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Stressed for Success

Kids feel the heat, as games get rough

By : Bryan Schwartzman Staff Writer

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A high school softball pitcher in New Jersey recently achieved the most elusive of feats by tossing a no-hitter, confounding opposing batters with her speed and precision.

The next game, she gave up just a single hit to lead her team to another victory. Afterward, she broke down and wept.

But they were not tears of joy, recalls Keith Waldman, a Cherry Hill, N.J.-based sports psychologist who treated the girl. The 16-year-old cried because she performed poorly at the plate during those same two games, and felt she had let her teammates and coaches down.

This may be an extreme case, but it hints at just how driven many young people are toward athletic excellence.

"Kids feel so much pressure to win. This can take away the pleasure and enjoyment of it, and cause anxiety problems, depression," explains Waldman, of Optimal Performance Associates, where he runs team-building and stress-management programs for youth sports squads.

The intensity and passion that adolescents and early teenagers bring to their sports — and the sometimes unchecked push for victory on the part of players, parents and coaches — raise concerns that go far beyond batting averages and free-throw percentages.

Is too much pressure being placed on teens? Do teens place too much pressure on themselves? And if so much time and energy is invested in an activity, isn't there the expectation of achievement? Or does that sentiment come from overeager coaches and parents, rather than from the child?

According to David Pargman, professor of educational psychology at Florida State University, sports "offers tremendous possibility for enriching their lives. But it offers no guarantee."

He stresses that competitive sports can help young people learn to deal with success and failure. Sports can offer them the opportunity to make new friends, build self-esteem, and, of course, improve dexterity and fitness levels. But on the flip side, if the experience proves negative, it's possible that an athlete will struggle emotionally, even leading to issues of anxiety and low self-esteem.

'A recipe for dropping out'

"Sports has the potential to build character, but too often, it builds characters," emphasizes Michael L. Sachs, who teaches in the department of kinesiology at Temple University, and is co-author of *The Total Sports Experience for Kids: A Parent's Guide to Success in Youth Sports*.

What he means by "characters" are adults who are overly critical and obsessed with winning, and kids who either lose confidence in themselves or develop inflated egos to the point that they believe the world revolves around them.

"What 12-year-old wants to hear all the time how poorly you play? This is a recipe for dropping out," adds Sachs. "This is coaching malpractice. We shouldn't be telling our kids they stink."

While some coaches and adults do try to achieve glory through athletes in their care, Larry Shane, who heads the

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baseball team at the Haverford School, a private institution on the Main Line, thinks most people have the best interests of kids at heart.

"We don't put pressure on them to win," says Shane. "We remind the players that you are out there for the fun of it. It's not life and death. When the game is over, it's over; don't take it home with you."

Unfortunately, not every team's locker room is so relaxed. Dena Shleifer, 16, of Bethlehem, Pa., has played soccer for as long as she can remember.

Shleifer plays as a sweeper for the Bethlehem United Premier Girls Soccer, an independent soccer team, in the fall and winter. But come spring she suits up for her high school team, where the level of play is significantly lower.

"We don't win too much," she readily admits.

Her teammates try hard, but they don't have her years of practice and training. Consequently, Shleifer feels as if she's constantly being singled out by her coach.

"If we lose, it's my fault. But if we win, I'm the hero," she says. "It does bother me."

She explains that when she figured that out — when she realized her coach's poor style — she got angry, even wanting him fired.

Instead, she tries to drown out her coach's admonishments.

"The best way to get my anger out is to prove him wrong — to show him I'm better than he thinks I am," says Shleifer.

She adds that she looks forward to rejoining her club team in the fall, with its more supportive staff.

'How best to communicate'

"It is one thing to know a sport and know the skills, it's another thing to actually coach," declares Mark Allemand, marketing director for the Illinois-based American Sport Education Program, a private firm that trains 35,000 high school coaches across the country annually.

The course, now offered online, stresses positive reinforcement, as well as treating players equally.

As part of the class, coaches view videos of scripted interactions between leaders and athletes that show right and wrong ways of handling given situations. Allemand explains that this is meant so coaches can examine their own behavior on and off the field.

"We emphasize the importance of how best to communicate," says Allemand. "Our philosophy is: Athletes are first, winning is second."

But Sachs notes that since youth sports are so decentralized, the prospect of that kind of reasonable training seems a long way off.

In the end, it may be up to the actual athlete to raise concerns when sports takes on a life of its own, and ceases to be fun. And if the coach is part of the problem, Sachs encourages children to talk to their parents. If the problem is part parent, the expert says that a coach may be a better sounding board.

So what can be done for athletes who are stressed out by their performance levels, their coaches or even their choices in general?

Waldman, who holds degrees in clinical social work and sports psychology, says such anxiety is caused by focusing on elements children can't control.

He advises kids to concentrate on putting forth their best efforts, showing up with positive attitudes and developing good routines, like eating well and getting adequate sleep.

Waldman warns that there are repercussions to a teenager's world when it revolves heavily around extreme physical play. Besides the inevitable topsy-turvy emotions and so much stress so early in life, what about the body itself? Side-lining injuries could have devastating effects on young competitors, who might wind up with permanent ailments — or, at the very least, some time out on the bench to lick their wounds.

In many senses, as Waldman puts forth, a kid could truly be in "for an emotional roller-coaster ride."

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