

The American Family’s New “Addiction”: Select Travel Teams

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In recent decades an unhealthy “addiction” to youth sports travel teams has impacted thousands of families across the country. To the detriment of the American family, and thus society, countless children and teenagers are entangled with club, Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), or select travel teams. These teams have their place, but it mustn’t be above God and the church or the family and the dinner table. Parents must reprioritize and put club teams back in their appropriate place.

For the purpose of the paper, I am using the word *club* when describing AAU, select travel, or any other non-interscholastic sports team that practices and competes during the off-season. I am also going to use the names *Jimmy* and *Sally* when talking about imaginary male and female American youth. The anonymous quotes that are used at the beginning of each new topic are from different students or parents from our community I interviewed that were involved or have children involved in club teams.

The Church

These club tournaments pit the church and sports in direct conflict with each other. Families are made to choose between the two. Most tournaments are held on the weekends, and there is no consideration for the Sabbath when a child’s middle school sports career is at stake. On dozens of weekends throughout the year, families will pull their children out of church and Sunday school to take them to play soccer, baseball, hockey, basketball, and volleyball. What are we teaching our youth, that their soccer game is more important than going to church? These club teams have become the “daily bread” for thousands of American families.

“One thing I regret looking back at my childhood was that I never got involved in a youth group, and I feel club basketball was a major contributor to that. We never settled into a church because I had games every Saturday and Sunday. Depending on the time of games and location, we would always go to different churches to fit club games in the schedule (or we wouldn’t go at all). This never gave me the chance to settle into a church, and build relationships with kids that shared similar beliefs. I believe youth groups provide kids with a Christian community vital to spiritual growth, and club basketball took that away from me.”

Another student with a similar experience:

“In high school, I was on a club travel team every spring. We had two practices a week and tournaments almost every weekend. As a result, I missed out on attending and building relationships with friends in my church youth group. Now, I don’t want to say that I regret choosing to play club basketball because I have many fond memories of those times with my team. I will say, however, there was a definite trade off. My growth and maturation process as a Christian may have been stunted as a result of my playing club.”

Going to church helps students strengthen their faith, organize service projects, and become aware of needs in your community. If Jimmy is absent from his church, he is missing out on many opportunities to help strengthen and be strengthened by his community.

Family

The growth and reliance on club teams could be an indirect result of birth control. If there are no large families, there will be fewer children in the neighborhood, which makes it difficult to get backyard and playground games going. If, by chance, there are other children of the same

age in the neighborhood, there are no guarantees they will specialize in the same sport as Sally. This forces parents to travel with Sally to find a game.

“Overall, club basketball was a good thing for me, because it gave me the opportunity to play against other kids. There weren’t many other kids in my neighborhood, so backyard games and pick-up basketball were not part of my childhood. My parents felt my choices were to stay at home and play by myself or join a club travel team.”

Another student in a similar situation:

“My club basketball was really expensive and it wasn’t very organized. It cost \$600.00 every few months, but the practices were just basically pick-up, five-on-five games. We were paying a couple thousand dollars each year for me to play pick-up games. But that really was our only option, because there was only one other boy my age in my neighborhood that also played basketball.”

If America would embrace a more pro-life approach and be open to having more children, we would see more backyard games and be less reliant on travel teams.

“I never played AAU, because I had three older brothers. We just played games outside. When you added in their friends and my friends, getting a game going was never a problem.”

Large families can make their own backyard game any time they want. They don’t have to pay someone else to organize it. If they want to play, they just go out and play. Imagine if more families had multiple children. Think of the strength of the games, community, lessons, and growth that could be had. Iron sharpens iron.

Another issue with club teams is the “split.” If parents have more than one child involved with different club teams, the family will often split up with one parent taking one child and the

other parent taking the other child. Many families will work to avoid this. They will drag both children to Jimmy's soccer game and then drag both children to Sally's softball game. But often times the "split" cannot be avoided. The family separates for that day. So, let's imagine the parent(s) have a full-time job throughout the week, and the only time home with the family is on the weekend. Instead of spending a significant portion of that weekend together, they split up so both children can be with their teams and make their tournaments. Soccer is more important than the family. Their team being together is more important than the family "team" being together.

"We dragged our daughter to these tournaments. We are lucky that she liked to go and had fun and wasn't involved in other activities that would have divided us into two locations. Many of (Jimmy's) teammates' parents had to do this."

Club sports will often force the children to drift apart from each other.

"I really liked club. It was a lot of fun. The only bad thing I remember is that I had to miss my sister's high school graduation because I had a game that day."

Or it pits one child against the other children.

"I believe the biggest toll club had on my family was it made my parents more attentive to me which definitely affected my brothers."

Vacations

If parents aren't careful club teams can take over their lives.

"In the summers of high school I played club basketball. However, one year I missed the tryout because of work. Because of this, my starting spot on the A team was given to someone else, and I actually had to play on the B team that summer. Club basketball wanted me to put it over everything else in my life."

Families will routinely cancel vacations in favor of a tournament. Why? Partly because parents feel if they take a vacation, their child will be punished by the coach for not being “committed” to the team and will lose their spot on the depth chart. This is where families must reprioritize. What is more important? Going on a vacation with the family or paying several hundred dollars so they can drive an hour and eat fast food, then sit in the stands to yell at officials, so Jimmy can play a glorified pick-up soccer game for a coach who may or may not be teaching him any fundamentals? Parents need to reprioritize.

For example, as the assistant basketball coach, whenever a prospective basketball player visits the school, the head coach and I sit down and talk with the parents, while we give the player a chance to talk separately with his potential future teammates. During our meeting with the parents, the conversations will span everything from academics, to politics, to integrating faith into learning, to specifics about our basketball team. Often the conversation will drift into “travel.” Too many times grown men and women tell me they haven’t been on a family vacation in several years because of Jimmy’s AAU basketball schedule. They just could never get away. They took vacations when Jimmy was little, but once he got into middle-school, the vacations stopped. Now that he is finally going off to college, they are hoping to be able to start up again.

For the past 17 years I have been either coaching or playing college basketball. I have played in, coached at, and recruited at dozens of these club tournaments. Trust me when I say Jimmy would have learned and grown more from a trip with his parents to the Black Hills or to Acadia than he did playing in those tournaments. I am not suggesting that children never play in a club tournament; I am advising parents to use moderation.

Center of the Universe

Parents are spoiling their children. What are they telling their children if they arrange everyone's schedule around their soccer game? They don't realize it, but they are ruining their worldview. They are hurting their chances of being willing and able to sacrifice, to be humble later on in life.

Families will go into debt, cancel vacations, buy sport specific vehicles, leave church early, drive several hours, yell at refs, coaches, or other parents for their player and their hockey game. They are making them the center of the universe. What will happen when Jimmy's principal, teacher, boss, spouse or the parent asks/tells him to do something he does not want to do?

It is similar to a parent of the toddler that doesn't put them on a schedule. Parents should know the importance of getting on a schedule. Why? Because it will make the home and everyone's lives more efficient and better. Everyone will benefit from being on the parents' schedule. If everyone is on the toddler's schedule, life is chaotic. Meals are when Jimmy wants them; nap time is when Sally wants it, which isn't at the same time each day; bed-time is only when Jimmy wants. If life revolves around the toddler, meals aren't prepared, chores don't get done, bills don't get paid, and clothes don't get mended, which means those things have to happen at night after everyone goes to sleep, during the time the parents should be strengthening their relationship, talking. That is their only time together, and if the chores didn't get done during the day, because Jimmy didn't want to go down for his nap, then the relationship suffers. What is more important in a home than the relationship between the father and mother? If the relationship is right, the marriage will be right, and the family will be better off. If the families are right, the neighborhood will be right. If the neighborhood's right, the town will be right. If

the town's right, the county will be right. If the county's right, the state will be right. If the states are right, the country will be right. It all comes back to the family, which comes from the marriage relationship/bond. So again, whose schedule is the family on? Is it on the parents' schedule, or is it on Sally's club volleyball schedule?

The club atmosphere can also lead to selfishness and a sense of entitlement.

"I played for multiple club teams over my high school career. One problem that arose was selfish play. Since the main goal of club is to get recruited to play in college, the guys naturally wanted to impress the coaches watching. As a player, I am usually pretty unselfish and try to make the extra pass. However, when everyone else on the team is playing selfishly, it becomes contagious. I felt like when I did get the ball, I needed to make a play because I probably was not going to get it back. Playing selfishly on the court almost always translated to selfish habits off the court. Being on a team should teach people to work with others and overcome problems by coming together, but my experience with club teams was tainted because of the culture of selfishness."

Another similar experience from a different player:

"One of the chief problems of club is the selfish mentality that many of the players carry. Instead of trying to make the right play for the betterment of the team, players will force up unnecessary shots in order to try and gain more college exposure. This leads to poor ball movement and an overall lack of unity throughout the team. My team wasn't necessarily worried about the end result of the game as long as they got theirs (individual attention). I felt like the integrity of the game was largely compromised because of this."

From a parent:

“Aside from the money issues are the infighting and jealousy issues among the coaches and parents. Because parents are paying, they feel they have the right to voice opinions on instruction and game strategy.”

If a parent is paying for everything and driving all over the country for these tournaments, they should make sure Jimmy is “earning it” and learning how to work. When he is all done, he will need self-respect and confidence. Handing him everything does not give him the opportunity to develop self-respect and confidence.

Dinner Table

America is fighting an obesity epidemic and club travel teams are not helping. They operate under the name of “physical fitness,” but they take away the kitchen table and replace it with concession stands and fast-food restaurants.

“The biggest negative impact that playing club had on me was on my nutrition. Our coaches took us out to fast food restaurants after every game.”

Instead of a family sitting around the dinner table enjoying a healthy, well-balanced meal with fresh homemade ingredients, they are on the road traveling to a youth baseball game with plans of picking up some food at a gas station along the way. This scene happens every night in the summer across America in the name of “sport” or “physical fitness.” Compare a well-balanced home-cooked meal to a fast food burger and fries for the pregame meal and a hotdog and chips from the concession stand for the post-game meal, and the point is clear.

Playtime

Neighborhood games are of more benefit than club sports. The children get to learn a different set of rules each time they play a different game and at each person’s house. When

Sally plays with one team all year round, she has that coach's set of rules and that sport's set of rules. There might be some minor differences between how the game is timed at each host site. One school may use two halves with a running clock, whereas another school may use four quarters with a stopping clock. But other than differences in timing, Sally is not going to see many other differences. Goals, rules, and out-of-bounds lines are basically the same.

In contrast, at Jimmy's house, the crack in the driveway is out of bounds, whereas the shed is out of bounds at Sally's house. The rules of Four-square, Capture the Flag, or Dodgeball, change from yard to yard and host to host. It is good for our children to learn how to adapt and learn new strategies.

Neighborhood games also create a sense of community. The younger children earn the respect from the older children, and the older children look out for and protect the younger children. The children have to call their own fouls, speak up for themselves, and work it out. They will argue, but they are forced to work it out. Neighborhood ball is not like club ball, where a player can just drive to another town to play against some other team if he does not like someone. If players do not resolve their differences and make up in neighborhood ball, they eventually will not have anyone to play against. Neighborhood children need each other to play the game.

Children are forced to be responsible in neighborhood games. They have to get themselves there and bring a ball. If they want the first game, they have to get there first, sometimes with the sun. They have to organize teams, rules, and other matters of concern. Children are taught to value their gear. If they lose their ball, they cannot play. We, the men's basketball team, host a team camp each June for local high school teams. After the camp, the head coach and I walk around the building and clean up. We are amazed at what gets left behind.

These students will leave shoes, balls, jerseys, bags, money, and anything else. They simply don't care enough or have respect for their possessions enough to keep track of them.

Another benefit of neighborhood games is the children are forced to be creative and improvise. What games can they play with only five people or seven people? That is how games like Horse, Knockout, and King of the Court develop. There may be mud or snow in a certain area and they can't play their normal game, so they are forced to make up a new game.

Sport was meant to be played for fun and for exercise. If James Naismith, the inventor of basketball, were alive today he might be disappointed to see how his game has developed. His biggest disappointment would be with the involvement of the coaches. Basketball was not invented to be coached. It was invented to be played. In the beginning, coaches were facilitators, managers, and instructors. The athlete did not play for the coach. The athlete played for the fun and exercise. Now parents and players have completely turned the purpose of the sport inside-out, and not for the better.

There are no coaches or parents at the playground or in the backyard. Parents should teach them some rules and fundamentals, but then get out of the way and let them play. Remember, their world and schedule revolves around that of the adults. This is their play time. This is the time the adults have to themselves and with their friends. This is the time they should not have to listen to adult commands. That time will come when they are called to wash up, say their prayers, eat their veggies, do their homework, brush their teeth, comb their hair, put their PJ's on, and go to bed. Give them their two hours of play time with their siblings and the neighborhood kids.

Physical Education

Sometimes the coaching on select travel teams is good, and sometimes it is not. Many youth coaches just take the tallest child they have on the team and designate them as their low-post player or the goalie. So as the shorter players are learning to handle the ball and pass, the tall player gets practice setting picks for the children who can dribble. Then two years later, those short children grow taller and are now just as tall as the tall player. The problem is that the once-tall teammate cannot pass or dribble, while everyone else can. Now he is not the big one anymore and does not have many usable skills, so he/she sits on the bench or gets cut. It is the curse of the young post player. If the coach is more concerned about teaching fundamentals and developing his players' abilities than he is about winning a sixth grade basketball tournament, he will make everyone on the team, including the tall ones, learn how to dribble, pass, and shoot. But it is not guaranteed that a coach who emphasizes skill growth will be found.

If a parent chooses to get involved with a club team, they should use moderation. Let the competitions be few and far between. The competition should be the test. Do not test them every weekend of their "off-season"; they will get tested enough through their interscholastic seasons. The off-season is a time for growth. If they have an interest and desire to improve in a sport, let them work at it. And then let their tests come once every few weeks at the most, not every week or even every other day, the way many competitions sadly are.

"I wanted to play college basketball, was self-motivated and willing to put in the necessary work. I did play club basketball, but it significantly hurt my development as a player. With summer leagues during weeknights and club tournaments on the weekends, I would often have 3-4 games per week, which is more than we would have during our varsity high school season. Players are

made in the off-season, not in season. During the season you are always either preparing for or recovering from a game; you aren't getting better at your weaknesses. The time to improve is in the summer. In those summer months I should have been working on my strength and conditioning, and on my individual skill development. Instead, I was playing games, which allow minimal, or at best situational, opportunity for growth. Often times I would not lift or run during the day because I had a game that night. There were some years where I had more than 50 games in an off-season. That means there were at least 50 days when I didn't get better. Club makes it difficult to improve as a player."

In physical education we say, "The broader the base, the bigger the peak." Learning new games and skills allows for greater future development. If the player specializes too soon (middle-school and early high school) he/she will not reach their full athletic potential. If a coach or parent wants their player to be the best in basketball that he can be when they are 22 years old, he must let them play soccer growing up.

"Club started to get big when I was in middle school. All of our top players from the middle school team played club. And almost every one of them were burned-out by the time they were juniors in high school and either quit or were cut from the varsity team. Some of the best players on our varsity team ended up being the ones that played multiple sports growing up."

Specializing too soon creates other problems as well like burnout and staleness. There is a good chance the child will not even like the sport anymore by the time he is 20 years old. Many times I have seen athletes relieved, and at times even overjoyed, when they get injured. There are several different psychological reactions athletes have to injuries. Also, there are different stages

of the injury process and each stage calls for a different psychological reaction. The athlete has a reaction to the actual injury, which is usually pain, anxiety, and confusion. But then he has a reaction to the rehab, and then another reaction to the return to competition. It is in these two stages (rehab and return) that “inconsistencies” in how an adult would assume a competitive athlete should react. Anger, bitterness, frustration are all common to rehab, but relief, joy, and gladness are all common as well. The parents may not see those reactions, but a coach does. The child has been playing that sport competitively since they were six years old. They’ve played in a thousand games and disappointed their parents a thousand times. They’ve gotten yelled at, lectured to, and/or punished for their performances. Now all that gets to go away. And it isn’t the athlete’s fault, which means they won’t get blamed for it. The injury can be the scapegoat. Now at last they can get several weeks of relief away from it.

“I remember one of my teammates from club quit because of his dad. His dad, like many dads, would yell and scream at anyone and everyone during the games. During our varsity games at school we didn’t hear him much because of all the fans from both sides. But at club tournaments, there were not many fans, just a few parents and possibly the next two teams that are waiting to play. So at these tournaments we could hear every word the overbearing fathers would yell. Actually, I can remember several kids quitting, because of the amount of pressure their dads put on them.”

Joy, excitement, hesitation, caution, apprehension are all common return-to-activity reactions athletes have. They are happy to be back playing with their friends, but they can also be concerned if they are ready or if they will get reinjured. Often times, however, this confusing reaction of sadness and quietness is observed. Is it because they know what is coming? That in

the next few days the parental expectations, pressure, and disappointment will all begin again? They are happy to be playing with their friends, but anxious because of parental pressure.

“The worst part of club basketball for me, was when two of my teammates’ dads would confront me and lecture me after games if they didn’t feel I passed the ball enough to their sons.”

Parents need to take a step back and re-evaluate how they are raising their children. If the child is happy when he gets injured because it means the parent or another parent will finally get off his back, then we are missing the point of sport is missed and the parent is failing his son.

Cost or “Investment”

Participating on select travel teams can be very expensive and some families will even go into debt to give their children the “opportunity” to play for these teams. The coach, referees, and scorekeepers all have to be paid. A parent also has to purchase equipment, pay for the travel expenses (gas, food, lodging, tolls), and pay for the eventual medical bills and resulting physical therapy that comes with playing “for the love of the game.”

“We have spent upwards of \$3,000 each year not including travel and equipment, but if you include travel and equipment, we probably pay about \$5,000 each year. We drove anywhere from one hour up to eight hours to play. Many tournaments are in cahoots with the hotel industry. Your team has to stay at the tournament hotel and pay their prices. Some are deals; others are not. It is possible to travel every weekend from April 1 to mid-July, and then start up again and run through the fall.”

Parents do this partly because they feel determined to give their child every chance of playing in college.

“The biggest dilemma is if you really want to be good, you cannot stay at home and play local ball and expect to get the coaching and experience necessary to improve. If (Jimmy) would have stayed local, he would not have improved the way he did and would not be the player he is now. I know this because he has tried to keep his local ties and play with his buddies in town as much as he can. He has always been a better player than his friends, but after playing travel ball, he improved at a far superior rate than they did.”

Many college coaches have a negative view of club travel teams. Personally, and professionally, I am against “exposure” tournaments and will rarely watch them. They are often money-making rackets created to prey on unknowing parents to line the pockets of club coaches and tournament directors. The money you “invest” in a travel team with the hopes of your child earning a college scholarship would be better spent on something else like tuition. Odds are your child will not play a college sport. A small percentage of high school basketball players go on to play college basketball, and most of the players that make college teams do not earn athletic scholarships. Then an even smaller percentage of players play professionally. If Jimmy is good enough to make the high school varsity team, he has less than a .02% chance of playing professional basketball after that. Even if he does play professionally, he has a 60% chance of going broke within a few years of retirement. The chances of Jimmy playing professional basketball and retiring from it wealthy are worse than his chances of being struck by lightning. Why take the family away from church and the dinner table, go into debt, and cancel vacations in favor of these teams and tournaments?

Let Our Light Shine

Parents need to step it up and spend more time with and play with their children more. Instead of playing with their children, they are hiring someone else to play with them while a parent watches. The parents need to take responsibility for their own.

“I played for the same club team for several years. The guys on my team were either high school teammates or from neighboring towns. We were close. For most of the team, the fathers accompanied their sons to practices and the games. Therefore, as the guys on my team developed relationships, so did the fathers. According to my dad, the relationship of the fathers was almost just a chance for married men to commiserate together or go out and drink. My dad would tell me how going away for tournaments was an escape for some of the fathers. While this “escape” may not be a bad thing every so often, club results in a high frequency of overnight stays far from home, resulting in the fathers shirking their responsibilities at home. Also, while on these trips, the fathers were giving a lot of attention to only one of their kids, leaving his other kids possibly feeling neglected. Club became an excuse for many of the fathers to divert their attention from their homes.”

Playing in the backyard with parents gives the child greater respect and admiration for the parent. Dads, instead of driving their children 30 minutes to pay somebody else’s dad to teach their son how to throw a ball, they should save their money, and improve their relationship with their child at the same time by teaching him themselves.

All Jimmy knows of his dad is what he has shown him. Jimmy doesn’t see him at work. He doesn’t see how much knowledge he has and the kind of respect Dad’s coworkers have for

him. All he sees is the guy that lies around on the couch after work. Jimmy's dad should show Jimmy that he knows things and has skills, that he is stronger than Jimmy. Allow him to be impressed by his dad and develop respect for him. Why should he respect, and indirectly, obey someone whom he doesn't know anything about? Why should he respect someone he has never seen do anything? Yes, a dad can read scholarly books. Yes, he understands the debates on the news. Yes, he pays the bills. Yes, he has made thousands of good decisions to improve his child's life. But that eight year-old doesn't see that. His heroes are the men/figures whom he sees doing cool/impressive things. Paying his monthly health insurance premiums is not impressive to an eight year-old. Paying someone else's dad to teach him how to kick is not impressive either. Throwing a ball twice as far as he can is impressive to that kid. Touching the ceiling, giving him a piggy-back ride, and all the things that a father can do that Jimmy cannot do are impressive to him. A dad does not have to be superman; just let Jimmy see that his dad is bigger, stronger, and faster than he is. Why would Jimmy listen to someone he thinks he is better than? Fathers need to let their light shine instead of buying their kids a flashlight to shine on some other child's dad. Fathers should avoid paying someone else to be their son's hero.

Growing up my dad was my hero. He was the biggest, strongest, and smartest man in the world to me. He showed me how to do everything. My hero was not someone else's dad. It was not someone from TV. It was not someone from a book. It was the man down the hall. It was the guy that could reach the top shelf, the guy that could throw the ball higher than me, the guy that could run faster, the guy that could help me with my math homework, and it was the guy that I knew could physically discipline me if I misbehaved.

Why are parents needed? To provide food, health-care, shelter? Yes, but the government can fill that void. What do parents give that the government cannot? They can give love, their

time, their skills, an understanding of respect for authority. Absent parents who just pays the bills, but do not spend any time with their children need coaching. Parents should be more than just providers. They need to give of their time, and teach Jimmy and Sally their faith and skills. In addition, parents should show them a father/mother's love.

Conclusion

The AAU, basketball, volleyball, soccer and other sports were created to help improve the children's wellness. They were not created to divide families, aid obesity, replace the church, and increase household debt. Thought must be given to the drawbacks of select travel and club teams and how much parents really should be investing in them. Church suffers, school suffers, the family suffers, the game suffers, nutrition suffers, bank accounts suffer, the neighborhood suffers, and the child suffers. Are club travel teams needed this much?