3 as an average. Half points were used when appropriate and quarter points in a few cases. The children's skills varied from 1 (developmental) to 4.5 (relatively advanced for this age). The range of observed skills therefore was greater than in the Rockland study. At this age, the impact of travel programs is usually less apparent versus the girls in the older grades at Rockland, so the distribution of skills was greater.

**The Pre-Post Measurement:** This assessed whether players' skills remained the same or increased. Some players stayed the same, and others showed increases ranging from 0.25 point (slight increase) to 1 point (significant increase). No players were assessed as having increased skills beyond 1 point, and this degree of increase would not be expected with a program of this length.

**Results:** Ratings were summed up across both skill areas pre and post for the control (5-on-5) and test (3-on-3) groups. The combined skills for the control group increased 11%, and those for the test group increased 16%. The 5% difference is again modest, but the study was again directional. But even this modest advantage for a single pilot session would mean a 22% advantage for four total sessions. It is still very worthwhile in my opinion. (Should the reader wish additional detail about this study, please feel free to contact me.)



## **Remember that 3-on-3 Basketball Is Similar to Small-Sided Play in Other Youth Sports**

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, I studied basketball, but I fully expect similar and measurable benefits in other youth sports where short-sided play can be implemented, such as soccer, hockey and lacrosse where many programs have used small-sided practices and games for many years.

## **What the Study Results Mean, and My Call to Further Action**

Again, I will say up front that the numbers of kids in each study is small. If we look at the two studies together, the specific skills measured were somewhat different in each. But my focus was on fundamental ball handling and movement skills relative to the players' ages. The results were similar and averaged to a 6% gain for the two studies combined. The total number of players in both studies was 17 control and 23 test subjects (40 kids total).

These studies showed gains smaller than the sports camp versus the team-league program discussed in Chapter 6, but taken together, the three studies all indicate that *how we play the kids can impact how much they learn!* That is also what we would expect as a matter of common sense.

## **Study Size and Statistics: A Call for More Research**

My call to action is not only to consider the impact of play models on children's skills, but also to construct larger studies. The studies presented here did not involve large numbers of players, so I consider the results directional and indicators of what we can hope to achieve. To the best of my knowledge, no one else in America has been doing such studies of any size. So we need further studies so more robust statistics can be applied. As I said previously, the challenge is that to perform larger studies, you need to get a large number of parents to agree to have their kids participate in a different type of program than they are used to. Some will be glad to try new approaches, but others may see it as a "risk." Additional research, however, is important to fully learn how we should construct our programs to have a positive impact on both the overall youth sports environment *and* the children's degree of learning.

## CHAPTER 9: HOW COMMUNITIES CAN CAPITALIZE ON THE LEARNING FROM THESE STUDIES

Based on my research to date, I have reached two important conclusions:

1. My early studies in 2008 and 2009 (Rockland and Winchester, MA): that the type of play model matters and can have an impact on children's skills; and
2. The 2014 study detailed in Chapters 6 and 7: that a youth sports camp model can produce skills development that is measurably superior to that of traditional team-league play.

As I have said, the three studies are directional but all showed a positive impact on the players' skills. In any one season (here defined as a 20-hour total play period), the amount that any kid's skills will improve in the absolute is relatively small. Note that the length of seasons can vary, with recreational programs typically shorter, with less hours than travel programs. For the latter, 20 hours would most often be on the shorter end of the scale, but travel seasons in basketball, soccer, and other sports, can range up to 35 hours based on my observations over the years.

Children need many years to hone their skills as they move from childhood through adolescence, and (if they proceed further) on to post-high school play. If skills improve 15% in 15 to 20 hours, that's good. Fifteen percent means that a child can improve 75% (on a cumulative basis) over four of these periods based on the assumption that the per-season rate would continue. In basketball, that would be equivalent to two years' worth of improvement for kids who play during a typical winter season and also attend an off-season camp of some kind (whether one that extends over several weeks, or one that occurs during consecutive days in a single week).

Not all kids play this much over two years. Purely recreational players may play only during a winter season and no more. Basketball may not be their primary sport, or they may not be interested in playing more. Nevertheless, a 75% gain in key skills over 60 to 80 hours of play is very good. The gain in ball handling skills typically will be greater than the gain in shooting because shooting takes thousands of repetitions to improve form and increase shooting percentage on a consistent basis.

The 75% gain posited here is based on superior play models, including sports camp environments and short-sided play. No matter what, kids will always gain skills just by getting to play. But if a team-league based, and/or 5-on-5 model, yields for example only one-half of that 15% possible gain per season, that lower yield equates to only 34% cumulative gain over four 15- to 20-hour periods. This is less than half the 75% possible gain that the recent studies have indicated. That difference is significant.

In addition, the sports camp model reduces, and can even eliminate, the negative environmental aspects associated with so much of today's youth sports. *So not only can we help players gain better skills; we can also produce a saner youth sports world!*

### **How Sports Camp Models Can Be Implemented at the Community Level**

I hope readers will acknowledge that based on my unique research, we are on to something. Skeptics may respond that a sports camp model is simply a camp and cannot replace a typical community's in-season, team-league program, whether recreational or competitive; to which I simply say, why not? When kids used to play on the empty lot, they just played. Parents,

coaches and administrators weren't there to organize everything and take youth sports away from the youth. So can we give kids back their games?

I do not suggest that we completely undo everything created over the past few decades because any such suggestion would be unrealistic. In truth, those empty corner lots don't really exist anymore, and today's parents would be concerned about their children's safety. Child abduction by strangers is fortunately very rare, but it makes the news and parents worry.

## Two Great Examples of Alternative Youth Sports Programs

So how can a sports camp-style model be created within an organized framework? Does it even exist except in Bob Bigelow's mind? I am happy to say that it does! A great example is **Joy of the People**, a St. Paul, Minnesota youth soccer program that (as Chapter 3 introduced) has operated successfully since 2009. You can learn about this groundbreaking program at [www.joyofthepeople.org](http://www.joyofthepeople.org).

JOTP was started by Ted Kroeten to provide free play and skills programs for kids, independent of traditional programs. A key motto on the home page simply is: **Child Centered Soccer Development. Soccer. Futsal. Free Play. Joy.**

The home page explains that JOTP was founded, among other reasons, because:

- \* "Kids today are over-scheduled.
- \* Kids involved in youth sports are over-coached and over-trained. They need time -- and a safe place -- to play.
- \* Many young soccer players plateau or burn out before reaching their full potential."

These reasons echo key problems in youth sports that so many authors have written about in recent years, but with a key difference. Instead of writing just another book, Ted created and launched a program that provides solutions.

The JOTP Center offers 9 different surfaces and 20 courts, including small-sided fields with inflatable boundaries designed for rapid, engaging play. This arrangement permits the game to truly be the teacher, as the saying goes. Again, from the JOTP website:

"The building of an all-in-one play and training center is a huge step forward in developing more time for kids of all ages to just PLAY! JOTP is a model center for soccer and free play in the Twin Cities. As this amazing community continues to grow...."

JOTP offers over 1,000 hours annually of free-play time that kids and their families can choose from. And to complement the availability of free-play facilities, JOTP also offers skills programs from qualified instructors:

"JOTP recognizes that free play is merely a part of the picture. Deliberate practice, the inherently 'not fun,' part of training will be dosed in correctly with players receiving assessments and given fun assignments to address weaknesses."

The JOTP website has plenty of great information, too much to review here. Costs are very affordable to join and use the various facilities. In a major community, JOTP has developed and implemented a truly creative and innovative program that offers a very different play model for kids! And the program plans to expand in the near future.

Another great example of an alternative program, and model, is **Backyard Sports** located in Westchester County, New York. You can visit the site at <http://www.byardsports.com/about.html>. Backyard Sports focuses on skills development and fun outside of a typical team-league model. The website explains that it is really a camp-style program that kids can join in addition to, or in place of, a regular program:

“Backyard Sports provides weekend and after school sports instruction and game play for boys and girls ages 4-16 years old. Our programs are designed for EVERY child who desires a positive and healthy sports experience. Many programs will appeal to the ‘gifted’ athlete and promote the idea of elevating the child to ‘the next level.’ However, these programs ignore the single most important aspect of the child athlete: their social and emotional needs. Both experts and coaches at the highest level of sports agree that emotional not mechanical development is what is most important during the childhood and adolescent years.”

This program, founded in 2005 by Danny Bernstein, and assisted by Vin Minotti, provides basketball and soccer. It has successfully operated and evolved over the past ten years. Backyard Sports doesn’t have the dedicated facility and special equipment that JOTP features. It uses existing local sports facilities and through that demonstrates that a program driven by a sports camp-style model can also thrive without facilities of its own.

### **What Your Community Can Consider**

I do not suggest that every community can undertake these types of programs, at least not all at once. But there is a very simple way to change your current team-league program into a camp-style program, particularly at the younger age levels. Simply put, run your current program as a camp, scheduled for the same several weeks and instead of your traditional season. Whether the sport is soccer, basketball, lacrosse, hockey or other team sports, this approach can work, especially for kids through elementary school ages.

Most sports camps occur off-season and conduct half- or full-day programs during one or two weeks. Summer soccer and basketball programs are common examples. A weeklong half-day program equals 20 hours, while a full-day program equals 40. Most youth league seasons offer between 20 and 35 hours of total play activity. Think of a program with two one-hour practices and a game each week. That’s three hours a week, or 30 hours over a 10-week season. Longer or shorter seasons, of course, would either increase or decrease these hours.

In my 2014 study, the sports camp took place over several weeks, with three hours of activity each week. You can apply this arrangement to your program to replace a team-league based model. The kids will still receive the same hours of total play activity, but structured in a different -- and I believe better -- way!

### **Specifics to Make This Work – Recreational and Travel Programs**

#### **Recreational Programs**

Let’s first consider soccer and basketball. Many recreational programs for children ages 6 to 12 focus on playing games in a team-league setting. Depending mostly on the size of the town and the number of players registered, games may take place within the community or between nearby communities. Small communities often need to play others so changing a model would

involve working with other towns. But many kids reside in larger communities with “in-house” leagues so the local board of directors could change the play model.

So for now let’s put the inter-community situation to one side and discuss what the model could look like within one town’s (or city’s) program.

A common soccer and basketball recreational program offers an 8- to 10-week season, one or two practices and one game a week on local fields or in gyms. Volunteer coaches staff most of these programs. Some programs offer fewer practices and more games, and some offer supplemental clinics conducted by professional trainers. Changing to a sports camp-based model means:

**Changing the program’s structure**, and announcing this change when registering kids and assigning them to training groups. Instead of teams (which are often formed through rating systems or drafts), kids will be assigned by age to a group overseen by one or more qualified master coaches (either volunteer or paid), supported by traditional volunteers. For example, if a U10 soccer team typically has up to 12 players for 7-on-7 or 8-on-8 game play, four teams’ worth of children can be assigned to a master coach (up to 48 kids total), supported by four or more additional volunteer parents. This is a good number for a qualified master coach to oversee.

**Identifying master coaches who can lead camp-style sessions, train and guide volunteer coaches**, and oversee the sessions. Master coaches can be groomed from experienced volunteers who may already have good experience and certifications, or from experienced volunteers who agree to get additional training. This process would entail added funds only for training courses, which when spread across all registered players, may be small on a per-player basis. For example, Positive Coaching Alliance offers several quality coaching courses, as do many local providers for all sports. Master coaches can also be hired as paid resources. Hiring professionals will add extra cost to the program and may require increased fees, but not as much as you might think.

**Implementing the model that has the master coaches lead skills training sessions, assisted by the regular volunteers.** The volunteers need to be educated on their role in assisting the master coaches because no volunteer will have a traditional team. The master coaches would select the training activities, and would use a wide variety of resources. These resources would include books and DVDs from websites that sell them, though quality materials might be available from national or state affiliates (especially in soccer). Several emerging online businesses also provide reasonable-cost subscriptions to a large quantity of coaching videos and drills by sport and age group.

**Planning the season’s activity profile**, which would consist of (1) a larger ratio of skills and drills versus scrimmages during what would otherwise be practice sessions, and (2) more time allotted to scrimmages on days (such as the weekends) that otherwise would have been reserved for a traditional “game.”

**Rotating kids within an age group to practice with and/or scrimmage against other training groups** (and under a different master coach); or one group could simply be the sole training group for a given season for those kids that are assigned to it.

We must remember that a schedule of league games is a notion that adults added to youth sports decades ago. A game schedule is not something that kids naturally created or needed when they played on their own in the days of the empty lot. Meanwhile kids, especially at

younger ages, view a “scrimmage” as a game, and the groups scrimmaging as teams. If you coach, watch what kids say at your next practice when you announce “time to scrimmage” and hands go up and kids ask to be on so-and-so’s team. This happens all the time. To them, playing is a game even if the adults think it’s really not.

Of course, a program’s board of directors would need to decide whether to implement the sports camp model, and then would have to educate parents about why. But once implemented, the model delivers several logistical and environmental benefits:

**Without formal games to get worked up over, coaches and parents are much less motivated to get over-involved.** Scrimmages at sports camps rarely flare tempers or ignite abuses. The sports camp model thus fixes the main issues not only about out-of-control coaches and parents, but also about excess pressure to win, misplaced incentives to coach mainly the player with the ball, pressures to make playing time uneven, and the other destructive excesses discussed in Chapter 1.

**Trying to make teams (and adults) competitive with one another stops being an issue** when kids are placed into a training group because scrimmages can be organized flexibly with even sides. *Volunteers working together under a master coach in a group can do just that -- work together without competing against each other through the kids.* How nice that would be!

**Boards of directors won’t be burdened with nearly as many complaints** about games not being fair, bad calls by referees, and all the rest of the typical stuff that parents (and coaches) can complain about during a season. Every in-person, telephoned or emailed complaint takes time to address, and each one saved can allow 15 minutes, 30 minutes, even an hour to be spent on something more fun, and more worthwhile, for the kids.

**And easier logistics.** In all the various age groups, managers who oversee coaches and teams within a team-league set up (such as the U10 girls or the 6th grade boys commissioner) no longer have to worry about schedule snafus, not enough kids showing up on one team for a game, referees who don’t show up, coaches who have last-minute conflicts, and all the rest.

Doing it this way has many benefits. And the only downside is that some parents may complain, “What, no real games?” But then you have the ammunition about better skills development, and can ask which is more important, “real” games or the amount kids learn? To me the answer is simple and compelling.

**Take Baby Steps:** If you are concerned about a full changeover, consider two options that would permit a trial run:

**1. Start with one age group.** Rather than converting the entire program, start small for a season and see how it goes. Also see below for tips on how to gauge success.

**2. Implement the sports camp model for part of the season and hold regular games toward the end.** Think of this arrangement as a summer camp where the kids do all sorts of activities throughout the summer, and on the last week or two the camp offers parents’ days where mothers and fathers can come and see their kids show what they’ve learned. A similar example is the school play, where kids learn roles and do dress rehearsals before parents finally come see the play at the end of the semester or

school year. You can divide the season into 50-50 sports camp model followed by fixed teams and games, or have regular games the last 2 or 3 weeks of the season.

**Evaluate Success:** I don't expect anyone at the community level to go through the skills evaluation exercises that I did. It takes a lot of work to design, set up, and execute a study. That said, you can poll both the kids and their parents at the beginning of the season (with one of several easy-to-use online survey tools), and then see whether their opinions have changed at the end. Listen especially to what the kids say because they are ultimately the customers and the beneficiaries.

**Use Paid Master Coaches:** If tapping into volunteers to be master coaches is not practical, you can consider using a professional resource instead. Hiring a professional does not necessarily guarantee consistent quality, but experience and certifications can be checked and taken into account. The typical cost for a coach/trainer for recreational programs ranges from \$50 to \$80 an hour. In the scenario of up to 48 kids per master coach that I posited previously, at even \$80 an hour, each hour costs \$1.67 per child. For 25-30 hours of total play time during a typical season, that's no more than \$50 per player for 30 hours. At \$60 an hour for 25 hours worth of activity, that's just over \$30 per player. This range can be far less than the costs of many other children's activities.

### **Competitive/Travel Programs**

My recommendations for recreational programs, especially those that are entirely contained within a single community and under a single board of directors, are easier to implement than recommendations for competitive or travel programs. Smaller communities may need to involve one or more other nearby towns in their recreational programs to have enough kids to play at some age groups (especially older ones). But many suburban and urban towns and cities with populations of 25,000 - 30,000 residents and higher typically have enough kids for purely "house" programs.

Most competitive programs involve leagues formed of teams from multiple communities. That said, particularly for the younger elementary-school ages, a camp-style program can be implemented for more competitive play.

It is helpful to first describe what competitive or travel programs are. For purposes of this portion of the book, these programs share the following characteristics:

**Competitive or travel programs include only children who are deemed able to play at a higher skill level than most of their peers.** Not all programs rate children's abilities, but these abilities will follow a normal statistical distribution much like many other human traits. In a normal distribution, about 2/3 of children will fall within one standard deviation from the mean (or average) ability level -- so this group includes average players plus those somewhat above and below average. This distribution leaves about 1/3 of kids total that are either above and below this group, with one-half of these above, or about 16% of total kids. So out of every 100 kids, 16 typically would be considered skilled enough for more competitive play. This number will vary based on a given program's objectives. Some programs seek to more inclusive so the top 20 - 25% of children might be candidates for travel teams.

**In most cases, competitive or travel programs assess players' skills by tryouts, thereby making these programs selective and not open-registration.** Tryouts seek to identify the most "qualified" children (relatively speaking for their age group and the

overall player pool), but youth sports politics can also be a factor (for example, when a dad is on the travel program board, or is a coach, and his child makes the program for reasons other than skill).

**Competitive or travel programs participate in a formal league of teams that most often consists of multiple communities, or neighborhoods if in a larger city.** These leagues have most if not all of the typical features of sports play at the older interscholastic level -- a set schedule of games, detailed rules for how teams and games must be operated, standings, playoffs, and championships. These leagues are usually governed by a regional and/or state body and have many, many formal rules around team sizes, age requirements, the nature of officiating, how games are scheduled and rescheduled, and many other aspects.

For the purposes of this section, however, I will confine my discussion to “traditional” travel play, which is a level below what has developed into “premier” or “elite” play for those kids, who from travel programs, are considered of even higher ability than most of their peers, and who try-out and are accepted by one of these programs. In basketball, AAU is often considered this more elite level, and in soccer these programs are typically offered by “premier” clubs which often draw kids from several communities. These programs also cost much more than traditional, community-based travel programs. There are analogs in other youth sports as well.

I could spend a fair amount of time on what I have always felt are the sins of these types of competitive programs, including the designation (or even coronation) of young players to be on the “fast track” at the expense of many others who may be later bloomers. Because kids grow and develop at vastly different rates, especially around puberty, I believe that deciding that a 10- or 11-year old (much less a middle-school age player) is an elite player is total nonsense. Chapter 10 will discuss this development issue in more detail, but for now let’s accept travel programs for what they currently are, and see how we can apply a camp-style model.

So now that we have defined travel programs, and that the vast majority of travel leagues consist of multiple communities, how would a sports camp-style model work? I see three basic approaches, whose selection depends on the number of players available in a given community, and on the availability of nearby/adjacent communities. I won’t go into huge detail because many of the specifics depend on the community itself, including its current youth sports structure, board personnel, and culture. What is outlined below is a broader framework within which specific options can be further fleshed out:

**In a two-season travel program, one season is changed to a sports-camp model.**

For example, most youth soccer travel programs play both fall and spring seasons, so a logical starting point is to look at a different option for the spring, or second, season. The primary travel basketball season is in the winter, but programs often also conduct spring or summer leagues. This change would split the overall program 50-50, retaining the traditional team-league model for one of the two seasons. The other season would be then changed to a sports camp-style model. This would be similar in concept to an in-house recreational program (as described previously) where the first half of a season was camp style, and the second half consisted of traditional games. This option represents a baby step that tests an alternative program. The risk is small because the travel league is not completely abandoned and the full program presumably could always be reinstated.

**Withdraw from the travel league, and run an in-house sports-camp program.** This option would focus more on skills training activities and scrimmage play. “Friendlies” --



as a substitute for formal league games -- would be played with available surrounding communities. Friendlies have to be on days not devoted to formal games (for example, look to have friendlies on Saturdays if the league plays on Sundays). This approach is an option for communities with enough players in the various age groups to sufficiently populate a sports camp-type program. When withdrawing from a formal league, the kids will still see friendlies as games, so the major challenge is to convince the adults that this is a good approach because it provides games while increasing skills and providing a saner play environment.

**Withdraw from the travel league with one or more nearby communities.** This is an option for two or more like-minded communities that wish to pilot an alternative program. Here you would play just those communities within a framework of a camp/academy-style program where the “games” would also be considered friendlies. This option would be for communities with smaller player populations, but with the overall construct similar to Option 2 above.

### **The Challenges for Both Recreational and Travel Programs**

I’ll be the first to address the concern that “Gee, Bob, it just seems it will be hard to get folks to ever agree to this.” That’s a valid concern because the adults would have to buy into change that benefits the kids. Here are some thoughts that can help persuade the naysayers:

**Stay focused on the benefits for kids.** Having a laser-like focus on this is particularly important at the elementary school ages. The purpose of this book’s studies is to show a worthwhile prize that benefits the kids. So while some of the adults may be skeptics at first, we need to stay focused on the fundamental idea that we are really here to serve the kids. As I pointed out already, when kids played on the empty lots in years gone by, essentially they were playing “friendlies” but these were real games to them. Younger kids do not naturally need the attributes introduced over the years by administrators, coaches and parents, namely leagues, formal schedules, fancy uniforms, and all the rest.

**Remember that any programmatic change can be a pilot, and not (yet) a permanent replacement.** In recreational programs, where formal leagues and standings are often not as important, trying the camp approach for a season means taking only a relatively small risk. And if you try the hybrid option, or even withdraw from a travel league for a year, what’s the worst that will happen even if you decide that it’s not for you at the conclusion of the pilot? The kids’ skills will not be disadvantaged, and the program can resume its previous play. The exposure to “real” games will have been less, but the kids will still have played scrimmages, friendlies, and other competition with some tactical play. So will we really set back the 10-year-olds’ “sports careers”? Based on my years of experience, I know that the answer is no. The real battle will be with adults’ perceptions, but not with reality.

### **So What about Skeptical Adults, and How Can We Turn Them Around?**

The single biggest concern that skeptical administrators, coaches and parents will raise is that kids need teams and games at young ages to “prepare” them sooner and give them an advantage that can otherwise be lost. Here’s the thing, though -- when kids attend a sports camp, they actually do have teams and games, and they play what we adults call “scrimmages.” The adults may not view them as “real,” but the kids do.

To be sure, the kids do know the difference between the games played at sports camps and the games they play say on Saturdays and Sundays in their youth leagues. But when they play scrimmages at sports camps, these are still games to them, and the learning value that games provide still applies.

Through either scrimmages or “real” games, younger kids can learn to apply skills in a competitive setting, see how they perform against others, understand aspects of tactical play relevant to their age, enjoy winning and learn from losing, and reap all the other benefits that games can teach younger players. Whether a child won or lost, I would bet you rarely hear the child say that “it doesn’t matter because it was just a scrimmage”? When kids score a basket or a goal, do they value it less simply because it was “just a scrimmage”? My observation is that they value success just as much.

In fact, when kids are set up for scrimmages at a sports camp, they still perceive that teams have been formed and that a game is going to now take place. When a practice has spent too long on drills, you will often hear kids ask “when can we play a game?” The differences in a sports camp are that the teams are not fixed, and that they can be adjusted or changed based on the kids’ needs and the camp’s objectives.

So how important is it to have permanent or fixed teams for kids? When kids played in the good old days of the corner lot, a similar group played from day to day but the kids were free to assemble different teams on any given day, based on friendships, competitive balance, and other factors designed to make that day’s game fun.

At younger ages, fixed teams can have a number of disadvantages:

**Trying to balance teams for fair competition is difficult.** In recreational programs, teams are typically formed by either skill ratings of children, or by coaches’ drafts. Each approach has its own pitfalls, and any league of say ten teams usually has a couple that win most of their games and a couple that lose most. In camp settings, where teams can be fluid from day to day, no one has to win or lose regularly. In travel programs, the ability to create a balanced play environment is often more difficult because multiple communities are involved, and even attempts to separate kids into A and B levels may not work well.

**When coaches play with fixed teams, they often try to compete with each other through the kids.** Imagine if teachers of two third grade classes were trying to do that in an elementary school. Boy would that make for a great educational environment! Would one teacher always be glad that his or her kids got mostly A’s in math class while the kids in another class typically got lower grades? Or do most teachers feel that their job is to work together to make all the kids as successful as possible? Let’s hope the latter is true.

**Parents tend to view “their” team’s success by its won-loss record.** What’s the first question most parents ask? “Did you win or lose today?” But is that the right question to ask? Isn’t how the kids applied and improved their skills more important?

**Coaches can’t really collaborate on behalf of all the kids.** In a sports camp setting, teams for scrimmages can be created with specific objectives in mind. Teams can be balanced so that the more skilled players can play similar positions on each team for a period of time, giving the less skilled kids a chance to develop through more balanced play. And coaches can reinforce specific goals. For example, in soccer or basketball it is

more important to assess how many good passes were made instead of simply how many goals or points were scored.

One of the biggest advantages of a sports camp program is that kids can be grouped by ability in a much less visible manner. (Parents are often concerned whether their kid makes the “good” team!) Grouping kids by ability allows coaches and trainers to tailor both drills and scrimmages to best meet the needs of specific groups of players.

Parents who react negatively to not having fixed teams and league games simply need additional perspective about, and a better understanding of, how younger kids best learn new skills and how to compete.

### **Additional Advantages of a Sports Camp Model**

Several other considerations favor a sports camp model over traditional teams-leagues:

**A sports camp-style program may cost more than recreational programs, but you get what you pay for.** The cost depends on whether your master trainers are volunteers or professionals, and if professionals, the ratio of professional versus volunteer resources that are used. This ratio can be managed to suit local needs. Master training arrangements where a professional trainer oversees volunteers are less expensive than arrangements that use only professional trainers. Training volunteers as master trainers to achieve consistently high levels of performance is challenging, and the quality of volunteers can vary. Using professional trainers does not guarantee excellence, but a hired service provider can be held accountable, and multiple training providers in a given area can usually compete for servicing your program’s needs at competitive costs.

**Compared to traditional travel programs, camp-style programs may actually be less expensive.** Each travel team usually has a its own paid coach, and what these coaches charge may actually work out to a higher cost per player than a sports camp model because the camp trainers receive varying levels of pay depending on the age group being trained, the trainers’ experience and length of service. Training providers can have more options and flexibility for deploying training resources across groups of players than a traditional travel team that uses the same coach for all the team’s activities. Most travel team coaches ideally want a premium rate, and a winning record commands higher fees (thus the emphasis on winning).

**Winning and losing take a back seat to skill development.** A sports camp model does not have fixed teams with win-loss records. Trainers are free to focus on the skills that kids need without worrying about winning the next game or scrimmage. This focus means less pressure for everyone involved!

**Coaches can focus on the most important skills.** For example, foot skills in soccer are the single most important thing for young kids to learn. At younger ages, tactics just don’t matter very much. As long as foot control is developed, kids can learn tactics later and not be “left behind.” In fact, I have heard many high school basketball coaches over the years say that when a kid has good motor skills, they can teach the kid basketball at the early high school years just as well as if the child played youth basketball. The reason is that most kids (especially boys) don’t grow into their bodies until they reach high school. Basketball in particular is a later-blooming sport. Meanwhile, think of great players in soccer from outside the U.S. who grew up playing in the streets and gained great foot skills long before they entered any organized play. Just one example (and

there are many) is Zinedine Zidane, France's three-time World Player of the Year, who retired after the 2006 World Cup. He developed his ball handling skills in the streets of Marseille, where he grew up.

**Progress and evaluations will focus on skills.** With the importance of winning and losing removed from the equation, the obvious focus will be on skill development and assessing progress. So in soccer, for example, rather than being mainly concerned with how many goals were scored, coaches can focus more on how many good passes were completed, the effectiveness of 1-on-1 play, trapping the ball, and other key skills that are important at younger ages.

**Fewer volunteers are needed.** For the option of using professional resources, sports camp models can be implemented by having a camp provider come into a local program to set up and manage how kids will be organized and play. The program can outsource all coaching and training to the professional service provider, or the program can use a combination of professionals and volunteers. The latter approach keeps local volunteers involved but reduces the cost of professional resources. In either case, registration costs will be higher, but with less pressure to secure as many volunteers as a totally volunteer program would need. Finding volunteers is harder than ever with people's busy schedules, and training volunteers is always a challenge. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data released in 2014, volunteering is at a 10-year low. Scrambling for fewer volunteers can make local youth sports administrators' lives easier and the program more consistent, particularly in the types of sports more likely to have only a small pool of qualified adult volunteer in a particular community.

**Local youth sports boards have less to contend with.** In addition to needing fewer volunteers overall, less volunteer coaches have to be trained, formal referees aren't really needed, formal game schedules aren't necessary, the typical issues and complaints that parents can have about their kid's team disappear, and even fewer board positions are required. What's not to like?

**Finally, especially at younger ages, what's the worst that can happen?** For example, the risk of a trial for just part of season for an elementary-school age recreational program is pretty darn small. The kids still get to learn skills and play, and the results of the studies described in this show that the development of fundamental skills can be greater.

### **Footnote on Competitive Programs: How Many Players Are Needed for Both Skill Development and Play Competition?**

One of the anecdotal arguments that traditionalists make to support a league-game approach for "travel"-style youth sports is that several other teams are needed to provide the variety of opponents necessary for competitive development. But this is purely anecdotal and not based on a careful consideration of how many players are really needed for adequate variety. The number of other teams (i.e., total players) in a program needs to be only enough at a given age and gender to provide a sufficient array of kids with varying levels of skill to provide competitive variety and challenge.

Let's take U10 boys' soccer as an example. In 8-v-8, just two teams of kids would usually total 24-28 children (12-14 per team). Playing only one another can potentially provide enough variation with these many children to present new challenges for the players' overall skill development. Kids don't need to play ten or more other teams. If a given team in a league had

to play the other teams on its game schedule twice (or even three times), I don't think that schedule would compromise player development. The notion of a traditional game schedule is an adult development that did not originate with how kids naturally played and learned years ago.

Most travel teams usually play 8 to 10 games per season in soccer, and anywhere from 12 to 18 games in basketball. Again, let's take soccer for a moment. When a team of kids in U10 soccer, for example, plays 8 other teams in a season (8-on-8 play), and each team has 14 kids, that's 112 other kids to play against in the league. With 112 children, you certainly have a good distribution of skills to provide competitive variety.

But are 112 truly needed, or will a smaller number do? Let's look at some basics of statistics concerning the normal distribution of many human characteristics. Any group of people has many characteristics that have been shown to follow a normal distribution or "bell curve." These characteristics include height, weight, IQs (as measured by historically accepted standardized tests), and other factors associated with human beings.

A bell curve is shown below, including what are known as standard deviations around a "mean" (or average) measure. Kids' skills in sports will follow a normal distribution much like many of people's other characteristics. For those of us who have been involved in youth sports for many years, and who have rated kids by ability, the vast majority will fall somewhere in the middle range of abilities relative to the total group. At the extremes, a smaller portion will exhibit well above average skills and a smaller portion will exhibit well below average skills; far less will be truly exceptional or at the opposite end of the scale, i.e., very uncoordinated. We'll talk more about numbers shortly.

Let's look further at the bell curves. Whatever might be an average evaluation (as a number) that we could assign to players for a specific skill, such as dribbling a basketball, the full range of skills that players can have around this average will fall under the bell curve. As an example, if dribbling is scored on a 1-5 scale (as was done in the studies described in Chapters 6 and 7), the average level would be a 3 rating. In my approach to ratings, the vast majority of kids fall into a range of 2 to 4 (that is, somewhat below average to somewhat above average), with only a relatively few kids rating as low as a 1, or as high as a 5.

An open recreational program usually has kids of all skill levels. This wide array of skills can be represented by the third bell curve below, where virtually 100% of data points (in this case, kids and their skill ratings) are within what are called three standard deviations above and below the average skill level (or "mean"). Statistical terminology defines this range as a "normal distribution." Standard deviation measures the spread among a distribution of numbers. The distribution represents the variation of a characteristic of something that can be measured.

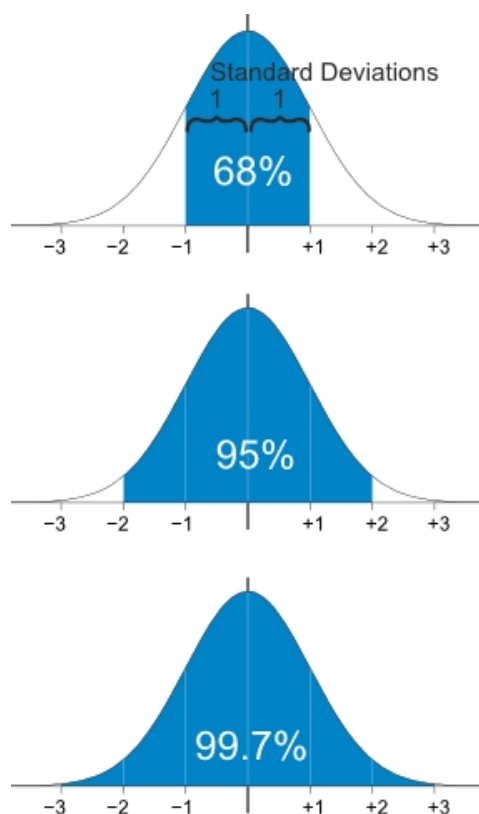
For people who are into statistics, the standard deviation is calculated by the square root of the variance, and the variance is the average of the squared differences from the mean of the data points within the distribution. Things can get a bit complicated, but suffice it to say that a normal distribution is described by standard deviations that each contains a percentage of the total data points within the distribution. In our example here, the distribution is comprised of the data points representing the kids' dribbling skills.

In a normal distribution, one standard deviation contains approximately two-thirds of all data points (here being players and their dribbling skills). In my experience of rating hundreds and hundreds of players, this outcome means that about two-thirds of all kids will fall between a 2 and 4 rating, representing one standard deviation from each side of the mean (or average)

rating of 3. The percentage of children that have higher than a 4 rating equals about 16%, and similarly the share of children who have lower than a 2 rating equals about 16% (because the shape of the curve is the same on either side of the mean). It is also important to note that higher, say, than a 4 rating doesn't mean all of those kids are a 5. We can define gradations in between, such as 4.5; or 1.5 on the lower end below a 2 rating, but not as low as a 1.

In travel sports, the skill levels typically will be above average, say 3.5 to 5. In a group of 100 players, how many will that be? As I said before, a rating of above 4 is 16% of the total, and the number of players between a 3 and 4 rating is 34% as shown in the bell curve below (or one-half of the 68% that are in the middle of the distribution). The 3.5 to 4 portion of this 34% is only about one-third of it, or about 11%, due to the descending slope of the curve over this 3.5 to 4 range. So the total number of players who are a 3.5 rating and higher is approximately 27% (the 16% that are above 4 plus the 11% that are 3.5 to 4). That just over one-fourth of all players.

So now let's return to our example of the 8 teams of 14 kids each, or 112 players total. Every group of kids will vary, but it is highly likely that just one-half this total, or 56 players, have enough range of skills to adequately represent the skill levels of 3.5 to 5 that are typical in travel leagues. This is not 8 teams worth of 14 kids, but rather just 4 teams.



We could go into a lot of very complex statistical formulas to emphasize the point further, but I will base my observations here on my years of experience, and with the proviso that complex statistics are beyond this book's scope. I'll leave that greater complexity to the authors of larger studies that I hope will come in the future.

In a camp-style program that uses this logic, far less players than 8 teams' worth are needed to provide every child with an adequate range of skills across the players they will play with and compete against. In fact, I would say that even less players are really needed to provide kids sufficient complete range for their development. So in our U10 soccer example, 40 kids would in my experience be plenty. That's 4 teams worth of 10 players each, to support 8-on-8 play with a couple of subs per team. This also gives everyone more play time than larger teams which is better for skill development anyway.

In towns with populations of 25,000 and higher, gathering 2 or even 4 teams' worth of kids in a younger age/gender group is not a tall order. This conclusion means that just two communities would be needed for a sports camp-style model to succeed in place of a travel league. With smaller populations, 3 or 4 communities might be needed, a greater but not insurmountable number.

## CHAPTER 10: FINAL THOUGHTS ON FIXING YOUTH SPORTS BY ADOPTING A NEW PLAY MODEL

I wrote this book seeking to provide an alternative approach to fixing the problems that plague today's youth sports. Rather than focus on fixing the symptoms, I want to go straight to the root cause and provide the antidote to what ails kids' sports programs. To me, the secret is simply to change the play model in younger age groups and reap the rewards of the accompanying improvements to the environment in which younger kids play. This change is accomplished by reducing, and in some cases even eliminating, adults' incentives to thwart what's best for kids even if the adults act unwittingly.

Based on my research, the good news is that younger children's skills will increase faster with alternate approaches to the traditional team-league model that is widespread today. So we get both a better environment and better sports skills and education. What's not to like?

I have also proposed that parents, coaches, and administrators who fear a new model in principle take very little risk if they try it, especially in the ways I suggest in Chapter 9. After all, we're talking about the youth practices and games of kids in elementary school. I do not think that we have to be overly concerned that trying something different will ruin their budding sports careers.

In Chapter 3, I provided a great example of a truly groundbreaking play model that the *Joy of the People* program, located in St. Paul, Minnesota, has now successfully implemented for the past several years. This program's success illustrates that what I recommend is not just theoretical. Now I want to include some further perspectives about adopting new play models. New models are not as difficult and crazy as some doubters may think.

I want to return in more detail to a great example of an alternate program that I touched on in Chapter 9, namely *Backyard Sports*, which Danny Bernstein founded in 2005 in White Plains, New York. Then I will offer further perspectives on the advantages of sports camp models from a regional director of a well-respected youth soccer training organization.

### **Backyard Sports**

Backyard Sports was founded by a guy named Danny Bernstein, who is also its Executive Director. His biography states how he learned to love sports right in his own neighborhood, the way kids used to play. He grew up on Long Island and played in schoolyards, driveways, and backyards. He attended Amherst College, where he played goalkeeper on the varsity soccer team and was elected captain his senior year. He earned an M.A.T. in Physical Education from Manhattanville College in New York.

Like many adults, Danny has experienced the downside of youth sports in his coaching career. Finding a better way (combined with his positive experiences as a kid) inspired him to create Backyard Sports. He strongly believes that sports should instill character and values beyond winning, snazzy uniforms and championships; the key mission should be to teach the love of playing sports and how this love can continue throughout life.

Rather than simply paraphrase Danny's approach and model, these are excerpts from his website, [www.backyardsports.com](http://www.backyardsports.com).

"Founded in 2005, Backyard Sports is a unique, community team sports program based in Westchester County, New York.



Youth sport programs exist in a much more competitive world today than a generation ago. Current programs resemble a professional model where results, records and instant success rule the sports landscape.

Knowing how to be correctly competitive is not something we're born with. Appropriate competitiveness and winning attitudes often need to be cultivated and encouraged. But, if done properly, within the right time frame and in a positive environment, competitive training can help our youngsters grow into the leaders of tomorrow.

That is why we created Backyard Sports. We believe that any child, given the right coaching and support, can acquire the competitive edge and winning skills that will serve them in sports, academics, and beyond the playing field.

Backyard Sports provides weekend and after school sports instruction and game play for boys and girls ages 4-16 years old. Our programs are designed for EVERY child who desires a positive and healthy sports experience. Many programs will appeal to the "gifted" athlete and promote the idea of elevating the child to "the next level." However, these programs ignore the single most important aspect of the child athlete: their social and emotional needs. Both experts and coaches at the highest level of sports agree that emotional not mechanical development is what is most important during the childhood and adolescent years."

One great example of this different approach is Backyard Sports' After School Sports Camp. It focuses on building skills and fun without the need for parents to drive kids there. Backyard Sports picks up kids at their school, and brings them straight to the facilities for an afternoon of sports and skill development, and then returns the kids to their schools at 5:45 pm.

The goals are to improve athletic abilities, promote teamwork, and have a great time. Coaching methods are designed to provide self-confidence and teach leadership skills. Kids can participate in basketball, soccer, hockey, flag football, and other sports. The program currently takes place at some of the SUNY Purchase College facilities.

What a terrific idea! In addition to the sports camp concept, busy parents have the convenience of built-in transportation. In the good old days, kids of course provided their own transportation to the corner lot (walking, bikes, even roller skates). Backyard Sports recreates this but with important attributes needed for today's world: quality facilities, good coaching/mentorship, and convenience and safety for parents. The cost is also reasonable. Danny can supply lots of testimonials about the Backyard Sports approach and successes. Why would you not want to take advantage of this?

Backyard Sports also offers other programs, including ones that have a more competitive focus (and that can be a potential alternative to "travel" play). But the After School Program is an example of a model that embodies the less formal sports camp with a focus on skills, and not just winning.

But let's get to my biggest point here. This kind of program can also be created by a community volunteer organization that has access to needed facilities (gyms, playing fields, etc.), and a willingness to focus first and foremost on learning and building skills, getting and training some quality coaches, and developing the logistics to get kids to the program. During the week, these organizations might also partner with local elementary and secondary schools that seek to provide after-school enrichment for boys and girls who might otherwise be latch-key kids. It's not

hard to do this. So while *Joy of the People* has developed its own unique facility and program that's really terrific, *Backyard Sports* shows how the sports camp concept can be developed within a community using locally available facilities.

### **Major Soccer Camp Provider: the Value of Training and Camps versus Traditional Play** (from a Regional Director)

The United States has several major providers of soccer camps and training, and I have known many over the years. Recently I spoke with a regional director from a well-known provider that secures its trainers from overseas. Its approach is to bring qualified and trained coaches over from Europe and have them teach soccer to children in America. This organization has operated in this country for well over a decade, and provides camps and coaching services to many soccer programs around the nation. I have not provided the name because the viewpoints are of a senior regional director on the East coast.

I asked this director to email his personal thoughts about the camp approach versus traditional models for recreational programs, and about what he saw as the potential impact on skills. Here is what he said:

“Technical improvements are based on learning the principles of how to do the technique and constant repetition. The old saying that ‘practice makes perfect’ should actually be ‘practice makes permanent.’ It is therefore very important that coaches are able to identify where incorrect technique is being used, and coach the kids on how to do it properly.

For the model of having volunteer coaches only, the biggest thing that will impact the players’ development is the coaches’ ability to identify when mistakes in technique occur and why the kids are not having success. The problem with having volunteer parents coaching is a lack of experience. Volunteer parents may have an understanding of how to coach and may even know some of the coaching points, but more often than not they are unable to identify breakdowns in technique and as such are unable to provide corrective instruction. Volunteer coaches may also not be able to identify when incorrect technique has a success and as such may encourage incorrect technique in the kids. Within this method you are likely to see some success in the short term, but it can be damaging to the kids’ long term development.

The biggest reason for improvement seen with this group of volunteer coaches is likely to come from the kids simply playing soccer and gaining more experience with the game.

A master coach model (where one or professional trainers guide volunteer coaches) will likely see an increase of improvement from a traditional all-volunteer model. The set up will allow coaches to put on more sessions based around developing specific techniques and allowing for more touches on the ball. The increased number of touches will automatically aid the development of kids. The addition of having a professional coach will help with any adaptations that need to be done. They will also allow for more influence on coaching points periodically throughout the session. Again, the volunteer coaches will likely not have the experience to identify breakdowns in technique and address them to encourage the correct technique.

The option of the complete camp model will allow the professional coaches to be fully hands-on working with the kids throughout the session. Their experience will help them

to identify when techniques break down and address these issues. This will be the approach that sees the biggest amount of long term improvement. Based on my experience, these are the numbers I would suggest:

Skill increases by season by type of model (based on two seasons per calendar year):

Seasons	1	2	3	4	Cumulative	Index
Volunteer coaches only	10-15%	10-15%	10-15%	10-15%	46-75% (avg. = 61%)	100
Master coach model	15-20%	15-20%	15-20%	20-25%	83-116% (avg. = 100%)	164
Professional sports camp	15-20%	20-25%	25-30%	25-30%	116-154% (avg. = 135%)	221

These estimates are purely based on how I've seen kids we work with progress over a 2-year period. As the training progresses, these numbers will increase further as the techniques become more difficult.”

This of course is just one perspective from a key director of a professional soccer camp. I could certainly gather more, but I think this director illustrates why youth sports camp organizations have been successful in this country, and the added value they can provide.

If we look at the estimates of skill gains in four seasons, the sports camp model, in the regional director’s opinion, outperforms the traditional soccer play used in most American communities by about 2 to 1. The sports camp model’s gains over and above traditional programs range from 5% - 15% per season. As I said before, when reviewing my study, any one season may not seem like much, but on a cumulative basis over time the gains add up. The numbers here can be debated, of course, but overall I think these estimates are on target.

### **Even Kids Recognize Sports Camps Offer More Skills**

As part of my research into the alternative model of youth sports camps, I also surveyed a sampling of kids in a recreational soccer program from a town in Fairfield County, Connecticut. They were players in the U10 and U12 age groups. The question simply was: if you have attended a soccer camp/clinic, where do you learn the most skills compared with your regular team? *Over 80% of the kids said they learn more at camps or clinics than their regular practices and games.* So even the kids recognize the value of camps; the adults need to see how this alternative can play a larger role in youth sports.

### **A Trial Really Has Nothing to Lose, and Here’s How You Can Be Prepared for Questions**

In Chapter 9, I discussed the issue of skeptical parents (and skeptical volunteer parent coaches). Let me spend a bit more time here on this. Skepticism may well be the biggest obstacle that administrators will face in trying an alternative program for a season or two. Below is a list of specific steps that you can take not only to address parent questions, but also to get a trial started.

First, before you begin a trial, the program administrator wants to educate the parents about issues in youth sports generally *and* in your local program. If you’re like most programs around the country, you have a number of the problems I discussed in the first chapter. You may also

have to convince fellow members of the board of directors, whose majority vote may be needed to make the trial happen.

- \* **Schedule and hold a meeting with volunteer coaches and parents** at a local school, gym, library meeting room, or someplace similar.
- \* **Show support from experts in the field and bring to the meeting a couple of the books** I listed in Chapter 1. Have a couple key excerpts ready to read from, or even pass out photocopies. These books are easily available at the major online booksellers. I would highly recommend Dr. Shane Murphy's book, *The Cheers and the Tears*, and the excerpt I used in Chapter 1.
- \* **Be prepared to incorporate your own views** and anecdotes about local events, and examples of problems you have experienced. You undoubtedly have a few, and the audience may be familiar with some or all of them.
- \* **Explain that the biggest issue locally may not be excessive yelling and screaming; rather it may be the "normal" environment of over-invested adults** who can put too much pressure on kids, and who can negatively impact creativity and fun by trying to over-coach and control outcomes in games. Ask the parents what they would hear if they closed their eyes at a game. Usually it would not be the kids. That's a simple little test anyone can do.
- \* **Ask the players how they feel.** This can be as simple as asking a few players some questions on the field and taking some notes, or scheduling and holding one or more sit-down sessions with several kids. Perhaps even video tape the conversation to show at a parents' meeting, with the permission of the players' parents. Maybe even have a couple of kids speak at your meeting, if you find some outgoing ones who are supportive and who again have their parents' permission.
- \* **Discuss how an alternative approach can improve the environment** and make the program's operation easier (that is, less dependent on scrounging for volunteers) without unreasonably raising registration fees.
- \* **Reinforce that kids at younger ages won't lose out on skill development** by not having "formal" games. Indeed, skill development will be enhanced. Remember too that as far as the kids are concerned, sports camp models incorporate games.

As part of the education process, you can conduct an online survey of parents about what's happening in your program. You may find that a significant percentage of parents cite one or more troublesome issues. Putting together an inexpensive survey is easy with online services such Survey Monkey. The link can be easily emailed to your parents' and results are compiled for you online. Questions might include:

- \* Do you think your coach has enough training in how to interact well with children? How much of what you hear on the field on game day comes from the players versus the adults?
- \* Are some coaches constantly coaching, or do they let the kids make their own decisions?
- \* How many parents have you seen question a referee's call?
- \* How would your child respond if he or she were asked whether the amount of coaching at games is too much, too little, or about right? (Trust me, almost no one will ask for more.)
- \* Do some teams' practices appear more task-driven than providing fun with learning?
- \* Should the program incorporate more activities that put the kids first in making decisions as they play?
- \* What might you suggest? (This open-ended question should invite comments.)

You could ask many more questions to gain added insight. This information can prove very valuable in assessing your program, and looking for opportunities to promote a trial while indicating that some of the impetus came from the parents and players themselves. In addition, you should:

**Gather and publicize opinions from one or more local sports camp providers and/or professional training services.** Yes, it is easy to say that they may be self-serving, but good providers with solid local reputations are also likely to have local recognition and respect. Even ask a representative to speak to your board and invite parents to attend. Experts in developing skills with kids can go a long way toward convincing skeptics.

**Support your views by citing this book's empirical studies,** whose data has not been available until now. Skeptics can argue using their own anecdotes and opinions, but it is harder to argue against actual studies and data. Plus who doesn't want better skills and more fun?

**Offer to set up a small trial program.** One season is a start and can incorporate both subjective and objective measures. A before-and-after survey can be conducted to gather parents' and players' opinions, and you can also use a local expert training provider to conduct objective skill assessments. (These are done all the time in tryouts in competitive programs anyway.) If your program is in a larger community, you can designate only part of an in-house league as a play model experiment. For example, if your town has eight teams in a particular age/gender group, four can be part of the trial and the remaining four can play as usual; these teams will interplay more than once during a season, but that is not a natural impediment.

I could spend even more time on the specific options and to-do list items that can be part of setting up a trial program, but that is beyond this book's scope. Tailor your decision-making to local conditions. As I have said, you can contact many professional resources to start a review and get the ball rolling.

## Wrapping It Up

Thanks for reading this book, and I hope you will take away at least three important thoughts:

1. Fixing the environmental issues in youth sports, and frankly the outright abuses, takes more than just coach and parent training, good behavior pledges, and the like. *The real key is to change the play model itself.* This change is all that really works in the younger age groups.
2. Both my own research, and other programs already being implemented (such as *Joy of the People* and *Backyard Sports*), show that better play models, which put learning ahead of winning, can also produce *superior skill development.* That is what's most important for younger players.
3. *You too can try something new.* It just isn't that hard and there are many resources available.

In addition, I am always available by email or phone for questions and advice. Please don't be shy; you can get hold of me at 781-729-6134 or at [bobbigelow@comcast.net](mailto:bobbigelow@comcast.net). I would welcome hearing from you! And you may also visit my website at [www.bobbigelow.com](http://www.bobbigelow.com).

*And the best of luck on your journey to really improve youth sports in your community!*

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## AFTERWORD

**By Don Longtin, Glastonbury, Connecticut**

Bob Bigelow is a breath of fresh air -- generous with knowledge, thoughtful in outlook, and committed to providing richer opportunities for every youth leaguer. Athletic competition at the highest level has spiced Bob's life, and he has spent the past 25 years urging parents, coaches, and league administrators to better serve this generation of children. Building on *Just Let the Kids Play* (2001), the new book you have just read delivers a message that deserves to be heard and heeded.

Would Bob's "Sports Camp Play Model" work with elementary school players and teams? I answer with a resounding "yes" because I have seen what works and what does not. I am 81 years old, and I have been a Little League coach for 48 years, and a youth basketball coach for 41 of these years. I have worked with thousands of kids, and I look forward to the half-century mark because I still coach in both sports.

Nationwide too many youth leaguers abandon potentially bright sports futures because they quit before their time. Studies estimate that about 70% of youth leaguers leave organized sports by age 13. Percentages like this can appear cold and impersonal, mere anonymous numbers on a piece of paper. But behind this embarrassingly high figure are real people, few of whom have even reached middle school.

We adults can do better for the young athletes whose upbringings we shape. Most youth leaguers join their teams enthusiastically, and some join to explore their interests. Some leave a sport for other athletic or non-athletic pursuits, but too many youngsters tell researchers that they quit early because the adults turned up the pressure cooker too soon, often as early as kindergarten. Thirteen years old is much too young for anyone to exit, emotionally and physically drained, from activities that are supposed to bring fun and fulfillment.

Treating kids right brings its own rewards. In both our Glastonbury Little League and our Glastonbury Basketball program every year, enrollments far outdistance those of programs in nearby towns of comparable size. Perhaps the secret is that we mandate equal playing time and enlightened coaching for all youngsters. No boy or girl signs up to play for an adult coach who thinks that fielding a short bench maps an easy road to victory. For too many kids, that road is a dead end.

I met Bob Bigelow in the early 1990s, and I have watched him shape adults' attitudes ever since, one audience at a time. Bob is a true inspiration in the youth coaching world because his message comes with credibility. Just think about it -- a former NBA player who is still passionate and creative about keeping the doors of athletic competition open to all boys and girls regardless of their ability level.

For the younger age groups, Bob's "Sports Camp Play Model" provides the ideal mix -- fun, camaraderie, competition, and expert skills instruction. This all enables young athletes to develop love for their sports, to explore their own interests, and then to advance through adolescence as far as their talents and dedication carry them.

At the end of the day, we adults are not in the "sports business"; we are in the "kids' business." President John F. Kennedy once said that "those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future." Looking beyond the past and present, Bob Bigelow charts a path toward healthier athletic futures for the people who matter most in youth sports, the youth.