

What parents need to know about sports

by Jane Clifford

I remember when my son, Ryan, discovered tennis at Y summer camp. He was 7. Over time, he asked for lessons, then to play in a few tournaments. He was a solid player and, I thought, eventually might be good enough to get a scholarship.

That's what we all think, says Roger Blake, assistant executive director of the California Interscholastic Federation, the governing body of high school sports. He was coming to my town soon to lead presentations on "What Kids Want Their Parents to Know About Sports."

"During the presentation, I talk about the myths of college athletic scholarships, and become the bearer of bad news for many parents that only just under 2 percent of student-athletes in the United States ever get an athletic scholarship."

Blake gives that reality check during more than 80 presentations a year at high schools across the United States. It's part of a larger message to parents to back off, calm down and just let our kids enjoy playing sports for the pure joy of it.

Blake brings to his talks his experience with the Josephson Institute of Ethics and its Character Counts! Sports program, devoted to helping coaches, parents and other adults equip young people "with the values to meet life's challenges, on and off the field."

Michael Josephson, founder of the Marina del Rey, Calif.-based institute, was inspired to expand his character education program to include sports after a 1999 conference on the Pursuing Victory With Honor good sportsmanship campaign. There, a few dozen leaders in amateur athletics called for major reforms in the way sports are played, coached and watched. Eight years and many ugly incidents later, it appears coaches and parents still have plenty to learn.

"I tell stories and use pictures and videos," Blake says, "in the hope that, during the course of the evening, we may see ourselves and be reminded the vital role that a parent plays."

That role, says Blake, father of a 24-year-old son, is as supporter, encouraging our children to play the sports they're interested in, telling them the goal is not winning or losing, but just the experience.

"My job that night is to remind parents what really is important to our kids and what kids are often afraid to

say." Things like what a young boy says in one of the videos: "It would be a lot more fun sometimes if they just locked my parents out of the gym."

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