

Part 1 **The Role of
Sports Mothers
in the Family**

Chapter One

A Mother's Voice The Missing Piece of the Youth Sports Puzzle

Education commences at the mother's knee, and every word spoken within the hearing of little children tends towards the formation of character.

—HOSEA BALLOU

A CHANCE TO PLAY

One by one, eighteen sixth- and seventh-grade boys entered the gym, barely making eye contact with me or one another. I extended my hand to each as he arrived, and introduced myself. I asked each to find a soccer ball and kick it around until practice started.

As the boys sullenly tossed their sports bag on the gymnasium floor and began to kick the soccer balls, I detected a lot of negative energy. From talking with their mothers, some of their fathers, and their previous soccer coaches, I knew how embarrassed most of them were: embarrassed to have been cut from the travel soccer program in our town because they weren't offered a spot on one of the top three teams, embarrassed because there were supposedly not enough boys or a coach to field a fourth team, and embarrassed that their coach was a mother.

Past coaches and the director of the soccer club had tried their best to dissuade me from coaching. “Don’t expect to win any games,” they said. Some of the boys have attention issues, they said; several chronically misbehave. Some lack talent or are slow footed. So-and-so’s mother is a pain in the you-know-what and will make your life miserable.

To make matters worse, some of the parents, once they learned that I was to be the coach, immediately challenged my ability as a forty-three-year-old mother to coach a team of twelve-year-old boys. One father had called to tell me his son was going to sit out the season rather than play for me: “He deserves better. He deserves a top-level coach,” the father said. Most told me not to be surprised if their son quit after the first few practices: “he is angry and embarrassed to be on a team of also-rans, especially one coached by a mother,” they told me. The only glimmer of hope they gave me was that their sons loved soccer, and that they thought that they had the potential to be good players.

Instead of scaring me off, however, all the negativity simply strengthened my resolve to turn what everyone expected to be a disastrous season into something special; to give this group of outcasts a season to remember, to give them a reason to keep playing soccer by making it fun again, to show them the very best that sport had to offer, and to teach them lessons through sports that would enrich their lives.

After I let the boys play for twenty minutes (as the mother of three energetic twelve-year-old boys I was well aware of the need for boys this age to burn off steam), free play had turned into a frenetic game of dodgeball. I shouted for the boys to take a break, grab their snacks, and find a seat in the bleachers.

Once they sat down, I introduced myself. Before I began explaining my coaching philosophy, expectations, and goals for the upcoming season, Todd* blurted out the question that seemed to be on most of their minds: “Why don’t we have a man for a coach?” Instead of answering, I suggested that they eat their snacks and drink their water while I did the talking, after which I would answer their questions.

*In the interest of privacy, many of the names used in this book have been changed.

“Women are the greatest untapped resource in youth sports. In the countless hours I have spent at youth games, practices and tournaments, I have always been puzzled by the absence of woman coaches. The sidelines seem to be reserved exclusively for men, while women are relegated to bringing the snack, driving the carpool, and sitting in the stands rooting for their kids. To me this is clearly one of the most backward traditions in sports today.”

—SCOTT LANCASTER,
SENIOR DIRECTOR FOR
NFL YOUTH FOOTBALL
DEVELOPMENT

*"The bearing and
the training of
a child is woman's
wisdom."*

—LORD ALFRED TENNYSON

No such luck. They bombarded me with questions. Finally, Jared insisted that I answer his question: "Why are you coaching us? What do you know? You are a girl."

After taking a couple of deep breaths, I began again. I had not scripted what I was going to say; instead, I spoke from the heart. "Most of you know that a month ago you didn't have a team to play on. I was the one who asked the men running the program to give you a chance to play. When they told me that no one had volunteered to coach a Division 4 team, I told them I would find someone with a soccer license who was an expert on eleven- and twelve-year-old boys like you, and who loved sports as much as each of you."

The team was finally quiet.

As hard as I tried, I told them, I couldn't find anyone with the credentials, the time, or as much love of the game of soccer as I did to be the coach. "So, guys, I am your coach."

I went on to tell them that during the upcoming season they would learn a lot about soccer and teamwork; that, above all else, they would not only have fun but, by the end of the season, they would be holding their heads up high.

The rest, as they say, is history. A group of angry boys with attention, aggression, communication, and self-esteem issues became a group of boys who respected themselves, one another, and me; a group of boys able to effectively communicate with one another and me; a team that held its own in scrimmages against the town's Division 1 and 2 teams; a team awarded a trophy for sportsmanship at a Memorial Day tournament; a team that went undefeated until the semifinal of the league's postseason tournament; and ultimately, a team I was invited to take to a sportsmanship tournament in St. Andrews, Scotland. One parent later told me that I was the best coach her son had ever had. The director of the soccer club said he had never seen a team play together so well *as a team*.

It was my dream team. I took my wish list of what I felt made a good coach, and what I felt was important to teach boys on the cusp of puberty, and made it come true. I gave the team a safe, nurturing environment in which to do what boys their age want to do most: play, burn off

steam, feel safe (at every practice or game I told them I had only one rule: absolutely no teasing or bullying), and have fun.

By the end of the season, I came to realize that essential to the team's successful season—success I measured not so much in the wins and lone loss but in the physical and emotional growth of the players—were my instincts *as a mother* to nurture, encourage emotional openness, value fair play, cooperation, connectedness, and doing one's best over winning, and to provide boys with a healthy outlet for their aggression and competitiveness. It was simply a joy to see the power that sport has in bringing people together.

GUARDIANS OF CHILDREN AT PLAY

Sadly, the joy I experienced as a coach is not being experienced by most mothers. Instead of continuing to serve as the primary guardians of their children at play—hanging out a city window to check on our kids in the street below, or looking into the backyard to monitor a group of ten-year-olds playing touch football—today's sports mothers are more often than not, found sitting in the stands; working behind the concession counter, selling snacks and raffle tickets; working as team administrators; or chauffeuring their kids to and from practice and games. The puzzling absence of women coaches in youth sports, as Scott Lancaster, the director of the National Football League's youth football development program, noted in his book, *Fair Play: Making Organized Sports a Great Experience for Your Kid*, is “clearly one of the most backward traditions in sports today.”

The 3:00 a.m. E-mails Many of the e-mails I receive at MomsTeam are from mothers who wake up at 3:00 in the morning worried sick about what sports are doing not only to their kids, but to themselves, and asking for advice about what, if anything, they can do about it. The e-mails suggest that:

- ❖ While our daughters are participating in athletics in ever-greater numbers, many mothers are struggling to find ways to have their

Many parents believe it is time to challenge the assumption that, for better or worse, competition in youth sports must be defined solely in terms of winning and losing, and displays of power, dominance and control.

Many mothers see themselves as the missing piece in the youth sports puzzle, that they believe that the culture of youth sports would improve if it celebrated the values of women as much as men.

voices heard, so that youth sports will reflect not only the values and concerns of men but their own values and concerns as well.

❖ Although more and more mothers have grown up since the 1972 enactment of the Title IX, the federal law mandating that girls be given the same athletic opportunities as boys, many have been told that they don't know enough about sports to warrant moving from the stands to the coaching sidelines or on to a club's board of directors.

❖ Mothers know intuitively that they should be doing everything possible to protect their children from the pressures of the adult world. Taught by many feminists not to value their maternal, nurturing, and intuitive nature, some mothers are afraid to act on those instincts even though they tell them that the current youth sports system too often emphasizes winning and competition over fun and skill development, treats children as young as six as adults, and cruelly and unfairly labels too many as failures before they have even reached puberty. This is *not* the kind of nurturing, caring, and above all, inclusive environment mothers believe their children need to be able to grow into confident, competent, empathetic, and emotionally and psychologically healthy adults.

❖ Many mothers are afraid their children will be ostracized if they criticize the status quo, if they try to protect their children against a runaway youth sports system that injures and unfairly classifies and excludes more and more kids each year.

❖ Many mothers are getting sucked into the crazy vortex of competitive youth sports, where survival virtually requires that they become overly focused on and invested in their children's success in sports. As former *Time* columnist Amy Dickinson wrote in an online article in February 2000, "We sit on lawn chairs yelling helpful instructions to our kids and their coaches. And at night we go to bed wondering if we can pinpoint the moment we became our dads."

What Most Sports Mothers Want What, then, do sports mothers want? From the e-mails I have received at MomsTeam, from my conversations

with mothers all across the country, including the mothers of many Olympic athletes, the vast majority of mothers (and many fathers) just want to make youth sports fun again. They want to know that their children will be protected against injury and abuse and given a chance to play until they graduate high school and that the organized sports program in which they enroll their children—the “village”—will protect them and keep them safe while they are entrusted to its care. It isn’t just the safety of our own children we care about; as mothers we care about the well-being of *all* children.

Many believe that it is time to challenge the assumption that, for better or worse, competition in youth sports be defined solely in terms of winning and losing, and displays of power, dominance, and control. Instead, many of us want our children to learn that while competition is healthy and necessary (at least after they have developed a mature understanding of what competition means, around age twelve), a successful competition is one where *all* players do their best and respect their teammates, opponents, and the rules.

Many mothers also see themselves as the missing piece in the youth sports puzzle, that they believe that the culture of youth sports would improve if it celebrated the values of women as much as men. As natural communicators and nurturers, mothers inspire coaches, parents, athletic directors, school boards, and local and national youth sports organizations to do more to keep children safe, to balance competition with cooperation, and to think about sports not just as a place to showcase the gifted and talented but as a place where *all* children can begin a love affair with sports and physical exercise lasting a lifetime, instead of ending, as too often is the case, in early adolescence.

MOTHERS: A GREAT UNTAPPED RESOURCE

Women, particularly mothers, as Scott Lancaster noted in *Fair Play*, are “the greatest untapped resource in youth sports.” The 42 million mothers of kids in sports represent an incredible resource. In the chapters that follow, there is advice on how to reclaim their natural role as guardians of

“My mother has always been very supportive of me as an athletic female and has allowed me to be my own person. I was one of the first women to wear shorts on center court at Wimbledon. I don’t know what would have happened if my mother would have made me wear dresses. I might not have won 10 Grand Slam tennis titles.”

—ANNE SMITH

By the Numbers:

- *Number of U.S. women who are moms: 82.5 million*
- *Number of mothers in U.S. with a child participating in at least one youth sport: 42 million*
- *Number of U.S. children ages 4–19 participating in youth sports: 57 million*

our children at play and confidently step onto the out-of-control playground of today's youth sports to assume whatever role they choose, whether it be as parent, coach, team administrator, member of the board of directors of the local youth soccer club, or community activist.

Perhaps then, a new paradigm for youth sports can grow: one that will ensure that our children's sports years are more fun, safer, saner, less stressful, and more inclusive from the first day of T-ball to the last high school game.