

Parental Violence in Youth Sports

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alan Block", is written over a horizontal line.

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ABSTRACT

. Violence in youth sports has become a grave problem in society. It is the assumptions of this study this violence results not from the behavior of the athletes but is promoted by the parents of youth athletes who transfer and model aggressive behaviors to youth athletes, by the coaches who encourage and promote violent and aggressive behaviors in an effort to win at all costs, and by the spectators who support violent and hostile behavior as part of the game. Further exacerbating the problem are professional athletes whose violent behaviors serve as role models for parents and youth athletes.

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Chapter I: Introduction

For many individuals, reflecting on childhood sports participation conjures up fond memories. Perhaps the memory is of a brisk spring morning at the track, hot puffs of breath floating in the air as a runner races for the finish line. Through youth sports we met the different challenges required for healthy development, demonstrated effort and commitment, basked in success, and learned to cope with disappointment. Personally, in my senior year of high school, my high school track career was coming to a finish. In the sectional qualifying race of the 300 yard hurdles for state championship, I fell on the second hurdle. The rest of the runners sped past me, and I stumbled to get up. I recall seeing the backs of seven female hurdlers running ahead of me. The drive to win, to not end my career with bloody knees and finishing last, pushed me to run as I have never run before. Approaching the first corner I was gaining on the rest of the field. By the time I hit the home stretch my breath pounding in my ears as well as my feet hitting the track, there's a memory of my dad's voice "Run, Chrissier! You're going to do it!" The voice was positive, encouraging and full of support. I did do it. I passed the field to come in first, qualifying for state, and ran my best time ever in the event. This experience provided a lasting positive memory not only in sports but in how my father was a positive sports parent. So now, to watch my own children grow while meeting challenges is one of life's great joys.

It is not news when children play a game, have fun, and go home. It's only news when there is violence or abuse, or kids being damaged in some way. For example, in 2006, two soccer coaches got into a fistfight at a game for 7-year-old girls. In that same year in another incident, a youth football coach in 2006 attacked a referee, and another

coach went after a 13-year-old opponent. A parent allegedly pulled a .357 Magnum at a football game for 5- and 6-year-olds as he argued over playing time for his son. (Blount, 2007). Our society suffers from rampant violence, and our public feelings toward competition and toward violent aggression in “the real world” greatly affect our view toward competition and violent aggression within sport. The term *violence* will be used to refer to all acts of physical and verbal aggression. More often than not, it’s the most horrible of anti-social, violent aggression that is emphasized in competitive sports, from the youngest levels to the professional ranks. Baron (1977, p. 12, cited in Cox, 1990, p. 266) offers the following definition for aggression:

"Aggression is any form of behavior directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment." According to the definition, then,

- Aggression is an act and not a cognitive state
- Aggression is not accidental; rather violence is an intentional act meant to inflict harm
- Aggressive acts involve both bodily and psychological harm
- Aggressive acts involve only living beings; harm to objects does not count as aggression
- The receiver of aggression does not want to get hurt

Additionally, *sports violence* can be defined as behavior which causes harm, occurs outside of the rules of the sport, and is unrelated to the competitive objectives of the sport

(Terry and Jackson, 1985). As Thomas Tutko and William Bruns perceptively wrote in the mid 1970's:

...Parents or coaches might argue, "Look, you're talking about professional sports – but the pros have nothing to do with us." I strongly disagree. In my opinion, the professionals (and many of their collegiate counterparts) are becoming an increasingly destructive model for childhood sports, from coaching styles to the competitive ethos, and if left unchecked, this madness will eventually undermine the inherent values of organized sports.

The emphasis on winning gets out of control when overzealous parents become aggressive in their quest to be number one. Recent events show that parents have become increasingly hostile at youth sporting events. In mid-October, a T-ball coach from a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pa., was sentenced to one to six years for offering one of his players, an 8-year-old boy, \$25 to throw the ball at a teammate, a mildly autistic 9-year-old, during warm-ups to injure him so he would be too sore to play in the June 2005 playoff game. That incident made many year-end Top 10 lists as one of the worst sports events of 2005 (McMon 2006). *Aggression* is the term used to refer to all behavior intended to destroy another person's property or to injure another person, psychologically or physically. *Instrumental aggression* is non-emotional and task-oriented (Abdul-Hagg 1989).

A case in point concerns one of the first documented incidents of "sports rage" occurring more than 25 years ago in Kissimmee, Fla. "*Sports rage*" can be defined as: Within the context of an organized athletic activity, any physical attack upon another

person such as striking, wounding or otherwise touching in an offensive manner or any malicious, verbal abuse or sustained harassment which threatens subsequent violence or bodily harm (Heizman 2002). According to the article, "Taking the Fun Out of the Game," which first appeared in *Sports Illustrated*, "a mob of adults attacked four coaches of a winning team of 12-year-olds with clubs and pipes, sending one coach to the hospital. A cry from the crowd, 'He's dead!' apparently satisfied the mob and it withdrew just before the police arrived. The coach was not dead, only unconscious for four hours." Another incident involved a father from Miami who got into a fistfight with his son's coach over his choice of playing position. Finally, a "particularly heartbreaking loss" resulted in a Palm Beach coach punching a rival team's star player (Underwood, 1975).

These incidents did not make headline News then – the media didn't exist in its present day twenty-four hour, seven days a week, nor did MSNBC, Fox News, and the World Wide Web. As a result, the American people were not offered stories such as, "Angry Mob Attacks Coaches," especially when such stories occurred outside of their immediate vicinity. Mass media contributed to the proliferation and acceptability of sports violence. (Leonard 1988) maintains that the media occupies a paradoxical position. On the one hand it affords ample exposure to sports-related violence via television, magazines, newspapers, and radio, thus providing numerous examples to children who may imitate such behavior. It glamorizes players, often the most controversial and aggressive ones. Its commentary is laced with descriptions suggestive of combat, linking excitement to violent action. On the other hand, the exposure given to sports violence by the media has stimulated increased efforts to control and prevent such behavior.

The most popular section of most daily newspapers is the sports section (MacPherson

1989). Because of this, businesses are willing to pay higher advertising costs for placing ads in this section (MacPherson 1989). If violence ceases to exist, it will not be the same game. There exists the strong possibility that the media profits from violence, and therefore, in the interest of society/culture, we learn to tolerate it and bring it under corrective control that will satisfy our needs.

Collegiate and professional sports have their own ongoing scandals and casualties, as sport pages in the press and television news, regularly inform us. We see entire teams suddenly converging on the field to battle it out over some questionable incident or an official's decision. Dozens of Miami and FIU players stormed the Orange Bowl field and fought during the third quarter of their teams' game Saturday October 15, 2006, an incident that led to the suspension of at least 31 players and forced officials from both schools to publicly apologize for the melee (Wojciechowski 2006). Parents (and children) observe violence in professional sports and come to believe that it is acceptable behavior. When a role model charges the mound after a pitch that is high and tight, children often see their parents cheering the assault. Applying professional tactics like "brushing back the batter" (a pitch that is sent close to the back of the batter) or "taking out the second baseman," (a runner that is sent on a steal or hard run to get the base at any cost) is counterproductive to the spirit of youth sport.

In the terms of acceptance of violence, perhaps hockey traditionally has been seen as the most violent of the professional sports. Indeed more than twenty years ago, Vaz (1972) observed about the training for professional hockey players that the:

... Implicit objective is to put the opposing star player out of action without doing him serious harm. Illegal tactics and 'tricks' of the game are both encouraged and

taught; rough play and physically aggressive performance are strongly encouraged and... players are taught the techniques of fighting. Minimal consideration is given to the formal normative rules of the game, and the conceptions of sportsmanship and fair play are forgotten... Gradually the team is molded into a tough fighting unit prepared for violence whose primary objective is to win hockey games (Vaz 1972).

Young boys now are put in violent sports because society is convinced that this will build character. An increase in both frequency and seriousness of acts of violence has been well documented. Violence is most prevalent in team contact sports, such as ice hockey, football, and rugby. While most occurrences of violence emanate from players, others, including coaches, parents, fans, and the media, also contribute to what has been described as an epidemic of violence in sports today (Leonard 1988).

The violent behaviors that are witnessed are excused as natural components of the male behavior. Males that become successful in these sports obtain status, respect and adoration. The violence has become so normalized that society now turns a blind eye towards the destruction in sports. Most athletes that are popular are those that routinely display acts of physical violence. Because they are so well known and highly praised, they often escape substantial punishment. These athletes have been taught at an early age the importance of physical threat and dominance then use the sporting field to recite these notions (Klement 2003).

The parents of millions of youth participating in organized sports today terrorize coaches, assault referees and hurt kids. Survey USA took a poll of 500 parents in

Indianapolis, Ind. in May 2001, asking about views of parent violence in youth sports.

The survey found the following:

- 55 percent of parents say they have witnessed other parents engaging in verbal abuse at youth sporting events.
- 21 percent say they've witnessed a physical altercation between other parents at youth sporting events.
- 73 percent of those polled believe that parents who become verbally or physically abusive during games should be banned from youth sports.

Dreadful incidents as such as physical altercations between parents are often referred to as "Little League parent syndrome" or "sport rage" reveals a pattern of violence and verbal abuse arranged by adults at youth sporting events upon children, coaches and officials.

- In May 2003, a little league secretary in Wakefield, Mass., faced criminal charges of assault and battery for allegedly kicking and swearing at an 11-year-old boy who had been fighting with her son at the baseball field.
- In September 2003, a Toronto father was charged with assault after grabbing and shaking his 10-year-old daughter's face mask at a youth hockey game.

These are not lone incidents. Every year we hear stories about parental violence in youth sports:

- a soccer dad punched a 14-year-old in the face because he had scuffled with his son over the ball;
- a father dressed in slacks and a shirt leaped into the pool to slap the water by his child and started yelling at his son for losing a race at a swim meet;

- A mother slapped her 9-year-old daughter in front of everyone at a swim meet because she missed her race, and more.
- Perhaps one of the most widely reported cases of violence involved a woman who was jailed for trying to hire a hit man to kill the mother of her daughter's cheerleading rival, which eventually led to a made-for-TV movie, "Willing to Kill: the Texas Cheerleader Story," which aired on ABC in 1992 (Docheff 2004).

To date, many of the explanations given for "why rage occurs" have been too shortsighted to be of any practical value. For example, in response to the important and legitimate question, "Why do some parents behave so poorly at their child's sporting event?" the often parroted answer has been, "because no one told them they couldn't." This kind of naive analysis fails to provide direction for youth sports administrators, in terms of preventing sports rage, because it doesn't address the underlying reasons for poor parental behavior and the tolerance for violence in youth sports (Heizman 2002).

Public tolerance of aggression and violence within sports in the U.S. society is also evident in the behavior of parents and coaches involvement in youth sports. There is a need to understand the dimensions of parental aggression in youth sports more completely. The purpose of the study is to explore the phenomenon that focuses on parental aggression in youth sports. The study is focused primarily on the parents who may enter the world of organized sports with young children as young as of the age of four and play up to age eighteen. I will examine the possibility that within youth sports parental aggression utilizes a legitimate way to achieve goals and as an inevitable expression of "human nature" through a literature review. Parents, guardians, coaches and professional athletes are the primary individuals involved the "athletic triangle".

It has been said that sports provide youth players and their spectators opportunities to let off steam, release feelings of aggression and learn to cope with stressful and highly emotional situations without resorting to overt aggression. Among athletes and fans there is a hesitant attitude toward sports violence. The ambivalence takes the form of justifying the existence of violence in sports, but not taking personal responsibility for it. Coaches tend to blame the fans, saying that violence is what attracts fans to the game in the first place. Athletes frequently say that they are opposed to violence, but that it is expected of them by coaches. Fans then justify violence by attributing aggressiveness to athletes and to situational aspects of the game-you cannot play hockey or football, they say, without violence (Goldstein 1983). The violence is explained away and an inherent part of the game.

It is believed that all forms of aggressive behaviors are grounded in instincts. Theoretical support for this idea is often based on the work of Sigmund Freud. According to Freudian theory, all humans possess a death instinct, sometimes referred to as the death wish. This instinct takes the form of destructive energy within a person's psyche. If this energy is not released intentionally, it will build up and be involuntarily released in the form of aggression against self (the extreme form of which suicide or against other (the extreme form of which are murder and warfare). The only way this destructive energy can be controlled is by finding an activity through which it can be safely released (Coakly 1990). Consequently it is assumptions of this study that participation in sports that:

1. Parents of youth athletes transfer and model aggressive behaviors to youth athletes.

2. Coaches encourage and promote violent and aggressive behaviors in an effort to win at all costs.
3. Spectators support violent and hostile behavior justifying the performance as part of the game.
4. Professional athletes are roll models for parents and youth athletes, their destructive behaviors become witnessed in youth sports.
5. Media promotes violence in sports to sell its products.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Theoretical Explanation of Sports Violence

There are three major theories that seek to explain violent aggression in sports; biological, psychological, and social learning theory. (Terry and Jackson, 1985 p. 27; Leonard, pp. 170-71). The first, biological theory, proposed most notably by Nobel Prize winner Konrad Lorenz, sees aggression as a basic, inherent human characteristic. Within this situation, sports are seen as a socially acceptable way to release built-up aggression.

Within the professional sports world aggressive participation is celebrated. A 1998 *Sports Illustrated* cover story on “the NFL’s dirtiest players” admirably described San Francisco 49ers guard Kevin Gogan’s tendencies to “punch, kick, trip, cut-block, sit on or attempt to neuter the man lined up across from him.”, sometimes even after a play has been whistled dead. Coach Steve Mariuchi expressed his approval; “Coaches want tough guys, players who love to hit and fly around and do things that are mean and nasty. Not everyone can be like that, but you can have one or two players who are a little overaggressive, that’s great.” (Messner 1990). Violence is closely associated with masculine ideology and character building; sport is used to show this masculinity.

And consider a comment by NBA coach Pat Riley, of the Miami Heat. Bemoaning an unusually, long break between his team’s playoff games, Riley in June of 1997 said, “Several days between games allows a player to become a person. During the playoffs, you don’t want players to be people.” If it is acknowledged that the supposedly civilizing influences of a player’s life outside sports can (negatively!) humanize him, then doesn’t it follow that it might also work the other way –that dehumanizing attitudes and experiences within sports might spill over into life outside sports” Jeffery Segrave and

his colleagues found that Canadian minor league, fifteen and sixteen year olds, ice hockey players were more likely than nonathletes to engage in physically violent acts of delinquency. And sociologist Howard Nixon found that male athletes in team contact sports, especially if they reported having intentionally hurt other athletes on the field, were more likely to hurt others outside sports. Evidence points to the conclusion that biological factors do predispose some individuals toward aggression. Through much research, it was found that people who suffer from reduced levels of serotonin are more likely prone to suffer from reduced abilities to control their aggressive impulses. These findings lend support to the view that biological factors do indeed play an important role in at least some forms of aggression (Kelgley 1996).

Many children are taught that it is unacceptable to hurt other people. In order to get athletes to be willing and able to inflict harm on others, the opponent must be objectified as the enemy, and the situation must be defined as “either him or me:” somebody’s going to get hurt. I could be you, it could be him—most of the time it’s better if it’s him.” The most obvious force behind this suppression of empathy is the rewards one gets for the successful utilization of violence (Messner 1988). “The coach loved it. Everybody loved it.” And it’s not just this sort of immediate positive reinforcement (Messner 1988). Many researchers believe that aggression is caused by some genetic or biological factor, and thus believe that cases involving aggression should be treated chemically. These views of genetic or material essentialism claim that not only are physical characteristics of an individual determined by genetic information, but one’s social roles, behaviors, and relationships also have a biological-genetic base (Kegley, 1996).

In short, according to Kegley, boys' relational capacities and opportunities for expressions of emotional vulnerability tend to be thwarted and suppressed. Some boys find in their early athletic experiences that sports offer them a context in which they can connect emotionally through aggressive participation to gain the respect of others. Ironically though, as one moves further away from the playful experiences of childhood into the competitive, routineized institutional context of athletic careers, one learns that in order to continue to receive approval and respect, one must be a winner. And to be a winner, you must be ready and willing to suppress your empathy for other athletes. In the connecting intimately with others; rather your body becomes a weapon which you train to defeat an objectified, dehumanized opponent. It is a dog eat dog world out there and you have to have that killer instinct (Messner 1988).

In sum, boys in central, aggressive team sports, learn early to use their bodies as weapons against an objectified opponent. The empathy that one might be expected to feel for the victim of one's punches, hits, or tackles is suppressed by the experience of being rewarded (with status and prestige, and also with connection and respect) for the successful utilization of one's body against other men. Empathy for one's opponent is also suppressed through the shared contextual ethic that injury is an expected apart of the game. These on the field values and practices are mutually constitutive of the off the field peer group dynamics, whereby the boundaries of the in group are constructed through homophobia and violence directed (verbally and sometimes physically) against boys and men who are outside the group (Messner 1990).

A recent survey conducted by *SportingKid* magazine states that adult violence and inappropriate behavior at youth sporting events is a major concern among today's parents.

While violent and inappropriate behavior is not a recent phenomenon, the number of high profile -- and sometimes fatal -- incidents have escalated of late. And according to survey results, there may be no end in sight unless actions are taken immediately.

The study reported that more than 84 percent of respondents have personally witnessed parents acting violently (shouting, berating, using abusive language) toward children, coaches and/or officials during youth sporting events. More than 80 percent believe this violent and inappropriate behavior is becoming an epidemic across the country and should be dealt with on a national level, the survey stated. In fact, an overwhelming 85 percent of respondents say they would support a national program that provided educational programs for parents of kids who play youth sports and required mandatory background checks on youth coaches. Respondents believe these measures would help deter the rash of violent and inappropriate behavior.

Among the survey's other findings, 79.8 percent of respondents said they have personally fallen victim to inappropriate behavior, while 80.4 percent believe inappropriate behavior is destroying what youth sports are meant to be. Even though according to behavioral theory, aggression is an acceptable release through inappropriate actions.

The SportingKid survey was conducted in conjunction with a cover story that appeared in its January/February issue titled, "Parental Advisory: Explicit Behavior." The story defined the rash of parental violence that has plagued youth sporting events over the past few years. The survey --conducted through the magazine and online (<http://www.sportingkid.com>) generated more than 3,300 responses from parents, coaches, youth sports administrators and kids. Along with the survey results,

SportingKid received scores of letters and e-mails from concerned parents, administrators and kids.

One of the more compelling findings was that most of the older kids who responded said that they had dropped out of sports by the age of 14, citing a lack of fun and too many demands from parents and coaches. Dozens of personal accounts were sent to SportingKid's editor as examples of the growing concern. Many of the letters came from teenagers who are very concerned with the impact negative adult behavior is having on their sports.

Parental outbursts force children to expend a tremendous amount of energy. Protecting themselves from embarrassment on the field, the emotional toll has been called "draining the emotional tank." (Positive Coaching Alliance 2003). If our emotional tank is empty, we become negative, and we give up easier. If our tanks are full, however, we are optimistic and are able to handle difficult situations. Children receive mixed messages when a parent loses their temper. When children observe parents criticizing coaches and referees, they feel they are given an excuse for not performing well. The violence at youth sporting events is not just directed toward children. Parents are also attacking each other, coaches and officials. In fact, parental violence is so threatening that many referees have turned to buying "assault insurance," while some state legislatures (Okla., N.M., Tenn., Ala., Pa., Mo., Ky., Wash., R.I., Miss., Ore.) have passed laws prohibiting assaults on referees and umpires.

Several recent incidents suggest that, even if parent-instigated rink side violence isn't yet an epidemic, children's hockey is no longer entirely the wholesome scene it once was.

- ◆ During a girl's hockey game in Kindersley, Sask., last January, 40-year-old John Schell of nearby Kerrobert aimed a laser pointer into the eyes of three of his daughter's 15-year-old opponents. The three left the ice complaining of headaches and flu-like symptoms. Schell pleaded guilty to mischief and was banished from attending games. In March, Prince Albert, Sask., parent Dean LaCharity made headlines after attacking a referee at his eight-year-old son's game. Bad calls can lead to attacks and near riots.
- In San Fernando, Calif., a father was sentenced last year to 45 days in jail for beating and berating a coach who took his 11-year-old son out of a baseball game. "How dare you make my son a three-inning player," the parent said before slamming the coach against a car, according to police.
- In Albuquerque, N.M., in 1996 a dentist sharpened the face guard of his son's football helmet so he could slash opposing players. Five players and a referee were hurt and the father was sentenced to two days in jail and community service.
- A police officer in Pennsylvania was convicted last year of giving a pitcher \$2 to hit a fellow 10-year-old Little Leaguer with a fast ball during a game. The man, not related to players on either team, was sentenced to up to 23 months in jail for corruption of minors and solicitation to commit simple assault.
- A parent in Reading, Mass., was beaten to death while supervising his son's hockey pickup game last July. Authorities say another father,

Thomas Junta, became upset at rough play and fought with Michael Costin, a single father of four. Junta is charged with manslaughter and awaits trial (Dahlberg 2001).

The second theory that explains violence in sports, the psychological theory, states that aggression is caused by frustration; it is situational. Frustration results when one's efforts to reach a particular goal are blocked (Leonard, 1988 p. 170). In sports, frustration can also be caused by questionable calls by officials, failure to make a particular play, injuries that interfere with optimum performance, heckling from spectators, or taunts by coaches or players or parents?

In October, 1999, at least 50 players and parents were involved in a brawl at the end of a football game in Swiftwater, Pa. Players lined up to shake hands at the end of a youth football game, when two players started shoving each other. When the fighting escalated, parents ran onto the field and were involved in the melee. At least two people were sent to the hospital after the game. State trooper Wade L. Boston said, "I guess the parents were taking it a little too seriously."

Unfortunately, compelling evidence suggests that, for many children, the pressures associated with sports produce low self-esteem, excessive anxiety, and aggressive behavior. Children may eventually experience "sports burnout" and develop a lifelong avoidance of physical activity (Hellstedt, 1988). In Hellstedt's opinion (p. 62), these negative outcomes of sports involvement are caused by adults, particularly parents and coaches.

Not all children are unduly affected by name-calling, humiliating, and threatening or physically aggressive behavior of parents. Darrell J Burnett, Ph.D., clinical

psychologist at the Institute for International Sports at the University of Rhode Island, says a child's temperament and personality will determine the overall effect of such behavior. According to Burnett, some youngsters match aggression with aggression. "The kids will model the behaviors they have seen from their parents. The message they have received from their aggressive parents is; when you are faced with a problem with another person, you solve the issue by emotionally overwhelming your 'opponent,' using whatever means necessary," he says.

Learning such attributes from sports is essential in teaching moral and ethical development. The competitiveness permeating youth sports today often leads to exploding tempers, vile verbal assaults and sometimes fisticuffs, placing the child in the middle of the melee. Finding the balance between the positive and negative lessons that aggression teaches is the key, according to Tofler.

Fred Engh, founder of the National Alliance for Youth Sports and the author of *Why Johnny Hates Sports*, says many children complain of psychological and verbal abuse by parents. "Every time ... we have competition, you're going to raise the emotions," he says. Many individual's have witnessed parents screaming what they think are words of encouragement when all it does is embarrass and demean the child. They order the youngster to get a hit and demand that he catch the ball; they belittle him when he makes a mistake; and they tell him to "shake it off" when he is injured (Engh 2002).

We fear our child's striking out, missing a catch, or allowing the winning goal. Parents fear their child will be forced to sit on the bench and won't meet our lofty expectations. We're afraid that he won't be an athlete, or that she might not even like

sports and want to pursue other interests. We fear that our child will not fit in, and we're desperate to do anything we can to prevent such a fate (Engh 2002).

Too often parent's frustration's come out as being guilty of thinking too far ahead. They worry about how their child isn't going to be chosen for the all-star team if he doesn't start improving soon. Or they wonder if their child will be good enough for the travel team and what her changes will be of starting on the high school varsity team down the road.

Parents that haven't been able to make a mark on the world themselves are guilty of trying to make that mark through their children. Parents struggle to detach their self-image as adults from their children's prowess in the competition. Suddenly when the children make mistakes or don't fulfill the warped expectations placed on them, the parents take it personally." It's not the children but the adults who have failed. It becomes difficult for the parents to separate the children's performance in sports from their own identities.

The third theory, social learning theory, has received the most empirical verification (Leonard, 1988) and maintains that aggressive behavior is learned through modeling and reinforced by rewards and punishments. Young athletes take sports heroes as role models and imitate their behavior. Parents, coaches and teammates are also models who may demonstrate support for an aggressive style of play.

According to Terry and Jackson (1985), reinforcement for acts of violence may come from three sources: (a) the athlete's immediate reference group--coaches, teammates, family, friends; (b) structure of the game and implementation of rules by officials and governing bodies; (c) attitudes of fans, media, courts, and society.

Reinforcement may take the form of rewards, such as praise, trophies, starting position, respect of friends and family. Sensational reinforcement may be derived from seeing professional players lionized and paid huge salaries, in spite of, or because of, their aggressive style of play (Leonard, 1988). Players who don't display the preferred degree of aggressiveness may receive negative reinforcement through criticism and disapproval from parents and coaches, lack of playing time, harassment by teammates, opponents, or spectators.

There is also the financial burden for parents. Many parents can rationalize that if they are going to pay for a sport, or if they are going to support their child's athletic interests, it should be a sport with serious financial rewards, such as a professional career or a college education. It's a gamble that may cause frustration for the parent. If the athlete succeeds great, otherwise their son or daughter needs to find their own way (Gabrielson 1997). The cost of participation in an outside of school youth sport isn't cheap. The cost of league fees, uniforms, insurance cards, team pictures, and simply driving to and from practice and events in becoming a real burden for everyone. Additionally, if parents want to send the young athlete to a major regional or national event, costs for special uniforms, transportation and lodging, and even special training camps skyrocket.

Parents can also become emotionally involved, and in some cases, lose proper perspective when they begin to see their young athlete as an investment. According to Murphy (1999), instead of regarding sports as a potentially fun or healthy activity for their children, some parents view athletics as a means of achieving fame, glory or

material rewards. In many instances, the goal can be a college scholarship or professional contract. But even if a child appears to be a gifted athlete, the odds are remote.

According to Boggan (2001), in the two high-profile sports of men's basketball and football, for every 10,000 high school student athletes, three will become NBA professionals, and nine will play in the NFL. With respect to the nine-year-old hometown "phenom," the odds of a professional contract are even longer considering that more than 38 million school-age children participate in recreational youth sports throughout the United States (NCYS, 2001).

For those parents who are unable to act accordingly at their child's sporting event, the reasons have more to do with personality factors, the rapid pace of modern society, and underlying societal pressures, rather than circumstances inherent to sports. Other societal factors include the influence of technology, negative role models and an entertainment industry that markets violence.

Another reason for violent behavior at youth sporting events is the emphasis placed on winning, the win-at-all cost attitude. Parents and coaches often place so much emphasis on winning, that anything less is unacceptable. Yet, the number one reason kids participate in sports is "fun." The increased emphasis on winning and losing is a result of the parents, who are unaware that they are stealing the pleasure away from their children (Engh 2002). This win-at-all-cost attitude occurs while children are silently yelling, "Let us play!" Uncontrolled sideline behavior by parents diminishes a child's innocent joy of the game. In addition, this "emphasis on winning" may reduce the positive lessons learned through sport participation. Therefore, the often-used Lombardiism, "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing," is inappropriate when applied to youth sport.

With the emphasis on winning the importance of teamwork and the opportunity to learn good interpersonal skills is minimized. Additionally episodes of parental rage prevent the critical lesson of learning how to accept both defeat and success. Since conflict resolution and redirection of aggression are two key purposes of playing sports, violent responses to perceived unfair calls nullify those positive lessons (Matheson, 2001)

While there is little scientific support demonstrating that sport rage is increasing, sketchy evidence seems to indicate that sport rage is on the rise. There are many examples that seem to indicate that parental behavior is, in fact, out of control at youth sporting events.

- In May 2003, a little league secretary in Wakefield, Mass., faced criminal charges of assault and battery for allegedly kicking and swearing at an 11-year-old boy who had been fighting with her son at the baseball field.
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These are not lone incidents. Every year we hear stories about parental violence in youth sports:

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- a father dressed in slacks and a shirt leaped into the pool to slap the water by his child and starting yelling at his son for losing a race at a swim meet;
- a mother slapped her 9-year-old daughter in front of everyone at a swim meet because she missed her race, and more.

- Perhaps one of the most widely reported cases of violence involved a woman who was jailed for trying to hire a hit man to kill the mother of her daughter's cheerleading rival, which eventually led to a made-for-TV movie, "Willing to Kill: the Texas Cheerleader Story," which aired on ABC in 1992 (Docheff 2004).

To date, many of the explanations given for "why rage occurs" have been too shortsighted to be of any practical value. For example, in response to the important and legitimate question, "why do some parents behave so poorly at their child's sporting event," the often parroted answer has been, "because no one told them they couldn't." This kind of simplistic analysis fails to provide direction for youth sports administrators, in terms of preventing sports rage, because it doesn't address the underlying reasons for poor parental behavior (Heizman 2002).

Moreover, for significant progress to occur, parents must critically examine their own beliefs regarding "what youth sports should be all about" and continuously monitor their behavior to be certain that it's consistent with the positive values that they believe sport can offer their children. There's a lot of money to be made in sports these days, and parents are well aware of the cash windfalls, that an athletically gifted child can generate. Many parents are delusional about the abilities of their offspring they think that if the coach isn't playing their child enough, he is being robbed of his chance of securing a scholarship to a prestigious university. They see their youngster with the good arm, great hands, fantastic legs, as their personal lottery ticket to fame and fortune. In September 2005, Cory Petero, an assistant coach for a San Joaquin County youth football team, ran onto the field during a game in Stockton and rammed his big adult body into the back of a

player who was guilty of a late hit on his 13-year-old son. The move was caught on videotape and splashed across the evening news (McMon 2006).

Football has become a setting for the expression of such standards partly because norms of manliness are intrinsic to it. That is, it, too, is basically a play fight in which masculine reputations are enhanced or lost. Its inherently oppositional character means that it lends itself readily to group identification and the enhancement of i-group solidarity in opposition to a series of easy identifiable out-groups the opposing team and its supporters (Feigley, 19983).

Bernard Jeu (1973) has referred to this quality of modern sports as providing a counter-society. Sutton-Smith (1978) in referring to the games of children, and this author to sports in general (1981) have described this quality of conflict in a cooperative context as dialectical. In a different way, George Simmel (1908) has described the sports contest (Kampfspiel) s providing Einheit im Kampf (unity in struggle). There are many other interpretations accounting for association or communication (Schelling, 1960) in sports contest and other social encounters (Schelling 1960).

Two features with particular implications for aggression research are worth noting. In combative and some contact sports the aspiring athlete is taught basic skills in interpersonal aggression and lavishly rewarded when they are effectively applied in competition. In these sports interpersonal aggression is met with enthusiastic approval within the sport and a general tolerance on the part of society (Smith 2001).

In an interesting field study, Patterson (1974) administered a hostility inventory to high school football players and PE students both before and at the conclusion of the

football season. The PE students evidenced no change over the season whereas the football players were significantly more hostile in the postseason (Tamburro 2004).

The question of the media's rule in social violence has many facets, including the influence of role models, social contagion, and the values and attitudes that are promoted. However, the present discussion is intended to treat the issue from the perspective of sports and confine itself to the topic at hand, catharsis (Tamburro 2004).

Industry spokesmen and others can often be found defending violent programming stating that evidence of harmful effects is inconclusive, or that screen violence provides viewers with a means of vicariously venting their hostilities. Writers concerned with media violence typically seek to bolster their case with tallies of the average number of shootings, stabbings, rapes, and punch outs as a function of some period of viewing. The villains singled out are invariably cartoons, police, crime and war shows: rarely is there mention of sports programming. However it is important to recognize that some of the most heavily televised sports, boxing, football, and hockey are just those in which viewers will see acts of interpersonal mayhem on a scale which rivals that seen elsewhere in the media, at least by frequency, if not an intensity criterion (Tamburro 2004).

In July, 1999, a youth baseball coach in Hollywood, Fla., was arrested for aggravated battery after a fight during which he broke an umpire's jaw. The umpire was throwing the coach out of the game when he was struck. The scene has becoming startlingly familiar across America - even in the lowest levels of youth sports, where touchline tirades at teen soccer referees are routine fare. In Florida, one youth baseball coach broke an umpire's jaw over a disputed call.

Taken to its extreme, it conjures images like those so often sent from foreign capitals, where soccer fans from opposing teams are separated by lines of security officers in riot gear. Some observers see this as a wake-up call for professional sports that could yield new security measures and a code of conduct for fans and players. Many athletes report the enormous importance of the coach to a young boy or girl. Players look to their coaches as figures of wisdom and authority. This deep emotional relationship and respect for the coach's authority facilitates players' transference of moral responsibility from themselves to the coach. A core idea transmitted by coaches (and fathers) is that "playing the game is just like the game of life. The rules you learn will stand you in good stead for the rest of your life." (Smith 2001).

Sports Illustrated took an "unscientific poll of fans" and reported in its August 8, 1988 issue that "everyone who had ever been a spectator at a sporting event of any kind had, at one time or another, experienced the bellowing of obscenities, racial or religious epithets ... abusive sexual remarks to women in the vicinity, fistfights between strangers and fistfights between friends". Increased spectator violence is one more manifestation of the escalation of violence which has taken place in our society in the last 20 years. Violence between athletes can only serve to encourage it. On a warm night at U.S. Cellular Field in Chicago this spring, a White Sox fan rushed the field and tackled the umpire. Four days later, a right fielder with the Texas Rangers was hit in the back of the head by a spectator's cell phone.

Fans that become part of the game are what researchers call "high-identifying sports fans"--people whose identity is intertwined with a team. High-identifiers tend to have extreme emotions in the face of defeat, compared with average sports fans.

Considerable research has been done on spectator violence. A central issue is whether fans incite player violence or reflect it (Debenedotte, 1998). The evidence is inconclusive. Spectators do take cues from players, coaches, cheerleaders, and one another. Spectators often derive a sense of social identity and self-esteem from a team. Emulation of favorite players is an element of this identification. Group solidarity with players and coaches leads to a view of opposing teams as enemies and fosters hostility towards the "out-group" and, by extension, its supporters, geographical locale, ethnic group, and perceived social class (Lee, 1985).

According to a recent survey by the National Association of Sports Officials, 76 percent of the respondents from 60 high school athletic associations reported that increased spectator interference has caused many officials to quit (Docheff 2004). Even though this survey is related to high school officials, it is clear that officiating in parks and recreation programs is much more difficult. Their lack of training and development leaves them open to greater censure.

Researchers have found a wide range of personality and social factors that influence the actions of high-identifiers. Alcohol often encourages their behavior, as does the possibility of appearing on television, says Christian End, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology at the University of Missouri at Rolla. "In some instances, highly identified fans may also view it as a means of helping their team," says End. Leonard Zaichkowsky, Ph.D., a professor of education at Boston University and an expert in fan behavior, says it's unclear why American fans are jumping into the game.

"Is it the violence in sports that motivates the fan or is it a microcosm of what is going on in the world?" asks Zaichkowsky.

Marketers appear unfazed by sports-related violence as well, as Ed Erhardt, president of ESPN ABC sports customer marketing and sales, told *TelevisionWeek*, a sibling publication of *Ad Age*, after the basket brawl incident in the National Basketball Association: "We haven't seen any defections. Nobody said, 'We are pulling our business.'" "However, marketers don't get a complete pass. In the Lightspeed survey, 57% say excessively violent sports can tarnish the image of advertisers associated with those sports. "People understand that sports are reality TV in its purest form," Mr. Turner says. "It's unscripted live drama, and occasionally emotions boil over." "Sport events are passionate environments," he says. "Whether you're talking about an NBA incident or a couple of parents mixing it up at their kids' soccer games." (Tenser 2005).

Violence on television, in the movies, in video games, and on the playing field becomes the commonplace to our youthful spectators. Since the at risk youth aren't participating directly, they can't feel the pain, so develop no adverse personal controls to limit or prevent them from finding the violent nature of these activities as acceptable behavior. They don't need to also accept the pain of practicing until they can do it right or the effort needed to get in shape. They don't need to worry about getting up in the morning with bruises or sore muscles. With this perspective of the world, violence appears exciting and not necessarily damaging to oneself.

Media dollars directed towards coverage of only major sports, even if violent, will only increase, not help, the problem of the spectator perspective. According to Robert F. Tamurro, M.D. associate of professor of pediatrics, Penn State Children's Hospital, Penn state Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, "Our study found that nearly one in five

commercials during televised major sporting events depict unsafe or violent behavior," said Robert F. Tamburro. "Studies report that children commonly watch televised sports, and thus, the commercial content of these programs should be scrutinized since data suggests that media exposure increases children's risk-taking behavior." Additionally, simply creating new laws such as ratings to address a minor symptom of a major problem is an indication of the success of media hype over common sense. Remember that the television industry has a vested interest in this problem, just as the movie industry does with violent movies. Meaningless laws don't buy any additional youth control, plus they can force an adult's individual freedoms to be curtailed by the narrow viewpoint of those who want quick fixes, not cures. Adults watch violent sports, and they will let their children watch these sports, particularly if their sitting in front of a television as a spectator rather than out participating.

- In South Carolina, an assistant football coach followed the referees into their locker room after a playoff loss and was later arrested following a confrontation with police.
- A girls high school basketball coach in North Carolina was charged with assault after authorities said she grabbed a referee who officiated her team's loss in the state playoffs.
- In New Mexico, a father admitted to sharpening the buckle of his son's football helmet before a game in which five players on the opposing team were cut, including one player who needed twelve stitches. The father said he did it because the referees in the previous game had failed to penalize players for roughing up his son.

- An Alabama, a referee was punched and pulled to the ground by a mob of fans that surrounded him after their team lost in a high school football playoff game. When the game ended, several hundred fans went on the field and surrounded the officials.
- In Los Angeles, a high school football referee was assaulted by a player during a game.
- A boy's basketball game in Texas erupted into a brawl in which one player was arrested for disorderly conduct.
- During halftime of a high school football game in Michigan, a flag bearer received a broken nose and required thirteen stitches because of a tussle with cheerleaders from the opposing team (Engh 2002).

In April, 1999, former Cincinnati Reds third baseman and manager Ray Knight was charged with simple battery and disorderly conduct after a fight at a girls' softball game in Albany, Ga. Knight, whose daughter was competing in the game, allegedly punched a father of one of the opposing team's female players after a heated argument (Nack, Munson, Dohrmann 2000)

Sports play a major role in reinforcing the concern with success, winning, and dominance. On the sports field these goals alone justify illegal and violent acts. It is possible that violent behavior is filtered down from professional sports. Sport celebrities become icons indiscriminately revered by young and old alike. The focus of our intense attention, they soar to a mythic status in the minds and hearts of many Americans and are transformed into heroes. (Dalton 2001) An entire city will suddenly explode in ecstasy when its victorious sports team returns, to be paraded and garlanded as new divinities of

athleticism.

A child who watches acts of violence committed by thieves, murderers, or sadists in films or on TV knows that society disapproves of these acts. The child who watches sports knows that athletes' acts of violence are approved of. It makes sense that sports violence would serve as an important role model for children who tend to be well adjusted socially, while illegal violence on the screen would tend to have a greater influence on the behavior of children who are more psychologically damaged and/or feel more alienated from society (Balthsar 2004).

Increasingly sports culture also becomes a metaphor of violence as is variously demonstrated in a number of major sports. The offshoots of this orientation of violence are to be observed widely whether in the participation of the onlooker or in the actual acts of violence by players themselves and by supporters, such as in soccer, baseball, football and hockey matches.

Collegiate and professional sports have their own ongoing scandals and casualties, as sport pages in the press, as well as television news, regularly inform us. We see entire teams suddenly converging on the field to battle it out over some questionable incident or an official's decision. Parents (and kids) observe violence in professional sports and come to believe that it is acceptable behavior. When a role model charges the mound after a pitch that is high and tight, children often see their parents cheering the assault. Instead, parents should become the role model themselves, and condemn such violent behavior. (Dalton 2001)

Putting aside the potential role of excess alcohol consumption, Patricia Dalton, a clinical psychologist in Washington, D.C., regards this type of adult misbehavior as,

"worrisome signs of social disintegration." Part of the reason for the decline in self-control, she says, is because "people are less concerned about others, and about what others think...we have lost our sense of stigma and shame, which used to be powerful shapers of behavior" (The Star Ledger, 2001). Other related factors include people's increasing sense of entitlement and lack of personal responsibility for their actions (Heizmen 2002).

The thirst for respect has begotten a generation of trash-talkers and chest-thumpers who have turned the traditional notion of sportsmanship on its ear. In the past, there were many concerted attempts to steamroller such self-serving attitudes in college, where players as great as Michael Jordan were taught to play complementary roles and put the team first. Now, college is arguably more of a rest stop on the way to the pros for many high-schoolers who are already minor celebrities. With the increasing immaturity of many pro athletes, though, the combination can be explosive.

Chapter III: Discussion

Physical educators and coaches are in a key position to lay the groundwork for positive attitudes in sports. It's important for parents to encourage positive thinking in young athletes, especially when they're experiencing competitive stress in a negative, unhelpful way (Weiser 1988). Guidelines for teaching children to shun violent behavior in sports include:

(a) Put sports in perspective. Coaches should not emphasize winning at all cost. Enjoyment and the development of individual skills should be the objective. Coaches should be alert to and praise improvement. Athletic performance should not be equated with personal worth (Coakley, 1982). Players should not be encouraged or allowed to play when injured or ill, as a demonstration of stoic virtue.

(b) Stress and nonparticipation. Hellstedt (1988) cites studies which show that many children 9-14 drop out of sports because they spend too much time on the bench and not enough on the field. They perceive themselves as unsuccessful because their level of performance doesn't earn them more playing time. A study of young male athletes indicated that 90% would rather have an opportunity to play on a losing team than sit on the bench of a winning team.

(c) Present positive role models. Sports violence is most prevalent in professional sports. Coaches should avoid symbolic associations with professional teams--e.g. names, logos. They should not model their own coaching techniques on those of professional coaches (Coakley, 1991). Weiser and Love (p. 5) recommend that school coaches

implement strategies to foster feelings of team ownership among players, replacing the traditional hierarchy--authoritarian coach, submissive players--that governs the coach-player relationship in professional sports. Encourage input, permit participation in decision-making, and listen to player feedback. Feelings of team ownership foster team cohesiveness, which in turn leads to better performance.

(d) Integrate values-oriented intervention strategies into the curriculum.

Waldzilak cites a number of intervention strategies, utilizing Kohlberg's moral development model and social learning theories, which have been shown to produce improvement or modification of behavior, moral reasoning and perceptions of sportsmanship (Waldzilak et al. 1988). Teachers and coaches should commit themselves to actively teaching positive sports-related values, and devise curricula that do so.

(e) Involve parents. As the earliest and potentially the most influential role models, parents can have a critical impact on a child's attitudes towards sports. Physical educators and coaches should inform parents of curricular activities and goals, alert them to signs of anxiety or aggressive behavior, encourage positive attitudes toward competition and physical activity, and promote realistic expectations for performance (Hellstedt, 1988).

In recent years, organized youth sports has received unprecedented media attention, largely as the result of parents and coaches engaging in negative, and, in some instances, violent behavior. Anecdotal evidence is not enough to substantiate the claim that violence in youth sports is "escalating" or "out of control." To date, there have been no scientific studies conducted to support that view. Ultimately, it's beside the point. No

matter how likely or unlikely, administrators, parents, and coaches must take reasonable steps to prevent inappropriate or violent behavior.

Where is the mythology and where is the truth? How do we steer a middle course, protecting children and respecting their developing sensibilities, yet at the same time attempting to put them in situations where qualities such as perseverance, courage, and the willingness to subordinate their own goals and gratification to those of the group can be learned? When you take abstract notions about youth sport and test them with concrete situations, you can provoke a dialogue, serious study, and eventually, perhaps, approved policies and practices that guide a collective response to such issues. Too often, however, such issues provoke only conditioned responses, both from those who want to defend questionable youth sport practices no matter what and those who want to condemn them no matter what, with a lot of heat generated from both sides, but very little light.

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