

EXPERT CONTRIBUTOR

Finding the Fun in Competition



BY NEIL MCNAB, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, RUSH UNION
PHOTOS SUBMITTED BY RUSH UNION



When kids are young and first start exploring sports, the fun is unlimited. Squeals of joy, sleeping in jerseys (in my house at least), parents watching and snapping giggly pics on the sidelines. Coaches are actually happy to see parents stay for the duration of practice, chatting at the end, talk of ice cream and grass stains. Ahhhhh....the good ole days of fun in youth sports. Finding the fun is easy, as it is apparent and around us all the time. We are also involved in the experience because, let's face it, we are a big part of making it happen.

Whether it's winning the game of sharks and minnows, freeze tag, or being part of a relay race (and coming in last, but who cares?!), we are the curators of our kids' fun. And dang, it's fun.

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Wins are fun, losses can be even more fun with silly star jumps or song singing. It's good clean competition that largely ends in big smiles and chatter the whole way home. Man, we are doing a great job with this kid/sport/life-lesson/competition thing. Super fun.

PUMP THE BRAKES. THEY'RE FIVE.

Why is it as the kids get older, some of the fun disappears? What changed so drastically from watching a 5-year-old playing 4v4 to a 15-year-old playing for a state title? It all flew by. Doesn't seem like 10 years and they still like ice cream. What in the vanilla scoop happened to our fun?

HERE IS IT: PRESSURE.

But let's not give pressure a bad name entirely. Sports can be a great avenue for kids to learn how to deal with the pressure of a big game, the expectations of teammates and coaches; and how to handle a loss with grace. Playing sports can build valuable tools that can help children as they enter their adult lives.

In some cases, pressure can take a turn for the worse and even become a little toxic. Parental pressure is often the source of kids' stress in sports. Going bonkers in a U12 game about an offside call, or a foul they thought should be given, isn't our best look and causes undue pressure on the athlete. This exaggerated and uninvited involvement in the competition by our parents can be a real fun sucker in sports. And c'mon, who wants that title?



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There is also nothing wrong with competition—even stiff competition. It can help us perform beyond our normal capabilities. I was recently coaching my own team in what turned out to be a big loss—like a blowout. After the game, I asked my team if they enjoyed the second half of the game, and one of my boys responded, “Yes, we competed well and made some chances of our own.” His response reminded me that kids crave competition, and the right pressure can bring out elevated play. The boys responded very well that day as the pressure and competition were coming from the learning environment and not being placed upon the team by unnecessary outside forces.

We have many winter program offerings coming up once our season concludes. Low pressure, touch-on-the-ball, keep it kicking programs to maintain skills, see friends, and compete in a fun environment. This is in line with the feedback we receive from parents for off-season play. Why is the off-season so different? The “big game” mentality often creeps in and becomes the fun sucker (thumbs down) while off-season play—often played against or with some of the same “big game” players, is purely fun and pressure-free. An interesting study of psychology.

As parents, let’s try to relieve some pressure on our kids during the competitive season. Their natural competitive instincts will be enough internal, positive pressure to drive good competition, elevated play, and most importantly, fun on the pitch. It doesn’t matter if it’s playing a game of freeze tag or fighting for a state title. Kids naturally compete and enjoy doing so.

Join us this off-season for low-key fun, developing skills and playing because we enjoy the sport. Let’s remember to take that forward into next season so we can find the fun in competition, too. And don’t forget the ice cream!

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