



ARIZONA SPORTS COMPLEX NEWSLETTER

In all the years I have been a Coach, Pro-trainer and Director... I have seen great youth programs and I have seen youth programs that just don't get it. Its memories like these that drive me to continue to develop our Youth Program.

I remember a situation of an unhappy parent that shared with me an incident that really upset her and her daughter. Her daughter had just finished a game and the coach was screaming at the girls because they lost. The parent was beside herself and just blown away on how the coach treated the girls. He was belittling, he was loud and scary, and he had lost perspective as a coach. The coach yelled, "You're not here to have fun! You are here to work!"

The coach felt the girls were not giving their best effort, were not fully involved, and did not want to win the game as badly as he did. The worse they played, the more fired up he got.

The girls were 8-years old!

This mom was so upset and at the same time, this one conversation would turn her child away from sports. She wanted her daughter to develop a lifelong passion and pursuit of a sports. She wanted her daughter to have the great memories and experiences. She wanted her daughter to have fun first and to learn to love the game first.

Then she felt maybe that is the way it is and then she asked me "when do kids shift from having fun to being competitive in youth sports?"

I get this question a lot, from parents of children 8-18 and I always have only one answer...They don't! Fun and Competition are not mutually exclusive. Youth Sports should be both!

I want to share this article with you from Changing the Game Project. It has a lot of great information that I believe hits the nail on head when it comes to Youth Sports and why our kids play.

There is this overwhelming myth in sports that fun and competitiveness cannot coexist. To have one, you cannot have the other, and at some point, we have to choose between whether we are there to have fun in our sports experience or to compete.

This is a patently false myth. From the youth to the professional level, they coexist. Look at some of the world's greatest athletes and ask yourself "are they having fun"? The Brazilian soccer star Ronaldinho was always seen smiling. Peyton Manning had so much fun he even made commercials poking fun at the ultra-competitive nature of pro sports. Julie Foudy, the World Cup, and Olympic Champion told us on our podcast that there was never a game when she did not start laughing hysterically. The list goes on and on. No one doubts these athlete's competitiveness. They sure had a lot of fun doing it, though!

Fun and competition do not exist at polar ends of a continuum in youth sports. In fact, fun and competition can actually be the same concept for kids. Fun is not about deriving pleasure at all times from an activity. Having fun is more about "enjoyment" of the activity. So what is enjoyment?

The difference between enjoyment and pleasure

Have you ever run a marathon? As we often say at our talks, during mile 20-26 of your marathon, do you experience any pleasure? If you are like most, probably not. You probably had cramps in places you didn't know you had muscles. But

you can still enjoy running. Sports does not always have to be pleasurable; it can be demanding and challenging. Yet this can still be enjoyable, and enjoyment is a critical ingredient.

Many of us will look at a tough practice, a hard-fought loss, or a bad day in the trenches and think kids will not stick it out because it did not bring them pleasure. Others believe we will never see that hard-fought game or the grind in the trenches because we are making the game too pleasurable and not making it challenging. Pleasure is not the goal of making sports fun. Enjoyment is the goal. Those activities do bring enjoyment with the right approach.

How adults define fun is not how children define fun

Children play sports because it brings them enjoyment. Adults continue to play sports because it brings them enjoyment. Even pros play because they love to play, and when it stops being enjoyable, they retire. We all seek out things that we enjoy doing, and avoid things we do not. Why would kids be any different?

When Amanda Visek of George Washington University asked children why they played sports, 9 out of 10 said because it was fun. When asked what made sports fun, here were their top answers:

1. Trying your best
2. When the coach treats a player with respect
3. Getting playing time
4. Playing well as a team
5. Getting along with teammates
6. Being active

Much farther down the list we find winning (48), playing in tournaments (63), private training with specialized coaches (66), and my favorite, taking team pictures (81). In a nutshell, kids want excitement, support, and positive interactions with their peers and the adults. Those things bring enjoyment.

How do they define fun?

Fun is working hard. It is being challenged and competing. It is learning a new skill, being with friends, having a coach that cares, getting compliments from coaches, and a coach who respects them. Fun in sports for kids means learning from mistakes, working together as a team, applying a skill you learned in practice in a game, improving athletic skills to play at the next level, playing against an evenly matched team, and winning. Fun is getting playing time! Yes, winning is part of the fun for kids. It is not the most important, factor, though, coming in at a lowly 48 out of 81 when the determinants are prioritized.

What we should glean from this short list of fun determinants is that children see many varying things as fun. Their definition of fun is quite encompassing. They really know how to make anything fun! Two, their definitions of fun incorporate nearly all the facets of youth sport we, as adults, hope it will accomplish for them. If we made sports about fun, following their 81 determinants as a roadmap, it would fulfill their needs and our wishes for youth sports!

We will create an experience that fully engages children, keeps them playing for a long time, helps them develop vital skills in the game and beyond, and still achieves our adult-imposed goals on the whole thing. That is a win-win for everyone. They would play more, play longer, and play better if we only made it about fun.

Lack of Fun is the number one reason kids quit sports

As we continue to dig into this topic we have discovered children quit sports when they no longer have fun. It is the number one reason they quit, and as we ask these kids how they define "Not Fun" so we can stop making it not fun. Research has shown that most of the "not fun" determinants have to do with adults. If we force the fun from youth sports, we risk losing the kids completely. If they are not in sports, we miss this chance to use it as the vehicle for life skills, strong values, great role models that we so desperately want for our kids. It should be our primary goal to make sports fun, modeled after how kids define it, so we are building amazing people beyond the game.

If youth sports is fun, will kids compete less?

Why would enjoying something more ever make you compete less? The secret to competing is creating an environment that allows athletes to go all in without fear. What does this look like:

1. An environment that allows for mistakes, and even promotes them
2. Positive team dynamics
3. Respect and encouragement throughout the team
4. Agreed upon values
5. A coach willing to give players ownership of the experience
6. Last but not least, enjoyment!

This type of environment reflects fun determinants, for as you dig deeper kids define fun as competing, being strong and confident, playing hard, setting and achieving goals, being challenged to improve and get better, practicing with specialty trainers, scrimmaging during practice, playing against an evenly matched team, playing in tournaments, and even winning medals and trophies. This list is how we would define competition. This list is all inclusive of everything many coaches argue is lost when we focus on fun, and yet, kids are telling us these things are still fun for them.

Wringing the fun out of youth sports won't make kids compete more. It will make them compete less.

How to Make Sports Both Fun and Competitive

If you want to make your sports experience both fun and competitive:

1. **Play games in training, lots of them:** if you want people to compete at game speed, make it look like a game. At a minimum, 60-70% of your training should be game based. Add defenders, add constraints if you like, coach through the game, but play and players will compete.
2. **Focus on values such as fearlessness and accountability:** if athletes are not afraid to make mistakes, and are willing to be held accountable when they do not bring the right effort and focus, they will compete harder. This is what the best professional coaches do (see for example Karch Kiraly and USA Volleyball) and you should too.
3. **Stop yelling at players for technical errors:** nothing stops a player competing faster than getting yelled at for every mistake. If they compete with 100% focus and effort and still make a mistake, they are entitled to that. That is called learning.
4. **Play for something:** Let the winners earn something for winning in training. At times, you can even let your athletes decide what the winners get for winning. It might be picking up cones, a quick physical activity, making a rule in the next game, but let the winners actually win something and people will compete.
5. **Stay on schedule:** nothing diminishes competitiveness more than when athletes do not know when practice will end, or an activity will end. You are better off playing in shorter intense practice activities than longer, drawn-out ones. How can you go all out when you don't know when an activity ends, or if practice ends in 10 minutes or 30? Stick to the schedule so players can monitor their effort and hold nothing back.
6. **Give them ownership:** Whether it is choosing the game, deciding on the practice topic, or "running" halftime, when kids are given ownership, their enjoyment will increase and with it that competitive fire will be stoked because they are competing to prove their ideas correct.

Can sports be both fun and competitive? You bet it can and it should be. If sports isn't fun, kids quit. And if they quit, we lose the opportunity to impact their lives for decades to come. We miss that chance to change a life. That should scare us more than anything else.

I hope you enjoyed this Newsletter and you can count on the fact that at our ASC Youth Soccer Program we will continue to make it fun and competitive. Keep in mind that your child's Coach will not be afraid of losing the game they had a chance to win, but more importantly, it will be losing the kids we had a chance to transform.

We will continue to make your practices and games a boatload of fun. Add competitive games to your sessions. Find an appropriate level of competition. And let them compete. And when the game ends, we move on.

Sports isn't work. It's play. It's fun... it's competitive, but it's play. Just let the kids play, and the kids will compete.

We also want to take a moment to congratulate last week's Character Card Winners! Great Job to all the players!

🏀 Z. Zendejas U8 Coach Jazmyn Whitecaps

🏀 A. Tripathi U8 Coach Matthew Timbers

🏀 G. Steward U10 Coach Kliver Celta

🏀 L. Tufarelli U10 Coach Noah Valencia

🏀 R. Grindley U14 Coach Ayana Verona

🏀 R. Miller U14 Coach Marco Sampdoria

Please stop by the front desk to pick it up next time you're here.

Thank you for taking the time to read our newsletter and have a great weekend!

George Archuleta – ASC Director Youth Soccer