

# When Youth Sports Go Pro

*Too much adult involvement in youth sports makes it difficult for kids to learn their own lessons*

Joe DiMaggio once said, “A ball player has to be kept hungry to become a big leaguer. That’s why no boy from a rich family has ever made the big leagues.” Mr. DiMaggio, meet Kenny Troutt. Troutt, founder of Excel Communications, has one son in third grade and one son in fifth grade, and the Dallas billionaire funds traveling teams for both of them, complete with private jets, full-time coaches, nutritionists and numerous other support staff. But to what end? To try to prove Joltin’ Joe wrong? To try to live a parents’ fantasy through children? To provide opportunities that would not otherwise exist?

Indeed, his two teams do include kids from disadvantaged backgrounds, leading some to laud Troutt’s efforts. But in such an environment, do kids have a chance to be kids and to learn the lessons they need to learn in childhood?

The professionalization of children’s sports is becoming rampant. The “2005 Youth Sports National Report Card” of the Citizenship Through Sports Alliance gave a telling evaluation of youth sports in the United States. The CTSA, which is committed to promoting positive behavior in youth sports, evaluated youth sports programs serving children aged 6–14 in five areas, with the following grades being given to each area. Child centered philosophy, D; Coaching, C-; Health & Safety, C+; Officiating, B; Parental Behavior/Involvement, D.

That’s right: the officials, while constantly enduring chants of “kill the ump,” scored the highest of anyone involved in youth sports, with a B-. At the bottom of the food chain are parents, who are responsible for propagating a parent-centered approach to youth sports rather than a child-centered one.

I doubt Joe DiMaggio would have extrapolated his 1930s economic analysis to the psychoanalysis of the early 2000s, but I will. It may no longer be necessary for a kid to go hungry in order to have the drive to become a pro athlete, but

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by Bob Latham

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I’m not sure the DiMaggio doctrine is dead. The growing number of foreign-born Major League Baseball players, especially from Latin America, might indicate that it is still viable.

What any child needs to succeed in sports is to have a sense of owning the moment. Perhaps what DiMaggio meant is that kids from poor families learn to develop a sense of striving for themselves and thereby owning their own moments. Every great athlete and, in fact, every successful person in any

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field, develops a sense of owning the moment. However, in a youth sports culture where parental and benefactor involvement is dominant, do kids develop that sense?

Brooks Johnson, the great track coach, once said, “If you want to see a runner with great technique, watch a kid,” before all the handlers get to him. A third grader with an entourage may not only be compromising his psychological development—learning to own the moment—but he also may not be developing his physical skills in a natural way.

One of my most vivid youth sports memories happened when I was 10 years old and playing Little League Baseball. The dominant pitcher in the league was a 12-year-old, Dominic Tedesco, who would later play defensive end at Michigan. He was 12 and prematurely studly. I was 10 and prematurely undersized.

Without adult intervention, I figured out for myself that the only way I could have a chance against him was to use an even lighter bat than usual. Naturally the defense was playing every

batter who faced him to swing late, shifting heavily to right field. So I also opened my stance—again, without any coach or parent telling me to do so. Tedesco did exactly what he should have done with a puny 10-year-old, which was to throw a high inside fastball. With my lighter bat, I managed to get around on it and pull it down the third base line. By the time the shifted defense got to the ball, I was standing on third with a triple.

After the game, I hopped on my bike and went to Baskin-Robbins where I had a double mint chocolate chip in a sugar cone with my teammates. I can still, decades later, remember the taste of that cone. Then I got on my bike and rode home. No plane, no adults, no swing coaches, and certainly no nutritionist telling me to lay off the mint

chocolate chip. It was my moment—thinking, acting and reacting on my own. I later would move from baseball to other sports, but that experience and that feeling of being in the moment stayed with me.

Do the kids on Kenny Troutt’s teams have moments like that? I hope so. But when the parents and the professional coaches and trainers and nutritionists and traveling secretaries and skills instructors are involved, I’m not sure how it is possible for a kid to learn how to own a moment. When parents and handlers cover all the bases for their young athletes, places and situations may all seem the same to the young mind, and the magic of the moment is lost on them. I picture the third grader on Troutt’s team kind of like the rock star in the Southwest Airlines commercial who says “Hello Cleveland!” only to be met by silence, which is broken by one of his bandmates whispering, “Cleveland was last night.” ■

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