

When the kids are raised to win

By Bob Shaw (Pioneerpress.com)
posted: April 6, 2009



What kindergartner would want to wrestle Joey Flores?

With a Mohawk buzz cut and a flare for takedowns, the 6-year-old exudes the cockiness that comes from three years of competitive wrestling. *"I feel good at wrestling,"* puffed Joey during a break in a recent tournament in Inver Grove Heights. For a 45-pounder, he is intimidating. Few kids would want to tangle with him.

And therein lies a problem for wrestling — and every other sport Minnesota youth can play in middle and high school. When parents and children see elite athletes like Joey, they think they can't compete.

They are daunted by a standard of competition that includes traveling teams, summer camps, specialty training centers and programs that start before kindergarten. Even elementary-age latecomers find they can't catch up with the Joeys of their sport. So they quit — by the thousands. That's one reason wrestling participation has plummeted in Minnesota by 58 percent since the 1981-82 school year. Participation for all school-sponsored sports has dropped an average of about half.

The demands of competition — on children and parents — worry athletics directors. Woodbury activities director John Soma sees the effects in all sports. *"It's unfortunate. If kids are not playing soccer year-round, they can't compete,"* he said. *"And in basketball, it is tough competing against kids who have been playing since they could walk. The intensity is increasing, and I don't think it is good for kids."*

Winning is fun

If the quality of youth sports is high, one might reasonably blame couples like Kevin and Katie Featherstone. The Woodbury parents freely confess to giving their children every opportunity to enjoy and learn from sports despite sacrifices that would be unthinkable in other families. Their four kids have been involved in soccer and hockey since, in one case, age 3. Kevin helps or coaches three teams. Winter and summer, Katie said, there is a sports activity going on every day, often twice a day. *"I love sports for our kids. They learn how to win and how to lose. They learn sportsmanship and how to keep going when you are tired."* The level of competition is boosted by summer camps and free-standing sports training centers.

At Edge Performance Hockey Training in Stillwater, for example, experts in hockey use weights, dry-land drills and a skating treadmill to sharpen youngsters' skills. Edge co-owner Matt Doman agrees with critics who say fun is essential in youth programs. But so is winning. *"Winning is fun,"* he explained. The way to do both, he said, is to give kids early training that boosts their competence. On a recent afternoon, Tricia Sagissor, of Stillwater, brought her boys in for a workout. *"Absolutely, this is good for them,"* she shouted, over the roar of son Simon on the treadmill. *"The more active they are, the better off they are. This is what kids need, not to be at home on Facebook."*

Saying 'No'

But in the face of ever-tougher competition, other parents are balking. Kathleen Plasch gets steamed when she hears calls for parental sacrifice. *"They say they do it because they love their kids,"* said Plasch, of St. Paul. *"Well, I love mine, too. But you have to be real."* At one time, she was a single mother of three hockey players. *"It was easy,"* she said sarcastically. *"You just don't do anything but drive them from October through March."* The demands on parents are "ludicrous," said Skip Peltier, director of the Herb Brooks Foundation.

Some youth hockey players play 65 games per season, he said. His daughter, when playing seventh-grade basketball, had 63 games — and only 15 practices. That skewed schedule emphasizes winning over development of skills, he said. Marc Carlson, of Woodbury, said his 7-year-old son became a football dropout 20 minutes into his first practice. When the boys were asked to assume the three-point scrimmage-line stance, Carlson said, he saw a coach shove his son to the ground with his foot. A short time later, the boy was grabbed by a coach and fell to the ground. *"I put my crying son in the car,"* Carlson said. *"As a parent, I am sickened by this event. He said he never wanted to play football again. He was afraid of the coaches."*

No time for latecomers

Intense competition hurts participation, experts say, when a child is considered over the hill at age 10. Talent often doesn't emerge until adolescence, Carlson said. He recalled being a "shorter, fatter kid" in ninth grade who went out for basketball — and eventually started on a team that won the Iowa state championship in 1988. That probably wouldn't happen today, said John Uppgren, a Stillwater lacrosse coach and father of three hockey-playing boys. *"The myth of the farm kid who tries out for the team in 10th grade and makes varsity is a thing of the past,"* he said. The benefits of years of training are overwhelming, he said. Latecomers learn that lesson the hard way.

Jenny Holmgren, a freshman at Champlin Park High School, remembers trying out for seventh-grade basketball. *"It was intimidating. Most of them had been playing their whole lives,"* she said. *"I didn't get the lingo. I had to ask, 'What's a layup?'"* She jammed her finger, then told everyone she had broken her hand. Any excuse, she said, to quit. Today, she enjoys playing high school softball, a sport she's been involved in since age 8. The varsity tryouts, though, are grueling. *"It's like trying out for the Olympics, and here we are in high school,"* Jenny said.

Haves and have-nots

Super-charged competition widens the gap between winning and losing schools. When competition becomes a sham, children quit. Central High School in St. Paul, for example, has a winning tradition in girls basketball. But Central drains talent from competitors, said John Loo, an Arlington High School teacher and coach. *"That lowers the total participation to have one powerhouse and the others on the periphery,"* Loo said. There are only eight girls on the Arlington basketball team this year. One of them, Brandy McCrane, said, *"You know you are going to lose. It is reality. If I knew that before, I wouldn't have joined."*

A sport can get trapped in a downward spiral — losses lead to fewer athletes, which lead to more losses, which lead to... In towns such as Winona and La Crescent, wrestling teams consist of four or five wrestlers. One girls gymnastics team in Rochester has two athletes. Arlington had two boys swimmers last year, and none this year. *"The more you lose, the less everyone turns out,"* said Ashley Ehlers of the Arlington basketball team.

Pressure's on

The intensity of competition is evident in every grandstand — from this month's state high school championships to tournaments for those still struggling with their ABCs. *"C'mon, Joey!"* shouted Frank Flores, of Albert Lea, as Joey grappled at the Inver Grove Heights tournament. Nearby, Delbert Bullerman, of tiny Adrian, Minn., was asked if the pressure was too much for his 7-year-old son, Beau. *"You want pressure?"* he snapped. *"In our town we have 13-year-old girls who are pregnant. There are drugs and drinking in schools. Then there is paying bills in this economy."*

He gave his boy a hand-slap and said, *"Pressure is part of life."*