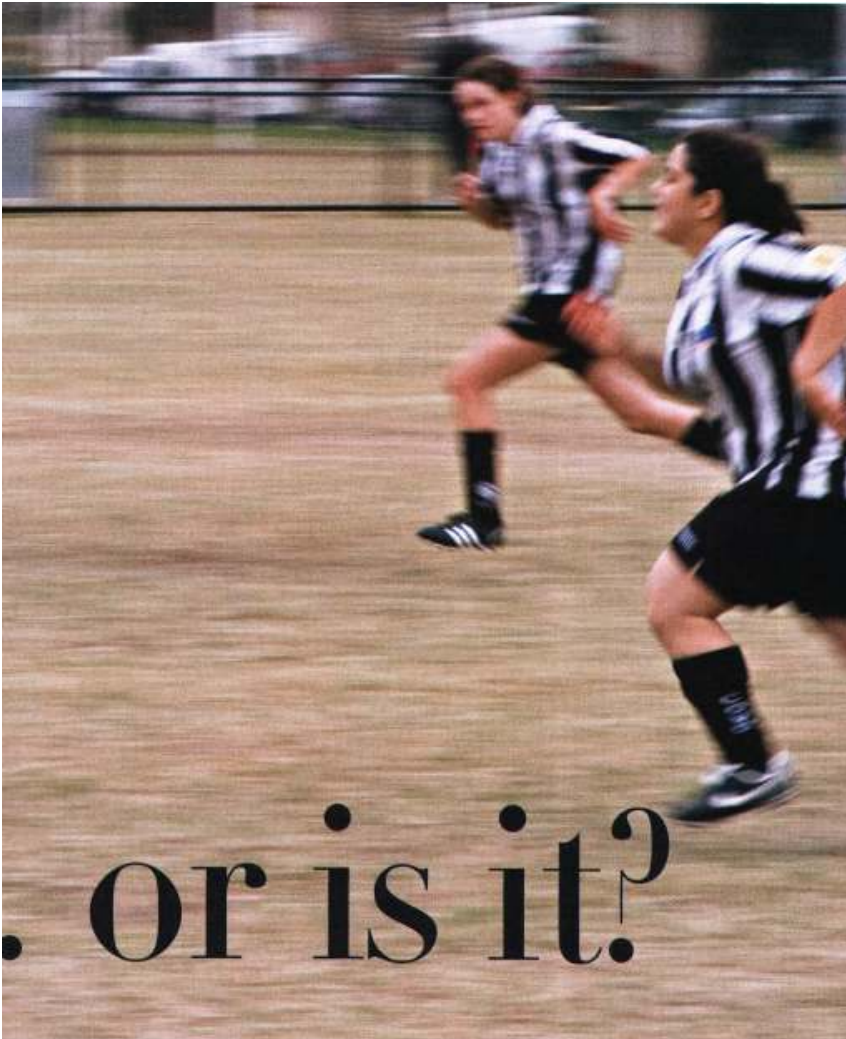


*Tears, tantrums,
even violence – and
that’s just parents’
behaviour on the
sidelines. Are we
pushing our kids
too far to achieve
sporting success?
By Paul Connolly.*

It's just a game ..



Pitch perfect A Bundoora United JFC under-14s player in a game against the Brunswick Zebras; (right) Lenny Leonidas watches his children from the sidelines.



Tony Lawrence knows how differently parents and their children sometimes see junior sport. As a junior soccer coach and a father, Lawrence, from Melbourne's Coburg, has seen some questionable things during his many years of coaching.

One incident, in particular, sticks in his mind. "It happened after an under-eights cup final," says Lawrence, 50, whose daughter, Susie, 13, plays for the Brunswick Zebras in Melbourne's inner north. "Many of the losing team's parents were weeping after the result, prompting one parent to offer them some perspective. 'It's not the World Cup,' he said to them. 'It is to us!' they replied."

As Lawrence's recollection suggests, kids' sport is more than fun and games. The sidelines at a junior sporting event can be a melting pot of petty rivalries, misplaced ambition, thwarted dreams, barely bottled rage and sometimes even violence. And, yes, we're talking about the adults here.

In 2003, for example, an argument between two fathers at an under-11s soccer match in Caulfield, Melbourne, left one man with a steel spoke from an umbrella wedged in his back, millimetres from his spine. And in what is arguably the nadir for sideline violence at a children's sporting event, an ice-hockey dad was beaten to death in front of his children by another player's father in Massachusetts in the US. Ironically, the 2000 killing was sparked when the assailant complained to the coach about rough play during an under-11s practice session.

Thankfully, "parent rage" on such a scale is rare but pushy, overbearing parents and coaches are as common as seagulls at a beachside picnic – and they often have a similar spoiling effect. Sports psychologist Anthony Klarica, of Elite Performance in Melbourne, says the majority of overzealous parents are well intentioned and don't realise their behaviour is over the top. "Parents assume the child wants or has the same goals the parent thinks are appropriate," says Klarica. "For example, a parent might think their child would like to be a professional – even if the child doesn't know it yet. This influences the parent to assist the child to pursue this goal. This will affect how they interact with the child, how they select a club and how much time the child spends training." →



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Another reason parents – and coaches – become overbearing is that they are living vicariously through their child. “The parent almost did, or couldn’t [compete at a high level], so they want their child to achieve what they didn’t,” says Klarica.

Lawrence, for instance, has seen parents guide their nine-year-olds on the field as if they were talking through their moves on a PlayStation game (“Hold, hold, move left, run forwards, pass the ball”). He’s heard coaches tell their eight-year-old players to “chop” the opposition. He’s witnessed a nine-year-old’s enraged father threaten to fight “every official at our club” and he’s seen the coach of an under-10s side give one of his less talented players a mere 18 seconds on the field during a final.

Dr Clifton Evers, a research fellow at the University of NSW, says pushy parents are one of the main reasons children drop out of sport. Evers and a team of researchers are midway through a five-year study into the role that sport plays in shaping physical, emotional and social development. Evers says the 90 children aged 10 to 16 who were interviewed for the study “overwhelmingly resent parents who scream at them or make them do things they don’t want to do – and they critique their parents with other kids because of it. Some kids spoke about

‘hating’ their dads for being overbearing. That’s very strong language to use.”

The interim findings of the research may not be that surprising. What is more surprising is that adults can so easily overlook or misconstrue their children’s needs. “Children, overwhelmingly, see sport as being about fun and a way to socialise with other children,” says Evers. “They don’t play sport to be competitive

and they don’t like other kids who are competitive. To them, playing sport is about excitement, not winning. Any excitement from winning comes more from the attention afterwards than the winning itself. And they don’t care about trophies. They are more excited getting new boots or a Chelsea shirt at the start of the year than a trophy at the end of it.”

All this isn’t to say children don’t need or want parental involvement, continues Evers. In fact, a lack of parental interest is probably the biggest reason kids don’t participate in sport.

“Transport and costs are two vital things parents can contribute. But kids also want their parents present, supporting them. They just don’t want them pressuring them or telling them what to do [on the field]. Interestingly, it doesn’t matter to the kids whether their parents played sport to any high level.



Game on Steve Brant gives son Harry's Leichhardt Saints soccer team some pointers during a game at Hurlstone Park.





They still look up to them much more than any professional athlete," he says.

The obvious conundrum such research raises for parents, coaches and clubs is how to be encouraging without being pushy, how to impose necessary discipline without being despotic. Negotiating this blurry line is something Sydney father-of-two Steve Brant admits is a struggle. For many years he has coached his 14-year-old son Harry's Leichhardt Saints soccer team in the inner west. He says he is very much of the view, as is his club, that the result is secondary to the players' enjoyment. Parents praise the coach for his balance of firmness and humour.

But the sales manager knows his son isn't always the most enthusiastic athlete and without soccer would likely do little to no physical exercise,

choosing to sequester himself in his room with computer games and books. "I think parents have a responsibility to teach children that physical activity is a worthy pursuit," says Brant, 48. "If I let him quit, I fear he would become a lounge lizard overnight, so there's definitely an element of me making him do it."

Brant admits he has been known to offer his son effusive instructions from the sideline, although he says he's never loud or abusive. "Harry gives me

hand signals as if to say, 'Shut up,' but I can't help myself. Having not been an athlete myself to becoming a player in an over-35s competition, I know how my game has improved by learning important basics. I just feel if he can pick up some of these skills and positional things, he will be more comfortable and enjoy it more."

Peter Le Guay says he loves watching his sons,

Jack, 12, and Matt, 9, play for Chatswood Junior Rugby Club, in Sydney's north. And while he knows they play because they love it, he does sometimes ask himself if he's living vicariously through them. "Maybe it's a realisation that I can't do that any more," he says.

Like Steve Brant, Sydney lawyer Le Guay, 47, sees great health benefits in children's sport and he also touts the benefits of joining a team. "I don't care what sport they play as long as it's a team sport," he says. "It's character-building."

That said, Le Guay has seen the ugly side of junior sport: clubs that emphasise winning and set a darkly competitive cultural tone, parents who scream insults at referees and linespeople, parents who abuse their own children for mistakes, and parents who seem to be on a knife's edge. "I've had parents from an →

Children see sport as fun and don't play to be competitive.

Tips for young players Evan Leonedas, 13, practises his ball skills; (far right) Brunswick Zebras coach Sam Habib gives encouragement.





opposition team running at me aggressively when I had to physically break up a fight between a child from my son's team and an opponent. Parents can become obsessed and I've seen them encourage their kids to physically target an opposition player. They transfer their aggression onto their kids."

The problem of misbehaving adults is one that sporting bodies and state government sport and recreation departments have been attempting to stamp out for years – for its own sake, to improve retention rates and to re-emphasise the fun and participation aspects of children's sport. These goals have prompted programs such as the NSW Department of Sport and Recreation's Sport Rage Prevention program; the national Play By The Rules initiative; and Silent Sunday (or Saturday), a campaign promoted by the Queensland Department of Sport and Recreation where participants refrain from making any comments at a junior sporting event – only clapping is allowed.

Peter McDougall, manager of community football development with AFL Victoria, says these kinds of programs aim to educate parents and clubs about what is or isn't appropriate behaviour. While they offer practical advice (the Sport Rage Prevention program suggests: "Cheer and acknowledge good play by both teams; be enthusiastic but don't scream instructions; and accept decisions by officials"), the programs are built around codes of conduct that parents are asked to sign upon registering their child with a sporting club.

"These programs allow for parents who break the code to face the club committee and possible sanctions," says McDougall. "I know of a case where a parent and child have been banned [from a junior Aussie rules club] because of the mother's continued verbally abusive behaviour."

Allied with such programs are moves by sporting bodies to introduce modified versions of games for

younger age groups, such as NAB AFL Auskick and the Football Federation of Australia's Small-Sided Games. Played on smaller fields and without competition points such versions encourage fun as well as skills development since young players have less space in which to operate and, subsequently, get more touches on the ball – which makes them, and their parents, happier.

Clifton Evers says modified games are an excellent innovation that appeal to children. But he says adults should be aware that organised team sport is not the only option. "Kids love to invent sports. The children in our survey expressed interest in things such as yoga, rock climbing, skateboarding and hip-hop. Parents are often more comfortable with the kids playing a sport that imposes rules, using the 'it didn't do me any harm' argument. But kids are often looking for something different, to be creative. It says something that kids find more joy in playing with other kids in the park than in team sports."

But if a child is happily involved in team sports, how should his or her parents foster that interest, particularly if a child shows an aptitude?

Based on his interviews, Evers says that parents who do the best show their children that sport can be a way of life and engage their child's interest in sport away from actual competition – "like taking them to sporting events, and not just the major ones. Kids remember going to watch the local football with their dad or mum. It feeds their enthusiasm for sport in a social way and they become enveloped by it and love it."

And for parents who dream their child may be the next sporting champion, the advice is to let them have fun or you'll scare them away. Says Evers, "Kids who become the best players are usually the ones who have had the most fun." •

Harry gives me signals to say, 'Shut up, but I can't help myself.'





Team spirit Leichhardt Saints soccer team coach Steve Brant with his 14-year-old son, Harry.



FAIR PLAY

Evan Leonedas, 13, and Anna Leonedas, 15
Evan: "I first started playing soccer when my school friends asked me to play. But I didn't join their club because they had tough coaches and there was a lot of anger and shouting. If my parents were like that, I don't think I'd play."
Anna: "I like soccer but the main reason I play is to be with my friends. And we [children] do notice what's happening on the sideline. The aggressive parents who want their kids to win all the time seem to have the most competitive kids who aren't always nice."

Steve Brant, parent and soccer coach
"Parents can lose sight of things. An example occurred after an under-sevens game ended with my team losing 6-0. After the game I could see the parents seemed upset, so I wandered over and said jokingly, 'Looks like you're making some big decisions.' They said, quite seriously, the team needed to win more because the kids would get depressed. Depressed? At the time [the kids] were climbing trees, having a grand time. Until kids reach their teens, I don't think they mind losing – unless they are told to mind."

Peter Le Guay, parent
"Parents and coaches can egg on their kids to such a degree that they go out onto the field hyped up to the point where I've seen them lose it. There's nothing wrong with instilling a desire to win but this is kids' sport, and winning at all costs should never be the main objective."

Ian Pope, elite coach, Swimming Australia
"In my experience, if children are competing for their parents' benefit [and not their own reasons], they are always looking for ways to cut corners and get out. If a child is swimming so they don't let their parents down, it becomes a negative motivation and it does them no good at all."

Peter McDougall, administrator, AFL Victoria
"Codes of conduct are one thing but it matters how clubs enforce them. The issue [of parents misbehaving] will always be there. I don't think people will change to any significant degree. So it comes down to enforcement."