

When sports parents attack

J.D. Mullane, Bucks County Courier Times, Oct/26/2006

I can't say why a 40-year-old dad put his son in pee-wee football, but after reading several accounts, it appears clear why he pulled a .357 Magnum on the coach.

According to police, the man was angry that his son wasn't getting enough "playing time."

The dad and the coach argued. This led to a fistfight, which is when police said the gun came out.

The team of 5- and 6-year-olds ran to an end zone and crouched. Parents on the sidelines panicked. The police were called. Arrests were made.

The incident, which occurred in neighboring Northeast Philadelphia last weekend, is the latest in a string of youth sports rage incidents across the country.

This case is, of course, extreme. But it's rooted in the same parental nuttiness that is not uncommon along the sidelines of kid sports.

Ask anyone who coaches in the youth leagues. They will tell you stories of pushy parents who scream, shout and swear.

I've seen it. I once spent several innings at a T-ball game seated behind a woman who loudly and snidely criticized her son because his batting stance was sloppy and his swing lacked authority. The kid was 5.

I wonder, as I watch this stuff, if these parents were lousy childhood athletes, and now try to make up for it by living through their kids.

If so, this is a cruel fate for the child.

I'm no shrink, but it's unlikely that the concepts of winning and losing, the value of a crisp, consistent swing, or the lack of getting enough "playing time" occurs to a kid until well after childhood's tender years.

I have two sons who play T-ball and flag football. They are ages 5 and 7. I put them in sports mostly to let them be boys. They do not disappoint.

If there is a mud puddle within 50 yards of the field, they are jumping in it.

If there is dirt in the vicinity, they are playing in it.

If a butterfly/interesting bird/weird crawly bug passes, their interest is all-consuming.

If there is a base, yard marker or other movable object on the field, they are examining and moving it.

To them, the most important aspect of sports has nothing to do with the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat. It's the snack after the game.

But there are special moments, too.

The other week, my 7-year-old, Danny, was carrying the ball for his Penndel Wildcat flag team. He smacked his head hard into another kid. He came off the field crying.

"I never want to be a running back again," he said.

He would not go back into the game.

On the sideline, we talked over the fence. I told him that giving up is a bad thing, even if you're hurt.

He stood there, still. After a while, after seeing the team playing without him, he decided to go back.

I was proud. This is the true value of youth sports.

It isn't always easy being a parent on the sidelines. You want your kid to shine and make the big play.

But when that doesn't happen, or when your kid isn't playing enough, or doesn't listen, or is playing in the dirt, frustration tempts nuttiness.

So, some advice.

Walk away. Go to the snack stand. Sit on a distant bench. Don't watch. Let the coaches coach.

In an hour, the game will be over and your kid, snack in hand, will be happier than when you left home because you let him be a kid.