

Which Side Are You On?

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I'm 50 years old and like most guys my age, I developed the ability to choose even teams by the time I entered the second grade. In the games I played with my buddies around the neighborhood, choosing teams always went something like this: 1) Two guys would volunteer to be captains. 2) One captain had the first pick 3) The other captain chose the next two players. 4) Both captains would alternate choosing players until everyone was assigned to a team.

More often than not, the teams we selected were evenly matched. On the rare occasion that one team dominated another, we'd stop the game and try to even things out. The solution to creating more balanced teams usually involved trading players, but sometimes we invented more creative solutions. My friend, Mike, was an All-WNY baseball player in high school and around the time he turned 8, he became such a dominant hitter that we insisted he bat lefty to make things fair. I remember a few games in which Mike had to hit from his knees to keep the game even.

Whether we were playing street football in front of my house, 4 on 4 basketball in my friend's backyard, or wiffleball over at the playground down the street, every kid in our neighborhood understood that creating balanced teams was an essential part of playing sports together.

When one team dominated another, the game became less fun to play. Players grew angry, bored, and humiliated. Disagreements and bickering increased. Inevitably, guys would quit and go home. Once a few guys quit, the game was over, and once the game was over, the fun was over, too.

The guys in my neighborhood, like every other kid in America at the time, looked at sports differently than kids do now. Most of us were pretty competitive and we all liked winning more than losing, yet winning wasn't nearly as important to us as playing a long time. If we started a football game after dinner, it was far more important to keep playing until dark than

be a member of the winning team. The key to playing for hours and hours was to create teams that were competitively balanced

Things have changed drastically over the past few decades. With each passing year, it gets harder and harder to find a competitive game played between two evenly matched teams. While out on my bike last summer, I came upon two youth sports leagues that left me shaking my head in disgust. One was a house league soccer game and the other a Little League baseball game. The games were played less than a mile away from each other; both games involved 7, 8 and 9 year olds.

The source of my disgust related to the competitive balance between the teams in each league. In the baseball game, it appeared as though the teams arrived to the field from two different solar systems. One team was comprised of big, strong 9 year olds who had obviously played baseball since their Pre K graduation. The other team was considerably younger and smaller, only a few of the kids looked like they'd played baseball for longer than three weeks. Every single one of the kids on Team Goliath could hit and field like Ichiro Suzuki. The kids on Team Weakling tended to swing at the ball like a slightly-inebriated Kristi Yamaguchi.

When I left the game, the score was 26-0. It was the third inning.

The soccer game was worse. I arrived to the game shortly after the start of the second half and the score was 12-0. Again, it was experts vs. amateurs; a team of big, skilled players who had obviously played and practiced together for a long time 'competing' against a group of younger kids that barely had any soccer experience. I stayed for most of the second half of the game and never saw the losing team advance the ball into their opponent's half of the field.

The notable difference in the soccer game was and undercurrent of emotional rumblings on the sidelines. The parents in the baseball game seemed resigned to the fact that they were going to watch their son's get their asses kicked and merely wanted the innings to pass as quickly as possible. At the soccer game, there was more than a little tension in the air. The goalie on the losing team was crying and a few of his teammates seemed on the verge of tears. A few of the parents on the losing team were clearly upset and began tossing not-so-subtle insults at the opposing team.

Some parents on the winning team began lobbing insults of their own back at the losers. By the end of the game, parents were clinging to their lawn chairs with white knuckles and screaming at each other.

An acquaintance of mine was one of the coaches of the dominant soccer team and when I spoke to him afterwards, he suggested that the occasional 22-0 blowout was "just part of the game". He even suggested that getting their butt kicked by a superior squad was a good thing for the losing team, that the blowout would build their character and make them try harder in the future. With all due respect to my friend, that's the biggest load of crap I've ever heard. How much fun is it to be embarrassed in front of your parents? How much fun is it to watch your teammate start to cry after the fourteenth goal? A 22-0 humiliation is exactly the type of thing that drives children away from sports!

When a game ceases to be competitive, everyone loses. Coaches stop coaching. Referees alter their judgment in an effort to "even things out". Spectators lose interest or cringe in embarrassment. The losing team equates playing sports with injustice and humiliation. The winning team often mocks the game because they sense how shallow the victory actually is.

A contest between two evenly matched teams leads players to give a maximum effort. Learning and skill development is heightened for all players. The actions of coaches and referees are honest and true to the game. Spectators are focused on the contest and appreciative of the play of both teams. The losing team can find value in the loss and the winning team can take pride in the victory.

Almost every coach I've ever met will tell you that they'd like to play a complete schedule of games against evenly matched opponents. In their heart of hearts, I think most kids would prefer to lose an exciting game than yawn their way through a 22-0 victory.

Which leads us to a very simple and very important question: if we can agree that competitive balance is essential to a healthy youth sports program, and if we can recognize that choosing even teams has always been relatively easy for generations of 8 year old kids, why is it so hard for the adults who manage youth sports leagues to make sure that every team

in their league has a competitive chance to beat every other team in their league?

The rampant competitive imbalance that exists in youth sports can be tied to three simple principles:

** Guys love to build stuff.*

** Guys love to win.*

** Few things give guys greater pleasure than building something that wins.*

For too many youth coaches, the dream of building a championship team clouds our judgement. We're faced with a series of interesting internal dilemmas that see our "shoulds" face off against our "wants".

- We know that all the teams in a house or recreational league *should* be evenly balanced, but we really *want* to coach the team that's just a little better than everyone else.
- We know that we *should* be teaching young athletes to value fair play and sportsmanship, yet we also *want* our players to experience the joy of finishing in first place (and if we're honest with ourselves, we want to experience some of that joy, too).
- We know that we *should* openly question a coach who fields an all-star team in a recreational league, but we don't *want* to be perceived as the guy who complains after his team gets beaten.

All too often, our "wants" win out over the "shoulds" and our children suffer the consequences. At the introductory stage of a young athlete's development, a coach should lead a child to equate playing sports with fun, friendship, and positive recognition. In the era of 8-0 house league soccer, many young athletes equate playing sports with frustration, injustice, and failure.

Some of the problems that plague youth sports leagues carry difficult and complex solutions. This problem, the lack of competitive balance in house/recreational leagues, is not one of them. The solutions are simple. Here is a basic framework for any prospective league organizer to help insure that teams are balanced:

- * The first day of the league is an evaluation day conducted by an independent group of 1-3 coaches. None of the evaluators should be the coach of a team in the league and none should be the parent of a child who participates in the league.
- * Each child is given a grade based on their experience and skill level. For example, a “franchise” player is graded a 1, a moderately experienced player is graded a 2, and a beginner is graded a 3.
- * An even amount of 1,2, and 3 players are distributed onto each team. Again, coaches are not allowed to influence player assignments.
- * The following restrictions are placed on player requests: 1) a coach may request that their child and one additional player may play on their team 2) any parent in the league may request that their child play with one additional friend.
- * If player request chains of more than 3 players exist, they will be broken into smaller groupings.
- * If a child cannot attend the evaluation, they forfeit the right to make a player request of their own or be requested by a another coach.
- * If obvious competitive imbalances exist, the league organizer reserves the right to make trades to correct those imbalances up to the third week of the season.

Sadly, coaches and parents will still try to manipulate the rules in an effort to assemble an all-star team of players. Parents of all-stars will deliberately sign up late for a league and request that their child play on the team of their choice. They’ll assemble a flow chart of fourteen player requests designed to keep the strongest kids together. When all else fails, they’ll draft angry letters to board members. Many parents and kids will go to great lengths to build and maintain a winning team.

League administrators should be ready for this fight and willing to take it on. Competitive balance plays an essential role in making competition more exciting, challenging, productive, and fun for all players.

