



## Why Youth Sports ? (Hint: It's not about the ball)

by Howard Eisenstadter 28-Jan-2018

As we turn the corner from January into February and begin to look forward to the warmer months, the question frequently comes up: 'What spring sport should I sign my child up for ?'

So now's a good time for all of us to take a half a second to pause and focus on the *why* before the *what*. After all, the schools all have Phys Ed. programs. The children who want to, play ball during recess. They play catch on their street, shoot hoops after school in the driveway, and play football in the local park. Those inclined to might even play on their school teams. Why do we even want our kids involved in youth sports programs ? What do we hope for them to gain by playing Youth Sports that they might not get otherwise ?

Not by intention, but certainly by good fortune, I've been blessed to lead a local youth sports program for (now) ten years. Our dedicated group of volunteers (Coaches and Administrators) have had the privilege and responsibility of shaping the youth sports experiences of many, many hundreds of children from our community over the years. And so this is a question that we ask ourselves all the time. What exactly is the point of all this ?

Seeking some meaning years ago, Yavneh Youth League (YYL), a Shomer Shabbat league that is open to boys and girls in 1st through 8th grade children grade in any school, made very conscious decisions to: 1) create teams that represented a mix of schools and neighborhoods in order to facilitate children becoming friends with kids they don't see everyday 2) put the focus on teamwork, sportsmanship and growth, and not solely on winning.

Sounds much easier than it is. Firstly, children almost always prefer to stay in their comfort zone. Being on a team with only a few of your friends and needing to meet children from other

schools/towns who maybe attend shuls a little different from yours is something that young people don't seek (and parents rarely push for). And, perhaps attempting to make up for the pro contract we never got, too many of us push our children to win at the cost of making them less tolerant of the shortcomings of others or even themselves. We think we are doing the best for our children today, often with little regard for what the young adult versions of them would have needed.

With that in mind, YYL exists only to fulfill the belief that it's not only NOT about who wins each division that matters most, but it's not even about really about the ball or the game. **Growth is the goal. Sports are just the stage.** Yes, everybody plays to win and the games are competitive. Yes, there are exuberant champions whose trophies are held high with pride, and sometimes heart-broken second (or last) place teams. But the purpose of our league, and we believe, the purpose of organized youth sports is to be an environment where each child can grow in the way that he or she most needs to.

How do we know what our players need in terms of growth ? That's the easy part. We ask their parents at registration time. And so, in YYL this spring there will be a 3rd grade girl whose parents want her to "learn teamwork, empathy for others and fair play", there will be a middle school boy whose parents asked for "consistency in practicing, to learn its importance". A fourth grade girl's parents want her to "learn how to fail with more grace" and someone seeks "patience and grit" for their 10 year old son. These are what we all want for our children.

Those are, in fact, the answers to the question "Why Youth Sports?". Youth Sports because the adults in charge can help direct all to care about more than just the score. Youth Sports because the coaches and parents who attend understand that our best selves can help the weaker children grow stronger, and can move the stronger children to help the others. Youth Sports because "V'Shinantam Livanecha". Youth Sports because in five or ten years, these kids will be entering a world where the values we wish them to live will either be a part of them or they won't be a part of them. There are lots of places to acquire those values. Youth Sports is only one of them. But disguised as a game, it's a very powerful place.

Our children are blessed to live in a community with so many amazing ways to grow as people. And there are excellent youth sports options to meet all tastes. If you pursue one for your child, give some thought as to what he or she really needs out of it, and then do your best to help that program live that vision. This world needs great people. Youth Sports can help make them. There's really no other reason for them to be here.

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