Packers' boss says adults, kids must be good sports: A variety of sports

Jan. 18--The new president of the Green Bay Packers had a message Thursday that might shock you:

Winning isn't everything.
"I know that's probably sacrilegious, working now for an organization that Vince Lombardi came from," Mark Murphy told a breakfast audience at the Milwaukee Club, 706 N. Jefferson St.

The gathering kicked off local efforts of the Positive Coaching Alliance, an organization that aims to develop character as well as athletic ability among kids who are involved in sports.

Murphy isn't opposed to hard effort, excellence or coming out on top in a competition -- especially not Sunday, when the Packers play the New York Giants for the chance to go to the Super Bowl.

But he is highly critical of trends in youth sports that are making the world of many kids a win-or-else place in which the love of sports withers and opportunities for character development are missed.

The trends Murphy criticized include pushing children at early ages to specialize in one sport; the "professionalization" of youth sports; televising of youth sports events, including high school games; and the aggressive involvement of parents in pushing their children in athletics.

"So many kids burn out," he said; many learn to hate the sports they play.

Murphy said only about 1 in 10,000 high school athletes goes on to a professional sports career, and many kids (and their parents) have unrealistic ideas about their chances and about what they should be doing to get ready for the rest of their lives.

"There's nothing wrong with striving to be the best you can be as an athlete . . . but I think you have to be realistic," he said.

And for those who are among the small group that can turn pro, there is a big risk of "elite athlete syndrome," with its roots in childhood years, Murphy said. These athletes were identified early and shaped by parents, coaches and even the press to think they are different from others.

"After a while, they come to believe rules don't apply to them," Murphy said; that is a big reason so many college and professional athletes get into trouble off the field.
Murphy said that even those who make it to the pros need to be realistic about preparing for the rest of their lives.

In the National Football League, for example, careers average 3.1 years, he said. He tells players they will have "a rude awakening" if they have not developed their broader abilities and character and suddenly find their careers over.

"Your NFL career is going to be over before you know it, with the exception of Brett Favre, and I hope he plays another couple years," Murphy said.

Murphy said he often played informal pickup games in various sports as a child, and that was a healthy experience too few children have now. He didn't specialize in one sport -- he played football, basketball and baseball in high school and college -- and said that was healthier for his body and better for his overall athletic development.

Murphy went on to an eight-year career in the defensive backfield of the Washington Redskins. He also earned a law degree and a master's degree in business administration from major universities.

He was athletic director at Northwestern University before being selected as president and chief executive officer of the Packers in early December. He is to take over the job from Bob Harlan at the end of the season.

Jim Thompson, a professor at Stanford University who founded the Positive Coaching Alliance in 1998, told the Milwaukee group: "There is no better place to teach life lessons than in sports. There is an endless procession of teachable moment in sports . . . and often, they are missed."

The participants in the breakfast, who included youth sports coaches and business people, were asked to make donations to the organization for such things as workshops for coaches.

The organization has opened a Milwaukee office, and businessman Franklin Cumberbatch, one of the hosts of the meeting, said he hoped the group would be able to convince more people involved in local youth sports of the value of its message.

Murphy's advice

To young athletes: Try different sports, and learn from sports such things as the need for teamwork, how to be disciplined in striving for goals and how to respond constructively to adversity.

To parents: Aim to "really understand your child, understand where their passion is and direct them to it," and not to project your own interests onto the sports involvements of your children.

To coaches / sports leaders: The rise of year-round programs for kids in sports such as soccer -- school programs, indoor and outdoor private leagues, camps and so on -- is "a really, really bad trend." Advocate more balanced approaches.

On the Web For more information about the Positive Coaching Alliance, go to www.positivecoach.org