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San Francisco Chronicle



CW Nevius

## There Are Big Problems, and Ready Solutions The Cost of High Stakes On Little League Games

[C.W. Nevius, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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When he was 10 years old, Joseph Matteucci had a coach for his Castro Valley Little League team who was a "screamer." Joseph's mother, Alexandra, had concerns, but as a single parent she wanted to encourage her son to meet and play with other kids, so she didn't complain.

Another parent did not hold back however. In the parking lot after a game, he confronted the coach about the yelling at his son. The coach got out of the car and began throwing punches. The father went down in the barrage and when his wife rushed out to aid him, the coach slugged her too.

Joseph Matteucci, sitting in the car, saw it all and burst into tears. He quit Little League the next day. Alexandra Matteucci was relieved. Thank God she'd gotten her son out of that violent environment.

Six years later Joseph was dead.



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An innocent bystander, he stopped by a spring Little League game for 16-year-old players to pick up a friend. A brawl broke out after the game, the result of excessive taunting from spectators. A player swung a bat at one of his tormentors, he ducked, and Matteucci was hit in the back of the head. He died in less than 24 hours.

Some might call that 1993 incident a fluke. It remains the only recorded death in the history of Little League, and Matteucci wasn't even the intended victim.

But the reality is the tragedy on that Castro Valley playground had all the elements of what has become an ugly trend in youth sports.

Violence has become commonplace on the fields of play in America, and the formula is simple, direct and brutal. Taunting from the sidelines escalates, coaches and spectators fail to quell the rising tensions, umpires or referees can not control the situation, and finally, rage boils over.

"Before it was coaches helping the kids who were having trouble controlling their emotions," says Jim Thompson, director of Stanford's Positive Coaching Alliance. "Now it is, 'Let's provide leadership to help the coaches control the parents.' "

The incidents of enraged parents are so out of proportion that they sound absurd. Orlando Lago, an assistant coach with the Hollywood, Fla., All-Stars, broke the jaw of umpire Tom Dzedzinski after a disputed call at third base in a Connie Mack game between high school teams.

Last January, police were called to a gym in Kirkland, Washington, when a heated confrontation at a wrestling match became so violent that a coach head-butted a parent and broke his nose. The wrestlers were 6 years old.

And the most shocking display took place in Reading, Mass., this July when Thomas Junta, a parent, beat to death Michael Costin, a hockey coach, at an ice rink. Junta, who was furious because he felt that Costin was allowing rough play, beat the coach to unconsciousness as his children begged him to stop. Junta, 42, has pleaded not guilty to charges of manslaughter.

But those are just the headlines. Anyone who has been to a youth sports game lately knows the truth. Parents are out of control. They scream at their kids, yell at the officials, and, in more cases than anyone would like to admit, something troubling happens.

Worse, every indicator shows it is becoming more common. Bob Still, spokesman for the National Association of Sports Officials, says his organization gets "between one and three" reports of physical assaults on an official each week.

"These are what we would call assaults as defined by law," says Still, whose organization has been tracking the numbers for 25 years. "The verbal attacks have always been there. But people acting out, coming on the field, there is a definite trend to more violence."

Kill the ump? It isn't so funny. Still says it has reached the point that in

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1998 his association began offering "assault insurance" to its 19,000 members. The policy pays medical bills, provides counseling, and offers legal advice as to how to prosecute attackers.

It doesn't take much imagination to project the short term result. Would you want to be a referee in this climate?

"Finding referees is the single most important thing we have to deal with right now," says Bob Maas, president of Pleasanton's highly competitive Ballistic United Soccer League. "You get out there, some parent yells at you, and you think, 'You know, I am missing the 49er game right now.' "

But the referee shortage is the symptom, not the problem. Fueled by unrealistic expectations and an unhealthy obsession with winning, parents have gone from cheerleaders to taskmasters. Having invested large sums in clinics and private instruction for their kids, anything but success is unacceptable.

Alexandra Matteucci, who now runs the Joseph Matteucci Foundation ([www.jmf4peace.org](http://www.jmf4peace.org)), was speaking to a group in Los Angeles when she heard a recent example. A mother, watching her son in a baseball game for 12- to 15-year-olds,

was furious when her son was taken out.

"She went out and sat on second base and refused to move until they put her son back in," Matteucci said. "They didn't know what to do, so they put him back in the game."

That kind of acting out may have worked in that case, but how many kids want their parent to become a laughingstock? The yelling, the gestures, and the intense pressure can drive even avid athletes out of organized sports.

"I can't tell you how many times I have heard kids say, 'Shut up dad!' " says Danville's John Wondolowski, whose under-11 soccer team won the State Cup last spring.

When dad won't pipe down, the next step is off the field. Many kids drop sports -- an estimated 70 percent quit before they reach the age of 12 -- but some also find another outlet. Skateboarders, mountain bikers, and surfers are just part of an emerging X-Games generation. There are fewer rules, less structure, and -- best of all -- dad doesn't know the first thing about it.

"That's the protection," says Positive Coaching Alliance's Thompson. "No adults. It is not hyper competitive. Fifteen or 20 years ago adults didn't know anything about soccer. Now you've got guys who think they know all about it. My son is into surfing, skating, and snowboarding. His point was: Do I want to stand in line, wait to bat, and have the coach yell at me? Or do I want to sit out in the ocean?"

A kinder, gentler approach was the idea behind "Silent Sunday" last October in a Cleveland suburb. Coaches and parents in the 217-team league were told not to yell at the players, not even to cheer good plays. Was it hard to break old habits? Well, some parents, afraid they couldn't resist the temptation, put duct tape over their mouths.

Another soccer coach turned the tables on his parents. He put them on the field for a practice and let the kids scream instructions at them as they scrambled to kick the ball. Reportedly, the parents were ready for the exercise to stop long before the kids.

Are those the only choices? Do kids either have to drop out of sports or duct tape their parents' mouths shut?

Well no, there are options, proposed by groups like Thompson's PSA and the Matteucci Foundation. It begins with what groups like Ballistic soccer calls "zero tolerance" for attacks on officials, but more than anything it involves changing perceptions for parents.

"After all," says Thompson, "when you go to a spelling bee, nobody screams at the officials. It isn't done."

"We turn our heads," says Still of the Association of Sports Officials. "We say, 'I'm going to let it go. It is no big deal. Bill is a good guy, he just lost it that one time.'"

That, says facilitators like Matteucci, has to stop. A clear ethics code must be established before the season begins and the parents must go over it. Expecting them to read a handout isn't enough. Matteucci advocates reading the code aloud before every game.

Second, parents who get out of control need to be told so, and in a way that makes it clear that they are out of step with the entire group. And, if the coach, or some of the other parents, cannot calm the transgressor down, enforce the rules and call a forfeit.

"Call the game," says Matteucci. "If we do, life goes on."

But most important, parents need to monitor their level of involvement with an eye toward scaling it down. Chances are, their son or daughter is not going to get a college scholarship, or appear on a Wheaties box. In 10 years, the best you can hope is that the kids still enjoy staying physically active and look back fondly on their sports career.

What's fun about sports if you don't win? Thompson recommends changing the goal. He worked with a soccer team that was so outclassed that it lost every game. Instead of winning, or even scoring, the team decided to make its objective to get the ball over midfield five times in one game.

When they finally did it, cheers rang up and down their sideline, puzzling the opposing parents.

"They were asking, 'What are they so happy about?' " Thompson said. "Aren't we beating them by eight goals?"

Yes, but they were playing a different game.

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## WHAT'S A PARENT TO DO?

-- DON'T: Focus on wins and losses. Some experts suggest that the perfect season is .500, enough wins for confidence, enough losses for a challenge. Adjust your expectations.

-- DO: Have a plan in place for disruptive parents and make sure everyone knows it will not be tolerated. Forfeit a game if necessary.

-- DON'T: Yell at the players, especially your children. Positive feedback is always encouraged, but the coach handles strategy, not the parents.

-- DO: Get to know the coach and understand his philosophy. But do not campaign for playing time for your child.

-- DON'T: Get carried away if your child shows early athletic ability. Studies show only 10 percent of gifted athletes could be recognized by the age of 12.

-- DO: Recognize that a full college scholarship is not a realistic goal for the majority of players, even the good ones. Thirty million children are playing sports in America. Only about 300,000 play in college at Division I, II, or III level.

-- DON'T: Launch into a critique after each game. Listen. Ask your child, "What was your favorite part of the game? Why?"

-- DO: Concentrate on ELM. E for Effort, which everyone can contribute. L for Learning skills. M for Mistakes (bounce back from them; everyone makes them).

-- DON'T: Stand by and let a parent abuse an official, coach, or player. Remind him or her, as a group, that the game is for the kids. Make it clear this is not a confrontation but that he or she is out of step with the majority.

-- DO: Set up a workable plan for grievances. Make it clear that nothing will be settled at the game, but there is a way to present concerns to an impartial board. Angry, out of control parents will get a hearing, but not on the field.

-- DON'T: Vent at the officials. There is no harder job, and most of them are volunteers, taking on what has become an unpleasant task for the good of your children. Respect their commitment and realize they may miss a call.

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-- DO: Encourage your child and his teammates. Studies show that the "magic ratio" between praise and criticism that works is 5:1. Children who received a 1:1 ratio were described as "despairing."

(Sources: The Positive Coach Alliance, Stanford University; and the Joseph Matteucci Foundation, Castro Valley.) .

-- RECOMMENDED READING: Will You Still Love Me if I Don't Win? by Christopher Andersonn. Why Johnny Hates Sports by Fred Engh.

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