

Year-Round Sports: Growing Old and Wearing Thin?

Not long ago, I was walking through a parking lot hurriedly looking for my car so as to get away from the drizzling rain. Climbing in and catching my breath, I glanced up at the adjacent field in which a soccer game was taking place. It was ringed with dedicated parents huddled under umbrellas, probably feeling as miserable in the rain as I had just felt.

Unfortunately, their plight is one experienced by many who faithfully cart their children to games, practices, and other sports training events. And according to a [recent article](#) in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, sports parents (and kids) are under ever greater pressure these days:

“The offseason is disappearing, fueled by an explosion of pay-to-play club sports that have scores of young athletes training year-round. ...

In the never-ending blur of year-round practices and games, the importance of the high school season itself is shrinking, to the chagrin of many coaches.”

The escalating emphasis on year-round sports has some coaches worried. Some argue that it's tough on the kids themselves:

“‘The genie’s out of the bottle now,’ Totino-Grace activities director Mike Smith said. ‘I don’t know how you’re going to reverse it. These athletes just don’t have very long to be a kid.’”

Others question what the focus on sports says about society:

“‘You see families that can’t afford to buy groceries, but they’ll somehow find a way to get a thousand-dollar pair of

*skates and get to New York,' Hill-Murray boys' hockey coach Bill Lechner said. 'It scares me; **our priorities are out of whack.'**'"*

That last statement is one we should all ponder seriously. Why is it that something as basic as an athletic game is claiming such intense focus and causing even athletic coaches to question our priorities?

There are several possible answers to that question, and all seem to stem from a greater underlying problem of individuals using sports to fill voids in life.

The most obvious is the higher education void. For many students and parents, the focus on sports offers the golden ticket to college. With college costs at an [all-time, often non-payable high](#), many families feel the only path to success can come through an athletic scholarship.

Unfortunately, that hope is often as feasible as winning the lottery, for as the *Star Tribune* notes, "only 2 percent of all high school athletes receive some form of college scholarship."

A second void American parents and students might be trying to fill is the need for community. Individuals naturally long to be a part of something, to have common interests, and to work toward a common goal. In recent years, the two venues in which many Americans once found this community – [church](#) and [neighborhood](#) – have seen an alarming decline. Is it possible that the intense focus on sports could be partially fueled by those seeking to fill the internal void that these two communities have left?

Finally, is it possible that sports participation is intensified when families don't really know each other? According to the [OECD](#), nearly 70 percent of American children live in homes where all adults hold paid employment. We also

live in homes where [electronic devices](#) often seem to destroy togetherness. Combining these elements, we have a recipe which makes conversation difficult and family downtime awkward. As such, it's not hard to see how many families would be tempted, although perhaps not intentionally, to strive toward busyness in order to avoid the uncomfortable, one-on-one time with family.

There's definitely a time and place for sports, but have American families come to love them too much? And are they using them as a form of escape from other, deeper issues that society needs to address?

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