

Sample Chapter

COMPETING *with* CHARACTERSM

*Let's Put Sportsmanship
and Fun Back in Youth Sports*

BOYS TOWN[®]
Press

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What's Happening to Youth Sports?

PENNSYLVANIA – *During warm-ups before a youth T-ball game, a coach offers one of his players – an eight-year-old boy – twenty-five dollars to bean a teammate who is autistic and mildly retarded. The coach wants the autistic player injured so he can't play in the playoff game. When the first throw doesn't do the trick, the coach orders the eight-year-old to "hit him harder." So, the young boy throws a second ball at his teammate's head, tearing his earlobe. A jury convicts the coach of criminal conspiracy to commit simple assault and corruption of minors.*

SOUTH DAKOTA – *At a youth soccer game, a coach strikes a referee, who is also the town's mayor. The match is between two eleven-year-old girls' teams. The coach is sentenced to forty-five days in jail, required to attend anger management classes, and banned from all youth sports for one year.*

NEVADA – *A parent of a twelve-year-old football player becomes angry when he learns that another player on the team is teasing his son. The parent seeks revenge on the player by trying to get him to drink from his son's water bottle that the parent has contaminated with an herbal extract that induces vomiting. Eight other players drink from the bottle and are poisoned. They are taken to area hospitals where they all recover. The parent is arrested and formally charged.*

MINNESOTA – *Two parents engage in a fight in front of forty children at a park. Hard feelings over playing time on a twelve-year-old girls' softball team erupts into a knock-down, drag-out fight between the two adults – with one accusing the other of biting off part of his earlobe. Charges are pending on both parents.*

CALIFORNIA – *A thirteen-year-old boy is charged with murder for a fatal attack on a fifteen-year-old boy who teased the younger child after a baseball game. The two boys had argued while waiting in line at the ballpark's snack bar. The younger boy grabbed his aluminum baseball bat and struck the older boy once in the leg, then delivered one deadly blow to his head.*

Out-of-control behavior on the fields and courts, along the sidelines, and in the stands is showing up more and more often in athletic competitions. This is troubling in and of itself, but what's most disturbing, as these stories demonstrate, is that it's happening among younger kids and in earlier levels of sports. Negative conduct from fans, coaches, and athletes has trickled down from professional sports to the college and high school ranks and is now infiltrating youth sports. Boys and girls as young as five and six years old are seeing coaches and parents lose control. Not only is this poor modeling of sportsmanship and fair play, but some of the behavior is also getting downright dangerous.

Not long ago, behavior such as a coach yelling at an official during a game, a parent in the stands complaining about his or her child's playing time, or a youngster "talking trash" to opposing players was considered obnoxious and unacceptable. Today, this kind of behavior is commonplace and accepted as the norm on many youth sports teams. Factors that have led to this current situation include an overemphasis on winning at all costs, early sports specialization, an increase in hyper-competitive or select teams and leagues, unrealistic hopes for sports scholarships to college, more parent misbehavior, and media emphasis on bad behavior by college and professional athletes, among others.

Some bad behavior has intensified and crossed over into thuggery and criminal actions. Too many adults and kids are brazenly escalating their words and actions beyond what should be acceptable at youth athletic contests. It's alarming and disturbing to see coaches, parents, and youngsters arrested and hauled off to jail over a *kids' game* that sometimes involved participants as young as five, six, and seven!

The earlier stories paint a bleak picture of the current state of youth sports, and they make it hard to deny that something is broken and in need of repair. These incidents also can be seen as cries for help, indicators that we've veered off course. When the adults who are involved and in charge of youth sports lose perspective and even self-control, we have a major problem.

We are at a pivotal time in organized youth sports. It's not too late to get kids playing the games for the right reasons – so they can learn good sportsmanship and good character, and just have fun. We must sound a rallying cry to all those involved, especially coaches and parents. Now is the time to take a collective breath, look at where we are and how we got here, and decide where we want to go.

In 2005, the Citizenship Through Sports Alliance (CTSA) released a national report card (see image) that provided a disturbing assessment of today's youth sporting

environment. The largest coalition of professional and amateur athletic organizations in the United States (see the bottom of the report card for a complete list of CTSA members), the CTSA asked a panel of youth sports experts from across the country to evaluate youth sports in United States and report on its successes and failures in areas including coaching, officiating, and parental behavior. In almost every major category reviewed, the Alliance gave barely passing grades. Of great concern was that the worst grades were given in the areas of putting children first and the behaviors of parents. (For more details about each category and to view the complete CTSA “2005 Youth Sports National Report Card,” see Appendix 1.)

2005 CSTA Youth Sports National Report Card	
<i>AREA OF REVIEW</i>	<i>GRADE</i>
Child-Centered Philosophy	D
Coaching	C-
Health and Safety	C+
Officiating	B-
Parental Behavior/Involvement	D

CTSA Members include: National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA); Major League Baseball (MLB); National Basketball Association (NBA) and Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA); National Hockey League (NHL); National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS); National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA); National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE); and National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA).

Reports like this reveal the fundamental problems that exist in youth sports today. Now that the problems are out in the open for all to see, it’s time to fix what’s broken in youth sports.

Into Action!

While bad behavior usually gets the media headlines, it's not all doom and gloom out there in youth sports land. Far from it! Take coach Jim Johnson and student Jason McElwain of Greece Athena High School near Rochester, New York. Jason has autism. Although he didn't make the high school's basketball team, he had such passion for the game that he stayed on as team manager. Coach Johnson was impressed with Jason's dedication throughout the year. To reward him, the coach added Jason to the roster for the season's final home game and let him suit up and sit on the bench. With four minutes remaining, Johnson put Jason in the game. In those last four minutes, Jason scored twenty points! Everyone in attendance went wild with each basket. The celebration peaked when Jason hit his sixth three-point basket at the buzzer. In the gym that day, no one lost. Players, coaches, parents, and spectators for both teams were treated to a special sports moment because the coach realized how important it was for Jason to be part of the game and team he loved. The highlights of the game were replayed repeatedly on ESPN and many other major media outlets carried the inspiring story.

All across America, every day, there are kids and adults having good experiences in youth sports. Most of these happen without publicity or fanfare but they're still dramatic, important, and spectacular to the children, coaches, parents, and fans who are there. There's the twelve-year-old volleyball player who finally gets her first overhand serve over the net for a point, or the eight-year-old boy who scores his first soccer goal, or the ten-year-old baseball player who catches a pop fly for the final out of an inning. Girls and boys who participate in youth sports just want and need the opportunity to play, have fun, and work toward success.

Most adults who are involved in youth sports are good people trying to do the right things for kids. They have a strong desire to help youngsters grow and learn through participation in organized sports. The problem is that a few bad eggs can do a lot of harm to a lot of young people very quickly. And the number of bad eggs seems to be growing.

One problem is that many well-intentioned adults simply lack the training and expertise to know how to create an athletic environment for girls and boys that's positive, fun, safe, and caring, as well as successful. Many youth sports coaches are simply parents who volunteer to do the job. It's easy for enthusiastic, but untrained coaches to become focused on winning to the exclusion of other goals that should be important in youth sports. It's tough to stay committed to making sure kids are having fun, learning athletic skills, and playing with character when others are looking only at your won-loss record. Education and

training, however, can help coaches, parents, and players stay on track to make the youth sports scene both enjoyable and successful.

This book is about solutions and taking action. *Competing with Character* is an innovative and exciting approach to teaching kids how to participate in sports with sportsmanship and character. The program grew out of the Teaching Model employed at Boys Town, a national organization serving youth and families. The Model emphasizes the importance of teaching not only at-risk and troubled youngsters, but all children, how to use new skills, how to build positive and healthy relationships, and how to go about making good choices. This approach works! We've seen the miracle of change at Boys Town in thousands of girls and boys who've gone out into the world and succeeded.

The main goal of the *Competing with Character* program is for youngsters, parents, and coaches to learn and use new skills. Each group has different roles and responsibilities in youth sports, so there are three sets of skills, one each specially designed for coaches, parents, and participants. There are eight skills for coaches, seven for parents, and ten for players. Coaching skills, for example, include how to correct kids' misbehavior and how to communicate with parents. Parents should compliment rather than criticize their young athletes and model appropriate behavior at games. Children need to be taught to listen to their coaches and respect their opponents, among other skills. In addition, there are three teaching methods coaches and parents can use to help kids learn their skills. When all the skills are working together and being used correctly, they help create an environment where adults and kids promote and practice good sportsmanship and character. In addition, the skills help everyone keep the youth sports experience in the proper perspective: The games are for kids to enjoy and learn from and not for adults to exploit.

Years of research at Boys Town have shown that skill teaching can lead to better behavior and performance in many areas of a person's life. *Competing with Character* offers many skills that work as well in the outside world as they do in the world of youth sports. Skills like "Following Instructions" and "Voicing Concerns Appropriately" can help young people and adults in their interactions not only in athletics, but also at school and on the job.

What are the benefits of incorporating and using skills like these in your sports setting? When kids learn how to follow instructions, coaches are better able to have practices that are organized, productive, and fun for both kids and coaches. And, when parents and coaches learn how to voice concerns appropriately, it leads to better communication. This can result in a more enjoyable, upbeat, and supportive experience and relationship between all

the adults. The skills that make up the *Competing with Character* program give you new ways to think and act that can improve on and enhance what you're already doing with kids. What you're really getting are some new tools for your youth sports toolbox.

Whether you run a league or a club filled with many teams, coach a single team, or are a parent who wants his or her child to have a healthy and positive experience in organized sports, you can benefit from what's in these pages. I offer you the opportunity to become a member of a larger team that understands the importance of and knows how to compete with character. I challenge you to take action and become part of the solution!

A Lifetime of Sports

Athletics has played a major role in my life and helped shape the person I am today. I spent much of my childhood and teen years playing sports, both unstructured games on the playgrounds, courts, and fields in my neighborhood and supervised competitions on organized teams and leagues. My youth sports experience was a positive one, and I continued to participate in athletics all the way through high school. Ultimately, I earned an athletic scholarship to play football in college at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. While there, I realized my calling was to help young people through teaching and coaching.

Over the last two decades, I've been a high school football coach and teacher. I spent my first nine years as a football coach and business education teacher at a large public high school in Omaha, Nebraska. During my time there, we won many games, including a state championship; we were runner-up another year. We were a perennial powerhouse in the largest and most talented high school football league in the state.

In 1996, an unexpected phone call came my way. The superintendent of Boys Town High School said that some other coaches had recommended me as a person who would be a good fit for the vacant head coaching position at Boys Town High School. I was hesitant about interviewing for the job because I knew little about Boys Town and what went on there. But, after visiting the campus and meeting some kids, my decision and path were clear. I wanted to be part of the Boys Town mission of saving children and healing families.

The centerpiece of Boys Town's work with kids is its residential treatment program located on its Home Campus in the Village of Boys Town, Nebraska. Kids who come here are often unmotivated and usually academically, behaviorally, and/or emotionally challenged.

At Boys Town, boys and girls live separately in homes in a family-style environment where married couples provide the warmth, structure, and treatment necessary to allow healing to take place. The campus includes a high school and middle school, both with full athletic and academic programs. While some youth live at Boys Town for many years and graduation from high school here, the average length of stay for a boy or girl is about eighteen months. This creates a unique challenge when trying to build a successful sports program year in and year out.

Boys Town's football team, the Cowboys, play in a much smaller league than my previous team did. Also, the talent level in the league and on the Cowboys' team is much lower than what I was accustomed to. Most Boys Town players have never played organized football before. We even have to teach players how to put on their pads and uniforms correctly! Many days, I don't know who'll be at practice because if a youngster misbehaves badly enough at school or in the home, he won't be playing football that day.

We had a rough season my first year as a head football coach, winning only one game. The second year, we finished the season with eight wins and three losses and made the state playoffs. The following year, we went all the way to the state semi-finals. Over the past eleven years, we've made the state playoffs every year and have been a fixture in the state's Top Ten ratings. In 2005, we won eleven games and again made it to the state semifinals. And in 2007, we had another successful season and reached the second round of the state playoffs.

At Boys Town High School, our athletic programs and sports teams are important because they help instill a sense of community and pride in troubled boys and girls, most of whom have never experienced these things before. On an individual level, participation in sports is therapeutic; it's another way to help youngsters heal. My experience here has allowed me to see the real value of athletics and to keep it all in the proper perspective. Youth sports should be only a part of the fabric that makes up a young person's life, not the whole foundation.

In addition to what I've seen and experienced in athletics both personally and professionally, I'm the parent of two boys, Keegan and Christian. Both participate in youth sports. Needless to say, over the years, I've seen the good, the bad, and the ugly in the conduct of players, parents, fans, and coaches. I've also got a lot invested here! I believe the power of athletics and the positive, supportive role they can play in helping to shape loving, caring, and productive people. *Competing with Character* was developed so we can share with

you and other adults involved in youth sports how to create a healthy and positive environment where girls and boys can have fun, learn, and grow in youth sports.

Athletic competition has been an influential and constructive part of the lives of countless young people for many, many years. That can continue, but there are some things that need to be fixed and cleaned up for it to really be effective. It's up to us – the coaches and parents – to be courageous and say enough already! It's time we band together and make the changes necessary to bring youth sports back into the proper perspective so young people can benefit from all that athletics has to offer.

Making This Book Part of Your Lineup

Competing with Character is a proven method that's easy to understand and implement. You're given specific skills that demonstrate good character and sportsmanship and particular ways to teach them. These tools allow you to easily integrate the *Competing with Character* program into any youth sports setting. The program enhances all the good things you're already doing, while giving young athletes, their parents, and coaches new ways of thinking and behaving that promote and build a positive and fun atmosphere.

The next chapter in this book assesses the current state of youth sports, its problems, and what youth sports should look like. It begins to focus on solutions and how the *Competing with Character* program can provide you with the necessary answers. Chapter 3 discusses the role of social skills for kids in promoting character in youth sports, and how to teach them to children. The next three chapters address the core of the *Competing with Character* program. We'll first address coaches and parents because kids' learning starts with us – how we act as teachers and role models. There is a chapter for coaches and a chapter for parents, both of which provide specific skills, or things to do and ways to act, that teach and model good character and sportsmanship. The last chapter is devoted to skills for players.

Changing the focus and culture of your team's or organization's players, parents, and coaches might seem like a difficult task. However, I firmly believe that once everyone involved understands the gravity of the situation and how easily it can be remedied, they'll enthusiastically jump on board! Youth sports are too fertile a training ground for lessons that last a lifetime to surrender it to an obsession with wins and losses, unrealistic hopes about college scholarships, and other grandiose and outrageous expectations.