

You are Paying for Practice Not Playing

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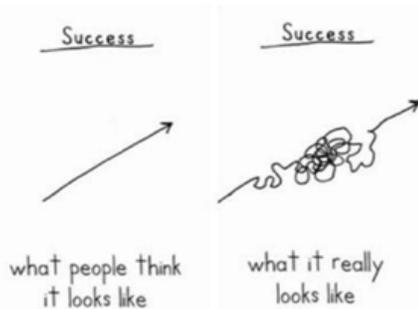


John Kessel's Grow the Game Together blog

To read more of the GTGT blog, visit this page (</sitecore/service/notfound.aspx?item=web%3a%7b2F87A993-D149-47F0-8915-FD7565FA3A89%7d%40en>).

The glow of your child being chosen to play for a club, perhaps even the experience of having to choose between multiple clubs and not cut, has faded. We are now into the heart of the season, where the coaches are making decisions on starters, subs and bench sitters based on both what they have seen in months of practices and tournaments. Depending on the team size, you are likely to be a parent who feels your child should be playing more, and may even be wondering why you chose this club, as they are not “winning enough.” I am going to share some observations and thoughts as a dad who has been coaching the sport for more than 50 years and with kids who both played at the college level.

You are paying for practice, NOT tournament play.



This actually is what is happening across ALL levels of a program. Let me explain – If your child is on a team of 12, when they are playing in tournaments, there is one person touching and 23 others watching, including your opponents and their subs. Each side has parents usually too focused on winning and not the process, and each wants their child to play. We learn by doing, NOT watching (just think about how a child has watched you drive for more than 15 years, but has no clue to how to drive until they DO it).

Tournaments are not where you become good. If the team plays in a tourney pool of four and does not advance (as half the teams experience) and your child has been part of a one-touch/23-watch, totally gamelike learning experience for about 2.5 hours on average (three matches lasting 50 minutes each). At practice, done even twice a week for 2 hours for two weeks before the next tourney, you have eight hours at a one-touch/11-watch ratio. If half of practice is smaller group training, you have four hours of one-touch/five or so watch (if doubles, one-touch/three-watch ratio, so lots of learning by doing) and

four of 1/11 so that averages eight hours of about a 1-to-8 ratio – three times the learning-by-doing ratio and for almost three times as long. This means practice adds up to nearly a 10-fold level of learning for your child compared to competitions.

Playing in tournaments is PART of why players practice; but if your child is not a starter, they are not missing out on that much learning by contacting the ball in those 2.5 hours comparatively. Want to get your child more learning beyond practice and tourneys? Have them go play doubles against anyone willing on any surface and they will get better faster for the indoor game.

Playing time does not translate to college scholarships, it is how good an athlete is from hours of deliberate practice. Doug Beal, a three-time Olympic coach, summed it up simply, “*The best players are those who play the best...*”. Since we play a ton more in training than in a match, you must play the best in practice to earn a spot in competition. The stronger the team and level of play, the smaller the difference between a starter and a bench player when competition rolls around. Only half of our 12-player Olympic rosters are on the court during a match. The others are watching from the sidelines.

Have you been specific enough from the start?

It is not enough to be told your child will get to “play a lot.” You should have written material that defines the club’s mission, philosophy and expectations for parents, players and coaches alike. At a national level, many clubs simply start the best players and sub only for injury or strategic, short-term reasons. At the more local level, clubs may require equal playing time. This range is seen from young to old, based on the club philosophy summed up with 1. Equal playing time or 2. Playing time based on practice performance.

You are paying for leadership development, teamwork skills, being physically active, not just sport skill development

These happen before, after and during practices and tournaments, and have little to do with your child being on the court. Indeed, the memories your athlete will be about the trips, meals, silly or inspirational travel moments, NOT the playing time or wins/losses. You are paying for your child to develop resilience and grit, including from the bench, by being a GREAT bench teammate. When your athlete picks a team sport, they should be learning about putting in the effort and deliberate practice it takes to get better, which increases but does not ever guarantee an outcome victory on the scoreboard. A person’s team attitude means a LOT, and is seen/developed over the season, not just at a tryout.

When you pick a TEAM sport, the coach, not the player, determines the positions. The U.S. Men's first libero came into the program as an outside hitter. Lineups, playing time, injury adaptations/solutions, leadership development are a coach's decisions. Sometimes the newest players become the best players. Basketball coach Doc Rivers noted - *Good players want to be coached; great players want to be told the truth.* Please also note, college scholarships are NOT something a player "deserves" or that a program can promise. While customer service is part of any business, sports included, you pay for the expertise of the coaches leading your athlete in training and tourney/travel. Coaches are the experts for their teams and parents are the experts for their children. I have never heard of a coach coming to a home or workplace and telling the parent how to do their job, while the coaches, and ALL officials also, deserve that same respect as they perform their work.

Sport is a lifetime option, not just a season of activity

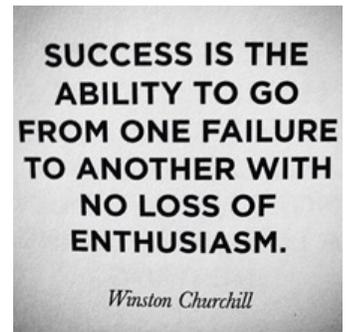
If you help your child love the game, win or lose, starting or not, you have given them a gift of health for their lifetime. This is the first generation to have kids who are expected to die younger than their parents. That is not the case for your child if they love to be active through sport. Do you realize that USA Volleyball hosts national championships for the 79 and OVER age group? This love of the game is one of the things you pay for.

Your child will be a better player if she coaches younger players

That which you teach, you learn. Is your club letting this happen for your child's sake? It's not about playing time, it is about learning time. Mentoring younger players helps you coach yourself better when the coach is not watching. If there are 12 players and one coach, an athlete can only expect to get 10 minutes of attention in a two-hour practice. While those 10 minutes of coach feedback is valuable to be sure, it is the other 110 minutes, when the coach is working with the other players, that an athlete gets better.

We are now seeing sport lawsuits based on being cut/playing time. I know of a good coach who was begged by a parent to PLEASE keep a child on the team as a practice player. When injuries in the early season allowed that practice player to play in a tournament, what happened? That parent complained about the child's lack of playing time. Next time, that coach is likely to just cut the player. It is well-meaning but over-the-top parents that cause some coaches to want to work at an orphanage. If you want your child to play at the college level, and file a lawsuit against the club, I would also expect few, if any, college programs would consider recruiting your child.

In closing, if you love to watch your child play as much as I do, get to practice more and enjoy watching her play. We lost a legendary coach recently who wisely told every player on their team, no matter how good they were, *"I can promise you that if you work really hard and display a team-first attitude, then you stand a great chance of playing. But under no circumstance do I promise playing time."* Sports are a meritocracy, not a democracy. In that, it is practice, not playing time, that matters, fiscally, mentally and physically. Playing time is EARNED.



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