



## Keeping it all in Perspective

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**[Not long ago], the father of a pre-adolescent hockey player was found guilty of involuntary manslaughter for killing another father who was supervising a practice. Thankfully, it is still fairly unusual for parents to kill each other at youth sporting events, but the specter of hockey and soccer and T-ball and skating moms and dads completely out of control at their children's practices and games is ubiquitous. A father head butting an official after a youth soccer game. A father sharpening the buckles on his son's football helmet so that other players would shred their fingers when they grabbed his face mask. Moms and dads screaming at umpires over calls in T-ball games in which no score is kept and the kids are so small they don't even try to have them pitch to the batters. Parents yelling at score keepers for not stopping the clock on the exact hundredth of a second at pre-adolescent basketball games in which the kids can barely get the ball up to the rim.**

One of the comments that we often hear about what's wrong with youth athletics is that the kids would be fine if you could keep the parents out of the picture. While there's a grain of truth in that idea, the deeper truth is that children are neither innately good-natured nor innately ill-natured. They learn to treat others with respect or with disrespect, yes, from their peers and from TV and the Internet, but first of all from their parents. Subtract the out-of-control parents from the picture — and of course many of the out-of-control parents are also the coaches — and maybe that would be an improvement, on the theory that no parents are better than bad ones. But that's not good enough. *The parents need to do better than stay out of the way. They need to be the "why" treating opponents and officials and coaches with respect is the right thing to do. They need to model that behavior themselves.*

What's needed is, to put it in one word, perspective. It may well be that to some extent small children retain a sense of play, or the sheer enjoyment of play at least until we teach them otherwise. If life has beaten the spirit of play out of us, maybe we should try to remember when we first fell in love with a game, remember that joy of playing the game. Hockey is a rough game, but it is a game. I met a man in his mid-thirties recently who grew up in Detroit playing ice hockey. He plays in a hockey league now in Dallas. "It's in the blood," he said. He's in touch with the spirit of play that is at the heart of all sports. That it's "play" doesn't mean you don't play hard. If you walk onto the field, step onto the ice, step up to the plate, you should play your heart out. You should play as if it's the most important thing in the world, but you should never forget that it's not.

Many people have commented on how much the tragedy of September 11 has made them appreciate life more than they ever had before. Shouldn't it also give us a more reasonable perspective on sports as well? Louisville basketball coach Rick Pitino lost his brother-in-law and best friend from childhood in the attack on the World Trade Center. Another brother-in-law had been killed in a hit-and-run accident earlier in the year. In 1987 Pitino's six-month-old son died from congenital heart failure. Coaching basketball has been a kind of therapy for Pitino, but these tragedies also helped him put basketball in perspective. "I will never lose my tremendous passion for the game or for winning, but I will accept losing much better than I ever have before," Pitino said. A few weeks after the terrorist attacks, Pitino told a story about a fan who came up to him and started talking about the Louisville-Kentucky rivalry as if it were the most important thing on earth. Pitino didn't actually say it, but he thought to himself, "Get a life." If Rick Pitino can recognize that the Louisville-Kentucky basketball rivalry does not in itself a meaningful life make, can't parents recognize that a pre-adolescent hockey game or a T-ball baseball game is not a matter of life or death, figuratively or literally?

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