

When smiles leave the game - by Tim Wendel

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Growing up, Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Montana pitched perfect games in Little League baseball and was so adept at high school basketball that North Carolina State offered him a scholarship.

Baseball slugger Mark McGwire quit baseball temporarily his sophomore year in high school to play golf. If he hadn't become caught up in the ongoing steroids controversy, he would be playing in more pro-ams and maybe eventually on the senior PGA Tour. He was almost as good with a golf club in his hands as he was with a baseball bat.

Deion Sanders was such a well-rounded athlete as a kid he became the only athlete to ever play in both a World Series and a Super Bowl. "Parents need to make the major decisions that affect their kids' lives," Sanders says. "But when it comes to play, they shouldn't discourage a broad approach. When a child wants to color, do you tell him to use just one black crayon?"

That's precisely what we're doing with our budding sports stars. Because of the influence of travel teams and the tantalizing hope of a college sports scholarship, the days when kids marked the seasons by the sport — football in fall, basketball and hockey in winter, and track, lacrosse and baseball in spring — are over. One wonders what would have happened to Montana, McGwire or Sanders if they were young sports stars in this day and age."

We have reached the point of saturation — a vicious revolving door of never-ending seasons," says Fred Engh, founder of the National Alliance for Youth Sports and author of *Why Johnny Hates Sports*. "Children can't even take a couple of months' hiatus from a sport for fear of falling behind their peers and being excluded from teams the following seasons. Those elite teams, all those trophies — that's what the parents want."

'Dream for parents'

Summer hockey, fall baseball, indoor winter soccer, elite year-round teams that travel far from their neighborhoods — these are all part of a new kidcentric culture in which specialization supposedly breeds success.

Says sports psychologist Rick Wolff, author of *Coaching Kids for Dummies*: "Excelling in sports has become as much a part of the American dream for parents as getting their kids into the best school and living in the best neighborhoods."

But here's the dirty little secret: According to the NCAA, in men's college basketball, 2.9% of athletes make the jump from high school to the collegiate level. Only 3.1% of players make it in women's basketball, 5.8% in football and 5.6% in baseball. For most sports, the odds of a college athlete playing professionally are less than two in 100.

"Parents are using their kids as a lottery ticket," Sanders says. "Before all this money came along, moms and dads didn't go crazy at games. They didn't curse their kids and get on them to play better. It was just fun. Now, there's a Yellow Brick Road, and parents think it's their ticket."

In making youth sports so specialized, so adult, we're killing our children's joy for the games.

More than 70% of those who begin playing sports in elementary school will have quit by high school, according to the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University. "Starting out, most kids just want to play. It's the parents who keep score," says Christopher Anderson, author of *Will You Still Love Me If I Don't Win*. "They can kill the love a kid has for a sport. Once that's gone, it's very hard to recapture it."

The American Academy of Pediatrics cautions about overuse injuries (tendonitis, stress fractures) in children who were specializing or training year-round in sports. As my two kids have grown up, I've coached them in soccer, basketball, baseball, lacrosse and ice hockey. I've told the stories about Montana, McGwire and Sanders to the parents who have children on my teams. Afterward they smile, as if I'm teasing them, and then the puzzlement creeps across their face as they realize I'm dead serious. Most of the best athletes of our time played just about every sport growing up — usually in the back yard, in the street.

That's not to say my family hasn't been affected by our society's single-sport obsession. In almost every sport my kids have played, high-powered coaches and commissioners have tried to steer us away from local leagues to more elite, even travel teams. They've often urged my children to play their particular sport year-round and attend intensive sports camps.

Sometimes, we've said no. But other times we've been caught up in the sports hype, occasionally with disastrous results. My son, who is a pretty good swimmer, recently announced he had had enough. Swimming just wasn't fun anymore.

What stays with players

At such times I vow to do a better job as a parent, and I remember something Montana said years ago, when he was an All-Pro quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers. It was after another game in which Montana had rallied his team for a last-minute victory.

When reporters asked Montana about one of the pivotal plays, when he evaded a blitzing defender coming from his blindside, he smiled that Cheshire Cat grin of his and said, "Didn't you guys recognize that move?"

Puzzled looks all around. Nobody knew what he was talking about.

"It's an old basketball move," Montana explained. "Spin away from your man, remember?"

"You guys forget I was a pretty good basketball player. They offered me a college scholarship in that, too."

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