

Ripken: Kids' sports too pressurized

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(CNN) -- Some young sports players are being pushed harder than ever to make the play, make the team, and in some cases, strive to make the pros. What did today's Major League players do to get where they are and what advice can they offer to those who are just starting to feel the pressure?

To help answer those questions, CNN's Carl Azuz spoke with baseball legend Cal Ripken Jr., a record-holder for most consecutive games played, a father, and the author of the book, "Parenting Young Athletes the Ripken Way."

CNN: How did your experience playing as a kid differ from the ultraorganized leagues that kids play in today?

Ripken: As a kid, I was born into baseball. My dad was a manager of minor league teams in the Orioles' organization and most people think that because he was in professional baseball that he made big league players out of my brother Billy and myself. We both got a chance to play in the big leagues. But, the opposite was true. Dad, all he did was expose us to the sport in a way that got our interest and allowed us to go out there and compete and play. We dealt with the good, the bad, and dad just had a nice even keel in the way that he approached baseball. It sent a big message us to that it was about us, and it wasn't about anybody else.

CNN: What are some of the things that kids are facing today in big organizations, which have 60-game seasons?

Ripken: It's interesting. I just wrote a book called "Parenting Young Athletes the Ripken Way," and I think when they put the Ripken up there, it's just a means to sell books a little bit better. But the whole point behind the book was to identify the environment youth sports are in right now and that's a highly pressurized environment. I don't know all the exact reasons, but I got a guess on a few of them. I think that sometimes you want to live vicariously through your kids and parents are kinda pushing their kids a little harder, which creates a little pressure. Many times, it's trying to make star baseball player -- an Alex Rodriguez or a Derek Jeter -- and that puts pressure on them. Sometimes, it's an over-emphasis on winning. Before kids really learn how to play, they need to experience the good and the bad, sometimes the positive, sometimes the negative, a little adversity, and they need to learn the game, and they should be allowed to make mistakes. When you emphasize winning, those mistakes really aren't allowed. So, to me, the pressure has kind of trickled down. Maybe it's because the big league game is so big now, the salaries are so big that parents want the best for their kids, and they want to give them the best chance possible. I think the intentions are good, but, to me, the atmosphere is way too pressurized for the kids to cope.

CNN: When you look at Cal Ripken Baseball, which is a division with more than 700,000 5- to 12-year-olds worldwide -- some of these kids are already feeling the pressure to perform, be it from their coaches or their parents. Take a 10-year-old, for example, should these kids be out there for just the fun of it, or do they need to specialize and set themselves apart?

Ripken: I don't believe in specialization as an introduction to the sport. Before you can truly compete, you have to learn the sport and the only way you can learn the sport is by having the opportunity to swing and catch and throw and run and learn the rules. Many times, there is experimentation when kids are trying to find out where they fit in. Granted, travel teams are forming much earlier now, and there is a seriousness about baseball -- kids are playing only baseball all year round at an early age. I think that leads to the potential of physical burnout and mental burnout. Kids, mentally, they're developing and they need the opportunity to have fun, they need the opportunity to explore and play the game.

All those factors we just mentioned, I think, play into a much more serious, much more pressurized environment. I think if there is one message in the book that I wrote, it would be that we should all consider how we support our kids, maybe rethink how we support our kids because the power is in the coaches and the parents -- not necessarily the league or not necessarily the travel teams -- it's in the people making those decisions.

CNN: What's the best position that parents can play from the sidelines?

Ripken: If I were to give advice to a parent on how to watch the game or how to support their kids, I would say to think of yourself as a grandparent or a great-grandparent, if you want, where you've lived life and you've seen just about everything and nothing's going to surprise you on the baseball field. So I wouldn't overreact to the positive, and I wouldn't overreact to the negative. Just be there and watch and allow the game to unfold to the kids because, after all, they are the ones out there enjoying it. The things we do on the sidelines, whether it's over cheering or calling out their names or reacting negatively when something happens, all those are potential areas that can cause pressure. So if we just act like we are almost invisible, but support the right way by putting our arms around the kids when they need it and kind of encouraging them in a small way, I think that's the best way to watch.

CNN: What if a parent were to see a child shine in a particular sport? How can that parent encourage the child to keep playing without burning him or her out?

Ripken: I would just allow the process to unfold. Again, make sure you compliment them on a job well done and give them reasons why you think they did a good job and encourage them to keep playing. Ultimately, if you are going to make it to the next level -- if you're going to play college baseball or you're going to go and play big league baseball -- it needs to come from within. So you need to grow that little seed, and they need to learn that they are empowered from within. Too many times we stand over our kids and we make them do those things for our benefit. In the end, the motivation needs to come from them, and that's really the secret. So, I would just say, continue to praise them, continue to say, "go get 'em," and allow the process to happen.

CNN: As that process is happening, at what age should a kid start thinking about when he or she should get serious?

Ripken: To me, seriousness occurs naturally in sport. As you go up the ladder in baseball, for example, there's a big drop off at 12 to 13 because you go to a bigger field size. The farther you get up the ladder as far as the talent, merit comes into play, then you have to make a team. The first time I had to make a team was in high school. That was the first time I had to really make a team and I was 14 years old. It then becomes about deserving to play. Playing time depends on how good you are, and sports can be cruel in the sense that competition will unveil anyone's weaknesses, and if you can't compete then you're going to end up getting pushed out. We don't need to accelerate that process, that will happen naturally on its own. If you have a kid that you think is a pretty good player, he's naturally going to meet the next challenge up the ladder and right about 14-years-old they start to mentally understand what they want, and they start to understand that they have to work to get it. So, their practice habits and their work ethic start to be shaped a little bit more from that area. But I wouldn't really spend a whole lot of time worrying about when to take it seriously. That happens on its own.

CNN: You say in the book, "Ultimately, parents should let kids play the game, it's their childhood."

Ripken: Absolutely. It's all about being a kid, and even if a kid is physically mature, emotionally, they're still learning and grasping. Again, I'm of the opinion to let them have fun, let them play, let them enjoy the sport, and I go out of my way to alleviate the pressure instead of adding things that can apply the pressure. All those pressures will happen naturally, you don't have to worry about that.