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TAKING SIDES

# The Crazy, Intense Schedule of Competitive Youth Soccer? Bring It On

By **Lisa Catherine Harper** October 7, 2013 2:31 pm

If my husband and I had to choose, we would live in Athens. While we were both athletes as children, as adults we make our home firmly in the world of content creation. Our daughter, however, lives much of her life in Sparta, by which I mean the world of highly competitive team sports.

I can tell you our daughter is 11, her sport is soccer, and that she has been playing competitively since age 7. If I revealed anything more — her position, her team or club, what she does with her downtime, or anything specific about her play — she would kill me. Remember, she trains in Sparta.

Some friends wonder: Why do we spend thousands of dollars a year on team fees? Why do we shuttle her to the field three to five days a week, 50 weeks a year? Why do we organize weekends around game schedules? And why are we allowing her younger brother to follow in her footsteps?

We live out the arguments against: early focus on one sport, diminished traditional family time, financial cost, lost weekends, less after-school time, fund-raising and volunteer duties, car pools and periodic exhaustion.

Still, the benefits outweigh the costs. There are the platitudes about “teamwork” and “lessons about winning and losing,” and then there are the real rewards of team sports, which have become visible to me only over many seasons.

The first thing to know: no young athlete succeeds unless he or she wants to. Few survive — and fewer thrive — simply because of parental will. It’s too hard. There’s no off-season. Our daughter spends 4 to 10 hours a week on the field, depending on games. Home fields are close, but away games can involve an hour of travel each way. On tournament weekends there’s nothing else.

A long time ago, a friend confided: I don't want to be well rounded. I want to be sharp, pointed, like a dagger. (No matter that this friend now thinks my soccer-mom incarnation is insane.) Already our daughter knows how to dig deep. Like us, she values expertise and excellence. As one team parent said to me, the world is no longer a liberal arts college. If it were, exposure would be enough. Increasingly, the world requires focused skill. The ability to specialize, to know what it takes to be an expert, these are vital. From this point of view, learning what's necessary to kick a great penalty shot is a skill that translates.

Any serious athlete knows how to be coached, how to take direction, how to respond to criticism. These meta-skills are essential even in creative professions, and my husband and I believe they are among the greatest benefits of our daughter's relationship with her skilled and demanding coach.

I admire, too, the discipline of the team. She loves her friendships and the free-range time at tournament hotels and dinners, but we see more. A recreational league game might be won by a star player, but a competitive level game never is. We've seen our daughter and her teammates — who come from a diverse range of communities and backgrounds — learn how to work together. They win together, they lose together. They respect the uniform and one another. They know what it means to work for something beyond themselves. The game takes them out of their comfort zone, exposing them to communities, regions and states beyond their own. This broadens their field of reference and keeps them from being complacent. They understand that there's always more out there.

Granted, not every young athlete will play professionally. Most probably will not even play for a Division 1 program. But you wouldn't tell your child, "You're not going to win a Nobel Prize, don't work so hard." That makes no sense. We believe in telling them: "Work as hard as you can at whatever you love. Find people who are better than you, learn from them."

Scratch the blustering surface of most young athlete's parents, and many will tell you all these things. We get pegged as one-dimensional, sacrificing family for field. But there is more to us than statistics and certainly more to our athletes than winning or losing.

Mostly, our daughter just loves to play. She doesn't fully realize what we've come to know in our bones: whether or not she ever sets foot on college turf, she is already finding some of what will matter most in her life on the field.