

"Are Young Athletes Putting Themselves at Risk?"
Injuries and burnout are on the rise among young people in competitive sports

YES

A lot of kids and adults think that youth sports in the U.S. have become too intense. In 2006, the Minnesota Youth Soccer Association polled young players about behavior they had observed at sports games. More than a third said that they had been yelled at or teased by a fan; 15 percent said their parents got angry when they played poorly. In a similar poll by *Sports Illustrated for Kids* in 2001, 74 percent of kids said that they had witnessed out-of-control adults at their games.

This sort of behavior takes an emotional toll. One recent study reported that 70 percent of young athletes drop out of their sports by age 13. Many of those kids told researchers that sports weren't much fun.

There are also physical risks. Half of all sports injuries among kids each year are caused by simple overuse, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Stress fractures, ruptured ligaments, and growth-plate* injuries can cause lifelong problems. They're all avoidable with rest and moderation.

I know more than I'd like to about such injuries. When my son was 18, he ruptured an elbow ligament while pitching for his high school baseball team. At the time, he was playing for three different baseball teams in three different seasons. I wish I'd realized then how excessive that was.

- Mark Hyman
Sports Journalist and Author

* Growth plates are areas of growing tissue at the ends of children's leg and arm bones. They are the weakest part of a young person's skeleton.

NO

Those who argue that youth sports are too intense point mostly to two factors--the amount of time that they require and the pressure they place on young athletes. These are the very qualities, however that make sports so valuable.

Youth sports today indeed require a big investment of time, money, and energy. But the physical and emotional benefits that come from playing sports are worth it.

Young athletes who spend countless hours training learn the value of discipline and commitment. There is simply no way other than tireless repetition to master the skills necessary to succeed in competitive athletics. When an athlete performs well as a result of this kind of training, he or she develops genuine self-confidence.

With parents shouting from the sidelines and college scouts watching, high-level competitions are packed with pressure. But when managed well, this pressure can bring out the best in young athletes.

To successfully compete in this environment, young athletes must develop mechanisms for blocking out distractions and concentrating only on the details relevant to performance. Instead of being held back by the pressure, they learn to thrive under it.

In the soccer club I work for, I've seen countless kids achieve their potential as a result of all their hard work. It's the intensity that makes youth sports so valuable.

-Nathan Pitcock
Chicago Magic Soccer Club

