

Brandon Day: Our youth sports culture is broken

Brandon Day | For the Times Herald Updated 3:44 p.m. EST Feb. 6, 2019

Editors Note: *Brandon Day has become a legendary wrestling coach in the Blue Water Area, leading Richmond to several state championships. This is his first guest column for the Times Herald.*

After 17 years coaching at the high school level, I am not a big fan of the youth sports culture in America today.

I don't think we are developing better athletes and/or people in our current system. We have developed a culture that will not serve our student-athletes well as they grow into adulthood. We have organizations and private coaches that are making a profit filling parents' heads full of false information and dreams of scholarships rather than focusing on the development of the athletes, regardless of their skill levels.

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but not every kid can be a college scholarship athlete and that is OK. We need to take pride in coaching and/or raising the child that is the sixth man, the back-up, or the utility guy on the baseball team. Those kids are extremely valuable to their teams, schools and communities. I prefer the way things used to be before the elite youth travel sports culture developed.

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a small, blue-collar town that was filled with kids and families that loved sports. The typical summer day was not spent riding in a car to our elite club practice to work out with kids from all over the state.

Our day was much more beneficial for the kids in our community, and it had a positive impact on our community and school for years to come. Rather than getting in the car, we would get on the phone. No, not like today's youth to check their Facebook, Snapchat or Instagram. We had Nick Collins' wall-mounted, tan-colored phone.

Nick and Neil Collins' father, Don, operated the local roller rink and helped run Imlay City Little League Baseball. Nick and Neil had access to every phone number of any kid who played in Little League. If a kid didn't play Little League at the time, Jeff Stryker was sure to have his or her number. Jeff's dad, Jerry, was a mailman, and he was one of the coaches.

They knew everyone. They hit the phone hard on those summer days and weekends that we didn't have school. It was great. By 9 a.m., we usually had enough kids assembled in the lot behind the roller rink to play football, baseball, basketball or whatever games we made up.

We didn't exclude girls, either. Some of us may not admit it, but all of us at one point were beaten by Milli Martinez. The thing we enjoyed best was that it was just us, no parents, no coaches and no officials. It wasn't perfect; we fought, we argued, and we may have even thrown a few kicks and punches.

We loved to compete. No one ever ran home and complained. The games were too much fun, and if someone left and or complained, he

or she may not have received a return phone call. It wasn't perfect, but we learned how to deal with failure, settle our differences and admit when we were wrong for the betterment of the group. We had no one to make excuses for us, and there was no one to blame for our failures. It was athletics and competition in its finest form.

We loved athletics. We weren't burned out from constantly competing for meaningless trophies at a young age. Our parents weren't trying to force us into everything to keep up with the neighbors; they just wanted us out of the house.

We weren't talking about scholarship offers in the sixth grade; we didn't have any pressure on us, other than we loved to win and being tough was a good thing. Our parents set us up to succeed.

We participated in athletics because we loved to be around our friends and compete. That being said, many of the kids that participated in the games behind the rink went on to help their high school teams have success, some became college athletes, coaches and a couple of them were blessed with the God-given ability to become professional athletes.

More importantly, the environment that was created and the lessons learned behind that roller rink helped all of us become successful adults.

Lessons learned

When I first started coaching and helped develop our current youth system at Richmond, many people questioned our methods because

we put an emphasis on instruction, practice and relationship development over competition. Our goal back then, and still to this day, was to develop each athlete fundamentally so that when his or her body finally grew, the athlete would be fundamentally sound and be ready to compete at the highest level.

We took pride in saving our parents registration fees and gas money rather than just pushing them to compete too early for little reward. We are honest with our parents and try to promote an environment that eliminates selfishness and focuses on doing what is best for the group.

The “me-first mentality” is way too prevalent in athletics and society today. We wanted to retain as many kids as possible, because oftentimes the kid who was great in third grade isn’t so great in 11th grade. And the kid who struggled in third grade has already been All-State twice before entering his senior season.

We knew we had to value and develop all kids. This system has served us well. It isn’t always perfect, and we have lost some kids through the cracks, but for the most part, our system has allowed us to help some kids do some pretty amazing things.

Correctable errors

As a teacher and coach, there is nothing more depressing than seeing that kid who was once a great youth or middle school-level athlete walk around the halls of your school and no longer competes because he or she can’t deal with potential failure because of the pressure they were put under as a 12 year-old.

We also see the kids who are afraid to come back out because they struggled as a youth but have now grown and could contribute to helping their school, community and friends have success. We need to keep our kids involved.

As parents and coaches, we need to tweak our thought process and ask ourselves, are we really getting our kids ready to compete and have success at the high school level or are we chasing meaningless trophies and trying to fulfill some void we think we had as youngsters.

We need to make sure our kids understand in sports and life, it's not how you start but rather how you finish.

[Richmond's Day honored at national banquet](#) Originally Published 2:03

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