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John Kessel's

GROW THE GAME TOGETHER BLOG

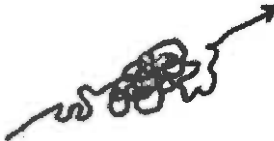
John Kessel's Grow the Game Together blog
To read more of the GTGT blog, visit [this page](#).

So 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 also been coaching the sport for over half a century, with kids, who both played at the college level, for about half that period.

You are paying for practice, NOT tournament play.

Success

Success



what people think
it looks like

what it really
looks like

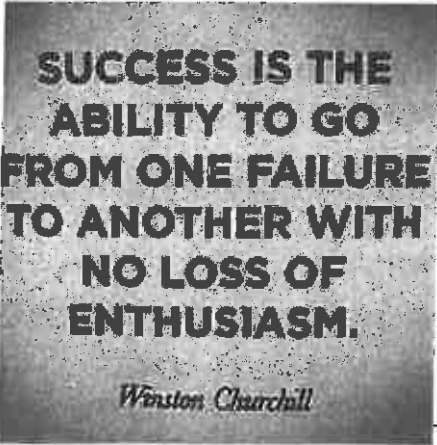
This actually is what is happening across ALL levels of a program. Let me explain this reality further – If your child is on a team of 12, when they are playing in tournaments, there is one person touching, and 23 others watching - including the opponents you are playing and their subs. Each side has parents usually too focused on the winning, and not the process, and each want their own child to play. As 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 get good. Play in a tourney pool of four and not advance, as half the teams experience, and your child has been part of a 1 touch/23 watch totally gamelike learning experience for about 2.5 hours on average (3 matches lasting 50 min each). Meanwhile at practice, done even just twice a week for 2 hours for 2 weeks before the next tourney,

with just playing you have 8 hours at a 1 touch/11 watch ratio. As about half of practice at this period is smaller group training you have 4 hours of 1 touch/5 or so watch (if doubles 1 touch/3 watch ratio, so lots of learning by joining) and 4 of 1/11 so that averages to 8 hours of about a 1 to 8 ratio – 3 times the learning-by-doing ratio and or almost 3 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 you 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 tournaments? Have them go play or compete in doubles play, against anyone willing, on any surface of court, including against adults, 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 the countless hours of deliberate practice. My boss, USAV CEO Doug Beal a three time Olympic coach summed it up simply, *The best players are those who play the best...* and since we play a ton more in training than in a match, that means more practice first, to earn a spot in competition. The stronger the team, and level of play as you go up the ladder of sport success, the smaller the difference between a starter and a bench player when competition rolls around. After all, on our 12 player Olympic rosters in a match, only half of them are on the court – the others areeven as the best 12 in our nation... 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 some form of written material, a contract even with the club, which 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 mostly – 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 have are far more often to be about the trips, meals, silly or inspirational travel moments, NOT the playing time or wins/losses. You are paying for developing resilience and grit in your child, which is developed over time, including from the bench, by being a GREAT bench teammate. When your athlete picks a team sport, winning and losing are out of one player’s control - and they should be learning about always 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 determines the positions, not the player. Our first world’s best libero at the USA men’s team level, came into the program as an outside hitter. Lineups, playing time, injury adaptations/solutions, leadership development these are best for the team decisions by a coach. My boss Doug Beal summed it up simply – *“The best players are those who play the best...”* Sometimes the newest players to a sport over the season become the best players! In practice, play AND off the court, 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, as 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 (unless they are in a relationship), 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 work to support your child to love the game, wins or losses, 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 parent's life expectancy. 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

We all know 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. After all, if there are 12 players and 1 coach, an athlete can only expect to get 10 min of attention in a two hour practice. So 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. That said, private lessons give more feedback, perhaps even too much, but they are usually so non-gamelike that there is only limited transfer. Your money is better spent on buying a good outdoor net and getting your kids to play doubles in the summer.

Lately, as Tiger, Helicopter, Lawnmower (even Bulldozer) parents steal the resilience, life lesson's experiences and problem solving creativity from their children, we are now even seeing in sport, lawsuits based on being cut/playing time. I know of a good coach who was begged by a parent to PLEASE not cut but keep a child just 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 say, thanks, but no thanks, and cut the player. It is well-meaning but over-the-top parents that cause some coaches to want to just coach at an orphanage. I can tell you this – if you are wanting your child to play at the college level, and feel the need to file a lawsuit, 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! Hopefully your coach has read my blog enough so you will see not see the athletes standing in line, but instead warming up playing 2 v 0, reading balls coming OVER the net, competing in small games like 2v2/3v3 speedball, and learning by doing. We lost a legendary coach recently, who wisely told every player on their team, no matter how good they were, simply *"I can promise you that if you work really hard & 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 and in that, it is practice that matters – fiscally, mentally, physically, not playing time. Playing time is EARNED.