

the last word

THE SCOURGE OF THE “SOCCER MOM GENERATION”

If Norman Rockwell were to paint a modern version of traditional American family life, what would it look like? My guess is a bustling soccer field on a Sunday afternoon, with meddlesome parents pacing the sidelines clutching cell phones and Starbucks coffee.

Don't misunderstand my somewhat sardonic view. Though my own personal Rockwell painting may have depicted a fresh-faced family sitting around a dinner table, as a college soccer coach, husband, and father of four young boys, I am a strong proponent of any weekend sports activity that brings families together.

But as someone whose vocation and avocation require careful analysis of organized sport, and in particular youth soccer, I fear that trouble lies just beneath the brush strokes of that present-day Rockwell illustration.

Over the past decade, an increasing number of high-achieving athletes lack some very important skill sets as a result of playing organized sports since the age of 5 or younger. Pushed into the melee by so-called “soccer moms” and overbearing dads (who have somehow escaped a moniker!), the vast majority of these kids have grown up in a sports environment where an adult has typically directed their development and, to a larger extent, inhibited it. Youth soccer and organized sports in general have reached a point where we need some pause.

The generation of kids going outside after school or during the summer and playing sports without adult supervision is all but gone. When kids played in their backyards or the sandlot, they made their own teams, picked captains, made rules, resolved disputes, and took care of their own cuts and scrapes. Through it all, these earlier generations

learned valuable skill sets they carried throughout their lives—leadership, conflict resolution, fair play, teamwork, and even compassion, when friends got tackled into a rose bush or were unceremoniously forbidden from playing after dinner because they didn't eat their peas.

So what's a parent to do today? Quite simply, strike a balance. Well-intended parents may be spending too much time preparing the path for their children and not their children for the path. Sports teaches life skills, but only if your child enjoys the experience on his or her own terms. Encourage a healthy mix of organized play and activities devoid of uniforms, structure, or time limits. Let your children create their own path, and observe the developmental process from a distance.

Early specialization in sports doesn't help a child become well-rounded in sports or life. Life isn't one-dimensional, so sports shouldn't be either. My best players are two- or even three-sport athletes who learned the art of balance and teamwork through their active participation in different sports.

Expose your child to numerous sports or hobbies and see what sticks. Wait until he or she is old enough to juggle those with the demands of homework, music lessons, or time with siblings and friends. As a parent, trust your instincts regarding what your child



can handle or enjoy, not what his or her peers—or their parents—have chosen.

When my wife and I think about our own sons, we constantly remind ourselves that it's not our life, it's theirs. Admittedly, it's hard to stand back. We aren't infallible, but we try to help them discover activities they are passionate about and match their enthusiasm. As children, they will succeed and fail, cultivate friendships, develop life skills, and have as much fun as we did at their ages.

My Norman Rockwell sketch is watching our kids and their friends organize a game out back (without an adult getting in the way) and having fun doing it. That's a sketch of traditional American family life every parent should appreciate and enjoy.

—Dean Koski



Dean Koski is in his 14th season as head coach of the Lehigh men's soccer program and has led the Mountain Hawks to a pair of NCAA Tournaments and the best record in the Patriot League over the past nine seasons (95-41-26). He has played an active role in the athletic department's comprehensive sportsmanship initiative. Koski and his wife, Lisa, are the parents of sons Alex, Trevor, Spencer, and Blake.