

Dr. Gable's Quarterly Book Review

Fall 2019

"Changing the Game" by John O'Sullivan



*Guess which provider is in the pictures included, answer key on last page © (a)

Tens of thousands of children have played in the Little League World Series since its inception in 1947, only 57 of these children have gone on to play professional baseball ¹. Only two percent of high school athletes receive an athletic scholarship for college. Only two percent of NCAA student athletes go on to be professional athletes². Contrast this with results from a TD Ameritrade survey conducted in 2019 of 1000 families regarding their children's athletic potential. 50% of respondents said that they thought it likely their child would get a sports scholarship and 34% of respondents thought that it was possible their child would play in the Olympics or go pro. Clearly, there is a disconnect. *What's my point?* **The purpose of sports in your child's life is not to get a college scholarship or play professional sports.**

Seventy percent of youth athletes drop out of athletics by the age 13. If you ask athletes about their least favorite moment in sports, they often say, "the ride home". A study examining the dwindling pool of youth sports officials found that 42% of officials report abuse as a problem with their job³. According to a 2017 article in TIME magazine, a WinterGreen Research study showed the youth sports industry is now a \$15.3 billion per year market, and the nation's youth-sports industry has grown by 55% since 2010. The youth sports market rivals that of the NFL market. *What's my point?* **A few factors including for-profit sports programs and a good number of parents are causing athletics to be a lot more expensive and a lot less fun, respectively.** In John O'Sullivan's book, "Changing the Game", he discusses why he feels

¹ <https://www.littleleague.org>

² <https://www.ncaa.org/sites/default/files/Recruiting%20Fact%20Sheet%20WEB.pdf>

³ *Why Referees Stay in the Game*, Lynn L. Ridinger, Stacy Warner, Jacob K. Tingle, Kyungun R. Kim, *Global Sports Business Journal* 2017 Volume 5 Issue 3

children's athletics are becoming an adult-centered, money making enterprise instead of a form of play.



(b)

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(d)

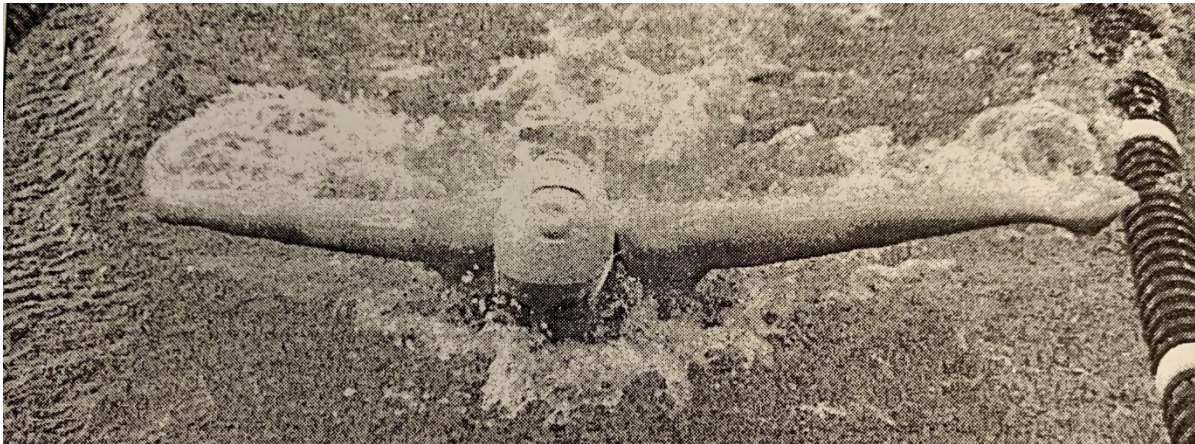
But...Let's put that aside for just a moment and talk about the positives. Physical activity leads to healthier children by improving strength, coordination and flexibility. Sports provide connection, foster character development, build determination and aid in learning problem-solving skills. Getting regular exercise helps to prevent childhood obesity. Athletes highly involved in high school sports have lower rates of depression and higher levels of self-esteem. Girls who play high school athletics are 92% less likely to get involved with drugs, 80% less likely to get pregnant, 3 times more likely to graduate than non-athletes.⁴ Adolescents who play sports are eight times as likely to be active at age 24 as adolescents who do not play sports.⁵ ...and so on. Mr. O'Sullivan assigns us the responsibility of creating a more positive experience and bringing fun back to the game.

⁴ www.WomensSportsFoundation.org

⁵ Sports Participation as Predictors of Participation in Sports and Physical Fitness Activities in Young Adulthood, Perkins, 2004

#1 Children play sports for fun! A study done at the University of Notre Dame's Center for Ethical Education found that the reasons kids choose to play sports are **#1 to have fun** (this is always #1), to do something I am good at, to improve my skills, to hang out with my friends, to exercise and stay in shape, to be part of a team, for the excitement of competition. I often hear parents comment that their child plays on a certain team, "just for fun". From the parent's perspective, I think they mean some teams their child plays on are more serious and some are more laid back, very reasonable. As with many things in parenting, semantics can make all the difference. I would like to suggest that we always reference sports endeavors as "just for fun". Distinguish the more serious teams as those requiring more of a time commitment or training expectations. If your child is on a team and is it not for fun, think twice about why they are on that team.

Whether you are a parent or a coach your job is to help children continue to enjoy athletics. I encourage you to take time at the beginning of the season to have them think about and record their goals. Learn what they are expecting to get out of the season and make sure your actions are in alignment. Mr. O'Sullivan believes that taking these simple steps will help them to be more successful and happier. We need to know how they want to play, why they want to play and the areas they think they need improvement. Only our children's goals should be driving their athletic path. To take it one step further, as parents and coaches you should sit and write your goals for your child or your team. If they do not line up, take an opportunity to discuss, and revise your goals.



(e)

Mr. O'Sullivan's 7 C's of a High-Performance State of Mind help athletes and parents set realistic goals:

1. **Common Sense- PERSPECTIVE.** Be able to recognize the importance of athletics in the development of your child's character. See the big picture. Realize that one play, one game, or even one season is a tiny step in your child's athletic and character development. Kids want to play sports because it is fun, they do not play for their

parents to yell at them a couple times a week. Parents may think kids join sports to win but they do not, when it stops being fun, they do not want to play.

2. **Conditions-** Keep the sports environment physically, mentally, and emotionally safe. Keep it developmentally and philosophically appropriate. Make sure there is a focus on Long Term Athletic Development (more on this later). A safe environment does not focus on wins and losses.
3. **Communication- LISTEN.** Listen to your child's goals for their upcoming game, season, and sports development. Really listen to your child, do not question their emotions. EMPATHY is IMPORTANT. Listen to what they want. Control your emotions. Practice what you preach. Model the behavior you want your children to have.
4. **Control-** Give your child age appropriate control of athletic decisions. Teach them about commitment but let them choose their own path.
5. **Competence-** Children feel competent when they are able to reach milestones through their own process. Success through trial and error. Success through failure and persistence. Do not steal their competence by doing it for them or positioning them to win.
6. **Confidence-** Skill development helps children build confidence. Skill development, not 3 games on a Saturday.
7. **Caring- UNCONDITIONAL LOVE.** Unconditional love means your love does not change based on their accomplishments. No sentences should start, "I love you but," there are no buts. You are your child's #1 fan!

In addition to athletes setting goals for themselves, it very important parents know their children's goals for their parents. Namely, how they want parents to BEHAVE while they are engaged in their sports. Believe me, children know how they want their parents to behave. If you are a coach it is encouraged that you have your players come up with a Parental Code of Conduct at the beginning of every season. The players write the rules, the coaches distribute the rules, and the parents sign the rules.

For example:

#1 Our parents WILL NOT yell at the officials or coaches, NO MATTER WHAT.

#2 Our parents WILL NOT try to talk about our performance ON THE WAY HOME.

#3 Our parents WILL be our #1 fans.

#4...

...Creating a Parental Code of Conduct empowers parents to make good choices and makes it possible to hold them accountable when they don't.



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#2 Children are playing sports too seriously, too young.

When I was young, I took a season or two of dance, tried gymnastics, played soccer in the fall for a few years, did dive team in the summer a couple times, swam summer swim team, played volleyball starting in middle school, attempted basketball (this went fairly poorly) , and for one winter I was a cheerleader (also not a shining moment ☺). Eventually, swimming became my main sport. Even so, it was not until I was 16 years old that I swam more than 3 practices a week. When I reached high school, in addition to swimming, I played volleyball and ran track. The rest of the time I enjoyed being a kid. I played a lot of tag, hide and seek, kick the can, rode my bike, hung out with friends at the pool, and spent a lot of afternoons bugging my parents about being “bored”. The benefits of boredom is an entire separate topic, but there is more and more evidence that boredom fosters productivity, creativity, and self-awareness. Your kids (and you) need to be bored sometimes.

If you take a look at the sports schedule of athletes today, they might play travel soccer, travel basketball and travel lacrosse all at the same time. They could potentially have three, 9-10-month seasons, with overlap that leaves NO off season. Worse, due to all the practices, games and tournaments they are exhausted, have little time “to be bored”, and little time for free play with friends. It is not hard to imagine why they stop enjoying athletics and why so many quit all together.

Beyond time commitments, private travel and club opportunities are very expensive. Parents may feel a sports scholarship is the only way to make all the money spent worthwhile. The

extremely high cost leaves athletes whose families have financial constraints at a disadvantage. In addition, the emergence of for-profit travel leagues has taken its toll on Rec sports. I was talking with a patient recently who joined Rec soccer this fall but there was not even enough teams to have games against more than 1 other team. It is commonplace to hear parents say, "If Johnny does not do travel by 8 years old, he may not be able to play in high school". Whether this is true or not matters less, let's think about this...We are planning our children's high school sports for them when they are years away. They should plan their own sports path for themselves as they get older, year by year.



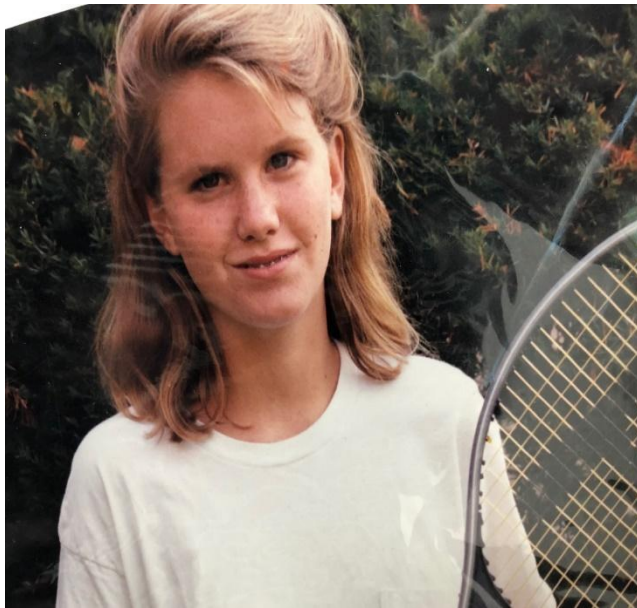
(i)



(j)

#3 Children and coaches need structured skill development and competition guidelines.

Mr. O'Sullivan points out that not only are children committing to much time to organized play but are participating in the wrong kind of play. There is a hyper focus on competition and not skill development. Three games a weekend, 5-6 tournaments per sport, per year. Mr. O'Sullivan illustrates his point with an example similar to the following. Imagine your child is playing a 90-minute soccer game; most kids will physically be touching the ball for less than five minutes. If you sat and watched your child at practice have this little contact with the ball you would likely be angry. Children ages 6-12 should attend 3-4 practices for every 1 game. Competition play is not giving your child better skills development or improved performance.



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(m)

Canada recognized this disconnect in youth sports programs and decided to start the Long-Term Athletic Development (LTAD) program. The LTAD framework organizes widely accepted principles of athletic development and education with the goal of producing happy, high performing athletes.

- (1) **Active Start** (0-6 years old)- Unstructured Play. Children at this age need daily **unstructured** active play by themselves and with peers to develop fundamental movements needed for an active life. Free play improves coordination and balance. It is critical that play is fun, safe and voluntary. Children should not be required to partake. Encourage crawling, running, walking and jumping. Chase your 3-year-old in the yard, get on your knees with your

2-year-old and pretend play. Be animals at the zoo, or on a secret mission, crawling around on the ground. It sounds silly, but you will both have fun and they will improve their athletic skills.

- (2) **FUN-damentals** (girls 6-8, boys 6-9)- Physical Literacy. Children gain exposure to a variety of different sports and activities, building confidence in fundamental movements. They run fast, jump high, turn quickly. Engage them in different activities season to season so they can find what is best for them and avoid burnout. If they prefer a sport, doing that 2-3 times a week is fine as long as they are trying new things as well. All children should play equally, despite their skill level. Focus should still be FUN, keeping competition to a minimum. They may be involved in sports that keep score, but the focus should not be on the score. Adults need to keep the focus on friends, fun and self-confidence. Emphasize they have won by having a good time even if the score did not end in their favor.
- (3) **Learn to Train** (girls 8-11, boys 9-12)- Basic Sports Skills- Time of converting fundamental movements into basic sports skills. During this time children come close to puberty which results in large growth spurts. Growing fast they encounter a temporary loss of coordination and motor control. During this time, they relearn to control their bodies and can see weekly or even daily improvement from all their hard work (a.k.a. they are building competence). Emphasis should still be on more training less competition 3:1 ratio of practice to games.
Quick note: The late developer- this can be an excellent time for those kids who are slow to hit puberty, or it can be a big disadvantage. If late to develop kids are pushed ahead too quickly, they struggle because they are not matched in size and strength, end up not playing as much, and miss out on valuable skill development. Resist the pressure to push them forward if they are small for their age or not as developed, use this time to your advantage to continue working on skill development. Often when these kids move up the following year, now growing and gaining strength, they surpass peers and end up being the better player. Use this time as a positive.
- (4) **Train to Train** (girls 11-15, boys 12-16)- Sports Specific Skills- 1st stage of high-performance training. A time of enhancing sports specific skills and competition development. Please note this is the first stage that includes competition development, meaning before 11 or 12, competition should not be the focus. This is the age to start building an aerobic base and build overall development of athletic potential. Still, winning should remain secondary to sports development.
- (5) **Train to Compete** (girls 15-21, boys 16-23)- Skilled Competitor- 2nd stage of high-performance training. The age when children choose a specific sport to become a more serious competitor. High volume, high repetition training. These athletes have aspirations of high school, collegiate, or even national and professional competition. Other than sports specific training it is important to incorporate nutrition, psychology, recovery and injury prevention/management.
- (6) **Train to Win** (girls 18 +, boys 19 +)- Full Time Competitors- Seeking national and international events, playing professional or at the highest level the sport allows. This book is not focused on these athletes, these athletes are focused on winning and it is all about results. For some athletes, it is about a paycheck.
- (7) **Active for Life** (any age)- Primary Goal of LTAD. Being active for life is of utmost importance for long term health and well-being. Athletes for life are healthier and happier. You can join

this stage at any age. Active for life also calls for former child athletes to “pay it forward” to help with coaching, officiating, mentoring and more.



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#4 How do we create change?

Some might say it needs to come from colleges, some might say we need an overall regulating body, Mr. O’Sullivan says it will need to come from you and me. Let’s think about this realistically, colleges and universities, now more for-profit corporations (even if they are non-profit), are not going to do it. They recruit athletes and students often on the popularity and success of their sports programs. Money making travel clubs are not incentivized to make a change, it is them that you are giving between \$2500-10,000 a year for your child’s travel sports experiences. The reality is that change is going to need to come from us...parents and athletes. Us saying “we want Rec teams”, “we want 3-month seasons”, “we want a limited number of tournaments and games”, “we want skill development”, “we want psychological wellness” and “WE WANT FUN”!

Using the ripple effect to our advantage. The ripple effect is when waves within a situation get incrementally larger, changes begin to impact more and more surrounding people. Mr. O’Sullivan charges us with the job of starting this effect to create positive change within athletics. Think of it this way, Mr. O’Sullivan writes the book “Changing the Game”, a lot of coaches read it and start changing how they coach, parents read it and start changing how they parent, I read it and decide to write this article, a friend of mine reads it and starts an athlete’s mental health initiative, more parents read it and think twice about signing up for that travel league next season, other parents read it and decide to convince their entire travel team to play Rec the following season. Athletes decide they only want to play one tournament a season. Athletes and parents advocate for a unified season schedule, so they have 1-3 months of down time throughout the year.

Ending the parental anxiety of not playing travel. Let’s discuss this phrase one more time, “but if I don’t put my kid in travel everything they will be left behind”...may I remind you of what our parents said to us growing up, knowing many of you will cringe but you will also see my point, “if your friend jumped off a bridge would you?” No, you wouldn’t. For one person it seems impossible to change the sports world for our kids. It takes one athlete, one parent, one coach at a time to not buy into this overwhelming system. It takes one athlete, one parent, one coach

at a time to talk about sports for fun, reducing the pressure, cutting the chaos to help foster change. YOU CAN BE THE PARENT! YOU CAN BE THE ATHLETE! For one person it is NOT impossible to change the sports world to improve the lives of our kids.



(p)



(q)

** The opinions in this piece are solely of Dr. Gable and do not necessarily express the opinions of other providers or Pavilion Pediatrics as a whole.

Answer Key	(a)
Dr. King	(b)
Dr. Ganunis	(c)
Anna	(d)
Dr. Gable	(e)
Dr. Broome	(f)
Dr. Gable	(g)
Amy	(h)
Dr. King	(i)
Dr. Broome	(j)
Dr. Goldstein	(k)
Dr. Broome	(l)
Dr. King	(m)
Joanna	(n)
Anna	(o)
Dr. Gable	(p)
Amy	(q)