

Problem With the Games Is a Parent (Newsday, Monday, July 17, 2000)

Did you have a nice family weekend? Did any child get bullied, browbeaten or ridiculed by parents at the Little League game?

Suppose we had Little League games and no parents came. Drop off the kids, tell them to have fun, and go read the paper. No uniforms, And no umpires; just let the kids call the plays. When the season is over, it's over, no trophies for every player and no big dinner with parents naming a Most Valuable Player.

"Was it like this 20 years ago?" sports parenting expert Rick Wolf asked. "Of course not"

We rode bikes to the field, got 15 at-bats and played until it was time for dinner. Is that an insane idea, or is what we have insanity?

Instead, we read about the killing in suburban Boston and experts tell us it's a trend. It should frighten us. We read that a coach, father of a player, broke the jaw of a 13-year-old umpire, or that a coach gave his pitcher \$2 if he beamed another player. We read about a soccer mother slapping a 14-year-old referee and knocking him to the ground.

On Long Island, we read of the lacrosse player who attacked another with a stick after a game. We heard of the coach with the big lead who ordered the best hitter on the other team walked, and parents rightly yelled objections, and the kids started to yell and the two coaches scuffled and slapped each other.

I'm no psychologist, but I talk to them and I know what I see is wrong.

"Sadly, this killing is not a surprise; I'm surprised it hadn't happened before," said Wolff, author of "Coaching Kids for Dummies."

"It would be nice if the parents got out of the way and let them play," said Leonard Zarichowsky, professor of sports psychology at Boston University, "That's the way it was. In many ways, it was much better."

Wolf identifies it as "a one-generational thing." He said, "You can't find a kid at 12 who knows what a do-over is, or knows how to choose." That's learning social compromise. Now kids get driven to the game, parents stay, involved, and the line between a support and unhealthy pressure gets lost, Kids get the idea that this is more important than having fun. "On the way home, the father has his post-game analysis the way the media questions Derek Jeter: "Joey, how come you missed the pop fly? And you wonder why kids drop out of sports," Wolff said. "Parents say, 'This is the time I bond with the child.' Baloney. Kids hate that. But this isn't about kids; it's about parents. We watch the Yankees on TV, but we don't recognize that what we do to our kids is more influential, Wolff calls it child abuse.

"When I was young, parents were minimally involved," Zaichowsky said, including the pressures on a young pianist or student. Often it's the parent at bat, not the kid. Sometimes the parent is driven by awareness of the big money -out there. "It's great to have pride in a kid, but it's taken to another level," Zaichowsky said. "Parents want to make sure their kid isn't cheated, and then they try to make sure he gets the very best, and he has to perform."

Often both parents work and time spent with the children has to be "quality time" Go root and urge them to play better. I'll go and watch and relieve my guilt for coming home late at night and my morning absence." Said Ray Warren, president of Raycom Sports, which produces "More Than a Game," a Saturday morning TV show about civility on the, playing field. We've all observed the Little League game reaching a climax-when a father on one side demands a pinch hitter for a 9-year-old and a father on the other side snarls that this kid can't hit - all in the most demeaning terms. 'The coach thinks he's Joe Torre and all the kid wants is not to get hit by the ball," Warren said. Coaches volunteer for their own reasons, "Most of them don't see the need to develop sportsmanship and civility," Zaichowsky said. 'We don't train them, "A soccer league in Cleveland has "Silent Sunday." No parent can direct himself or herself to the game. Coaches bear kids communicate on the field and actually hear them laugh and enjoy the game. A Florida Little League requires a three-hour session for parents on how to be a good sport: Attend or your kid doesn't play. Do we have courage to make that widespread? Does the seminar preach to the choir and leave the others unaffected? Warren is exploring the idea of producing TV public-service announcements for parents and possibly videotapes for youth leagues' sensitivity training. Because it's foolish to expect parental today to stay home, we could encourage parents to speak out: "please, don't talk to my kid that way, and not to yours, either." But do it carefully. There may be a case of sports rage building, "it's nuts," Wolff said, Certainly is.