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CHAPTER 2

Sports and Growing Up

Last summer when I was in Minneapolis for a long weekend to see my brother Walter and his family, the Griffins set out for the park to play baseball. Packed into a van on this beautiful Saturday afternoon were my brother and I, my two nephews, 7-year-old Neil and 13-year-old Leif, and my niece, 14-year-old Erin. Along the way we picked up Brian, a friend of Leif's.

Riding along squished into the middle of the front seat holding a borrowed glove and bat, I had the secure and contented feeling that I associate with sports. I remember on Saturdays when I was a teenager, all the guys used to pile into Bob Kaiser's car and go to a nearby college gym to play basketball. How good it felt to be part of the group and share in the anticipation of the ballplaying coming up! Back then, sports narrowed my focus in comforting ways. I could deal with basketball and nothing else. I didn't have to attend to everything that was going on in my life, some of which wasn't all that pleasant. On those occasions, I didn't have to deal with uncertainty or make a lot of decisions. Basketball was predictable, I knew how it would go. No pain, no surprises.

As it turned out, once the Griffins and Brian got to the park, we never got around to actually *playing* baseball. Instead, we practiced. First, the four children fanned out and took some infield practice, which included turning some snappy double plays and making quick flips to third to catch imaginary runners foolish enough to try to advance on a ground ball. Then the three boys clustered in left field and gathered in some fly balls and pegged them home to me, the catcher—or, in 7-year-old Neil's case, hit the cut-off person, his big sister Erin. I smile now as I think of fearless, determined little Neil that afternoon. He was something out of the old *Bad News Bears* movie: holding a 28-inch bat down at the end (no choking up for

him!), scooting after grounders and snaring some in stunning fashion while others whizzed past him, racing after fly balls that would whap into his floppy oversized glove and set him into a spin, and throwing so hard his legs would go out from under him and then bouncing up as if he were on a trampoline. He seemed to be having the time of his life.

After outfield drills we took some batting practice, with each of us getting in about twenty swings. I had the job of throwing batting practice to Erin (the 14-year-old). Erin stood up to the plate with a stern look on her face, holding the bat high in a right-handed stance. She was wearing jeans and sneakers and a blue jersey from her school soccer team with a white number 22 and "Griffin" on the back. I did the best I could to toss the ball softly down the middle, although, truth be told, accurate throwing has never been my strong suit. It quickly became apparent that things weren't going well for either Erin or me. The infrequent times I managed to get the ball over the plate, Erin either missed altogether or produced buntlike dribblers. Things seemed to get deadly silent around us. No one was saying anything. The wind even seemed to stop making noise. Erin tried a different bat with no better results. I could see she was getting frustrated and upset, which in turn made me self-conscious and tense, and it got even tougher for me to get the ball over. I started short-arming it as if I were throwing darts, and that just made things worse.

Finally, action on the field was suspended while Erin and her dad conferred at home plate. I couldn't hear what was said, but I can guess, because I was relieved on the mound and assigned the duty of handling incoming throws for the pitcher. That helped the situation a bit, but Erin still didn't produce more than three or four dribblers to short and some weak pop flies to the right side of the infield. She looked defeated as she tossed down her bat, and Leif took his turn to hit. I felt bad for Erin. I felt I had let her down by not doing a better job of pitching. I reflected briefly on my lifelong affliction with a scatter arm.

Thirteen-year-old Leif, lean and athletic-looking with his baseball cap pulled low over his blond hair, is deadly serious about sports. He is an avid soccer player—he attended a soccer camp later that summer—and he plays organized baseball in a youth league. He is a huge fan of the Minnesota Twins (this was Minneapolis, remember). That afternoon at the park he was all business; it could have been the seventh game of the World Series. He swung mightily at the ball. He soberly gobbled up grounders and smoked them over to first, demonstrating a remarkable arm for someone his age. When he whiffed or fouled one off at bat or kicked one in the field, I could see that to him it was no small matter.

I was left with the distinct impression that Leif saw a great deal on the line that afternoon, and that this activity was much closer to work than play for him. I sensed that in his eyes he was undergoing a test of sorts, and for him there was the question of whether he was going to measure up. He was performing for his dad, his buddy Brian, and former ballplayer Uncle Bob. (I have a strong hunch my sports exploits have been puffed up to him far beyond their actual merits.) I understand that Leif has mentioned hoping to get a college scholarship someday to play baseball. Later in the summer, I was informed by my brother that the family and some other relatives had gone to see one of Leif's youth league games. Leif had gone hitless at the plate and was feeling really bad about it, and in effect had apologized for his failure to everyone who had come to the game.

I am sure that there was more going on in this sports activity with Erin, Leif, and Neil than simply a chance to have some innocent fun and be together with the family and their relative from back east. And that brings me to the point of this chapter and an idea that is a basis for much of this book: *for kids, sports is often about more than just having a good time and developing physical skills*. For many children, sports is an arena for taking on the most crucial challenges they face during this time of their lives. Although the meaning of sports for most children is largely tacit or inarticulate, nevertheless they sense that sports has the potential to be more than simple recreation. The investigation of sports and children is no trivial matter. For the child who participates, and particularly for the child who participates avidly, sports is about growing up, the direction life will take for this child. Sports can have a significant effect on the success or failure of that process.

Sports is certainly not unique in this regard. School, for example, is more than a place for learning. It too is a playing field where, for better or worse, vital personal issues are resolved—resolutions that not only can have a major impact on the child's life in the present but also can have a significant effect on the resolutions of the adult issues coming up (love, family and friendship, work, connections to the society, personal happiness). In my view, the potential of sports for having an impact on matters of this import is what most compels parents' attention to their children's involvement in it.

It is inaccurate to say that sports inevitably has a particular significance for children or that participation in sports necessarily results in a particular outcome for them. To get at the meaning of sports for children and to understand its effect on them it is necessary to take into account what each child is like as an individual, his or her personal history, and his or her stage of life. We must also recognize and understand the child's circumstances—at home, in school, and with

friends—and the ways the child deals with these circumstances. Finally, we need to understand the society and culture children live in and its effect on them.

Saying that, I am not implying that sports is a neutral activity that children simply make of as they will. Sports is not a blank canvas on which a child paints a picture. Indeed, one of the major premises of this book is that we must look closely at the character or essence of sports in order to determine the directions in which it pushes the children who participate. In fact, the best way to view sports is as an *exchange* between a certain child and a certain sports activity in a certain place and at a certain time, and with certain other people. In order to understand or predict the outcomes of that exchange, we have to explore both parties in the interaction, the child and the sport situation.

An exploration of the concerns and issues inherent in this time in a child's life—the *agenda of childhood*, if you will—can contribute to your insight into the possible consequences of sports for your child as he or she grows up. The period of childhood I want to discuss in the pages that follow extends from roughly the ages of 6 through 18. I will describe a number of dimensions of growing up. These items have *developmental* significance. They are developmental because they have to do with the way an individual develops as viewed from the perspective of the most basic interlinked changes that occur over the span of his or her life. Their existence and interplay constitute the template or design of this stage of life. It is into this reality that sports fits and has its most significant impact on children, and it is within this frame that the effects of sports can best be analyzed.¹

The agenda of childhood is made up of the following items or elements:

- Personal Autonomy
- Gender Identity
- Personal Mastery
- Physical Development
- Mental Development
- Self-Concept
- Moral Development
- Self-Esteem
- Character
- Social Development
- Academic Development
- Self-Respect
- Personality
- Personal Philosophy

- Personal Identity
- Social Exchange, Fun, Excitement, and Challenge
- Relationship with Parents

In the pages that follow, along with a description of each item of the agenda of childhood, I will offer my own comments and, in some instances, refer to research and writings that bear on this area. In some cases, I will begin the discussion here and continue it in later chapters.

PERSONAL AUTONOMY

Beginning as early as 2 years of age, children seek to control their own behavior and establish feelings of personal autonomy. As they get older they become increasingly aware of their ability to initiate activities and manage themselves, as well as the limitations and constraints placed on this capacity. Getting in charge of one's own life, free from outside control, moving ahead on one's own initiative, is a central task of childhood. This contrasts with being reactive, passive, inactive, dependent, hesitant. Most of us can distinguish between those two orientations in children when we see them.

Sports can be the setting for the development of autonomy and initiative. However, the emphasis is on *can* be, not *will* be. Some sports contexts foster independence and an action orientation, whereas others foster dependence and inertia. Some sports settings breed a sense of industry among children, whereas others promote feelings of ineffectiveness. For example, a child's sense of autonomy is closely linked to the ability to choose. Therefore, a highly structured setting with a dominant coach and rigidly prescribed roles could win in the sports arena and lose in the developmental arena. The point is that sports situations differ from one another, and we must assess them one by one in terms of precisely what we care about. Two football teams may be similar in football and at the same time very different in the game of growing up—and becoming one's own person is a vital part of that latter game.

GENDER IDENTITY

Before the age of 3, children begin to understand whether they are boys or girls and they begin to take on gender identities and roles. They learn how important the meaning of gender is for themselves, including others' perceptions of them and attitudes toward them. Adolescence brings a continued elaboration of one's gender identity. With the arrival of puberty, it more explicitly includes a sexual com-

ponent. *What are boys (or girls) like ideally, and what am I like specifically, and how do I act accordingly? What is my relationship, including sexual, to members of the opposite sex and to my own? How attractive am I to those in whom I have a sexual interest, and how could I be more appealing to them?*

Does sports contribute to particular gender identities? I believe so. Directly and indirectly, sports sends messages to participants about masculinity and femininity and sexuality, and it provides a context for acting consistently with these messages. I think of Judy Oppenheimer's comment (the mother of the high school football player I mentioned in Chapter 1) that she wanted her son to be "big, booming, triumphant—a warrior" and how she went on to say that sports made her son into one.² But even if sports helps produce them, do we want big booming warriors? Many would say that is precisely what we *don't* want or need, that we have too many insensitive, violence-prone Neanderthals posing as men as it is. Others, however, think we could use more warriors these days. They believe they see an overabundance of soft-bodied, self-conscious, edgeless, somehow emasculated, overly domesticated, and ineffectual nice guys—men for whom even the thought of being either booming or triumphant makes them crave another glass of white wine to calm themselves down.

Here is a question I have asked myself since beginning work on this book: Has the increased participation of girls and women in athletics led to a healthy broadening of the definition of what it means to be female, or has it promoted an inappropriate blurring of the differences between the sexes? Is sports telling young women that to be successful they have to emulate men? There is much talk these days about girls being socialized into an overly narrow gender definition in contrast to boys, who, it is thought, are given wider latitude to experiment with ways of being male. On the contrary, I observe many parents (and society generally) proudly supporting girls in what once would have been called boy-type activities. Perhaps this is because today's culture places less value on being what has traditionally been seen as feminine, and perhaps it comes in some part from the view that girls are likely to have to compete hard in the work world later on. In any case, the result seems to be that girls are in fact more readily encouraged to be on the Little League team than boys are to take ballet lessons or to figure skate, activities that parents may worry will make boys appear, or actually become, weak or effeminate. In Chapter 6, I explore gender issues more fully.

PERSONAL MASTERY

Children develop perceptions of their own levels of competence,

perseverance, and effectiveness. Whether the child achieves a sense of personal mastery is a crucial issue in middle childhood, roughly age 8 to 11, although it is a continuing concern during adolescence. Children come to see themselves either as doers who get things accomplished or, in contrast, ineffectual people.³

A child's view of himself or herself as a masterful person (not a perfect person, or someone who can do everything well, just one who is fundamentally efficacious) is strongly affected by the outcomes he or she obtains when doing things that he or she accepts as important. Children are an audience to themselves. From the age of 7 or so, they draw conclusions about themselves based on the results of their efforts. Sports teams and situations hold up different standards of achievement to participants and differ in the likelihood that a child's efforts will meet with success and positive acknowledgment. The question becomes this: If kids take sports seriously and do not achieve good outcomes in their own eyes and in the eyes of others, what impact will this have on their feeling of masterfulness, and how will it affect the way they approach other areas of their lives now and in the future? I will revisit this question at the end of the chapter.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Children develop in physical capability and acquire a perspective toward themselves as physical beings. They may come to cherish and enhance themselves physically and integrate their physicality into their total being. Alternatively, without the proper influences they may come to ignore, neglect, or abuse this dimension of themselves. Physical activity is necessary to build motor skills, and organized sports can be that activity, although so too can bicycling, skiing, and throwing a Frisbee. It seems clear that there is a pace to keep in mind: pushing children to acquire physical skills more quickly than developmentally appropriate and emphasizing comparisons with older youths can lessen children's optimism about their own abilities and thereby stifle their motivation to use and expand on their physical abilities.

As for the effect of sports on the way youngsters view and treat their bodies, I have seen it go both ways. I have known athletes who respected and nurtured their bodies. I have known athletes who considered their bodies an integral part of their being. But I have also known athletes—teenagers, not just adults—who viewed their bodies merely as tools, tools they often abused. I refer to risking their health and safety recklessly, playing in spite of injury, and taking drugs to stimulate performance and stay in competition in spite of injury. I have known athletes who scrutinized everything that went

into their bodies to make sure it was good for them, and others who attacked their bodies with junk food, nicotine, alcohol, and so-called recreational drugs. I have known athletes who stayed in shape as an end in itself, and I have known athletes who let themselves go for the minute the competition ended. Some sports situations promote treating one's body well, whereas others foster the objectification and mistreatment of one's body. What happens in a particular child's case is the result of the interplay between what that child is like and what the sports circumstance is like. As a parent, you need to monitor and assess this interplay as it involves your own child.

MENTAL DEVELOPMENT

A crucial task of childhood is to mature mentally. Fundamentally mental (other terms, intellectual, cognitive) development is growth in one's capability to think abstractly.⁴ It is the ability to use one's mind effectively: to reason, to analyze, to create, to solve problems, and to make assessments, and then to use the results of one's thinking to guide one's actions. Some situations teach children things and help them learn to do things, but at the same time they don't promote children's ability and tendency to think hard and perceptively for themselves, which, it must be underscored, involves more than the ability to make quick and clever decisions and responses, or merely employ tactics necessary to carry out a strategy determined by someone else.

A question for parents to consider is whether sports activities go beyond contributing to their child's knowledge and skill and ability to cope with immediate situations to developing his or her intellect. Personally, I wouldn't make the claim that sports characteristically helps a child develop his or her mental capability in the way I have defined it here. In fact, my impression is that in most instances sports does not serve that end to any significant degree.

SELF-CONCEPT

During childhood, children develop an increasingly clear picture of themselves. Self-concept is a decision one makes about oneself: *This is what describes me. This is what I am interested in. This is what I am good at and not good at. These are the kind of things I do and don't do. This is how others see me and treat me.* The experiences of childhood and adolescence help draw the outlines and fill in the details of one's self-image, including whether it is favorable or unfavorable.

A child's self-concept is very important because it provides him or her with a frame of reference that guides future thoughts and actions.

For example: *I'm not trying out for the debate team because that is not what I do. I wouldn't get much out of that. Debate doesn't square with who I am and what I am good at and like to do. But I am going to check out football because that's more me.* In this case, debate didn't happen, and not because of some external force preventing or discouraging it, but rather because of an internal guide or screen that exists within the child—the child's self-concept. Self-concepts can be both useful and get in children's way. They are useful when they direct children toward involvements that are appropriate for them. They get in the way to the extent that children's view of themselves stops them from doing something that would have been enjoyable, enriching, and productive.

For children who participate, sports doesn't end with the last tick of the scoreboard clock. Sports persists inside them as memories and feelings and conclusions, and all this gets translated into a generalized conception of themselves. Very important, to an extent depending on the meaning children attribute to their involvement, playing sports contributes to and reinforces their self-concept in areas beyond the sports-related part of their self-definition. The question for you, of course, is how sports is affecting your child's overall self-concept.

MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Over time, children become moral people. They take on a sense of right and wrong. They acquire perspectives on fairness and justice and the rights of others. They become concerned about others and feel responsible for their welfare—or they don't. They become kind and decent and tolerant people—or they don't. They become good people or bad people. They become honest or dishonest people. Children learn morality through their interactions with others and from the examples of people around them and from the activities they engage in.

Along with everything else it is, sports is a moral teacher, and we have to assess it on that basis. Here are some questions to ask about your child's sports involvement: *At the most basic level, what do these people believe in? What values does this place, this activity, reflect? How would I feel if my child became the embodiment of what this sports setting believes to be right?* Reflect on these questions now, and consider what I have to offer on this topic in Chapter 4.

SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem is an aspect of self-concept. It refers to one's own assessment of two particular dimensions of oneself: (1) one's *worth*,

and (2) one's *competence* (or masterfulness as described above).⁵ People with high self-esteem see themselves as basically valuable. In their own eyes, they matter. They deserve good treatment. They deserve to be happy. They deserve to live well. Those who possess high self-esteem more than like themselves. They count. Their dignity counts. Their life counts. People with high self-esteem consider themselves capable of getting important things done. They are confident. They proceed from the assumption that they can accomplish what they set out to accomplish. People with high self-esteem presume that they will produce good results and not have to settle for reasons or excuses for why they didn't. Positive self-esteem is crucial to living well. If you don't believe you are a deserving and capable person, you operate from a rickety underpinning when trying to construct a satisfying and productive life. You are likely to construct a life befitting someone who isn't deserving and isn't effective.

Conventional wisdom says that sports contributes positively to self-esteem. However, the literature and research I have reviewed doesn't offer much support for the idea. One author reports that varsity sports tends to increase self-esteem slightly for boys but not for girls.⁶ Another researcher found that even though playing football raises boys' self-esteem a bit, the increase is not statistically significant (i.e., the increase wasn't great enough to allow him to conclude anything definitively).⁷ It is important to ask how these writers define self-esteem and how they arrived at their conclusions—it wasn't clear from their writings. Self-esteem, as I defined it earlier, refers to a general or overall sense of one's worth and capability. Personally, I have seen athletes who thought little of themselves anywhere but on the athletic field, and sometimes not even there. Some people who win every wrestling match think that is about all they are good for. What about the wrestlers who win very few matches, or are on the team but rarely or never get to compete? True self-esteem is to a great extent the result of accomplishment. It is a byproduct of success. It is not enough to have others tell you how great you are, or for you to tell it to yourself, if you don't have objective evidence. A fact of life is that you have to earn self-esteem through your own achievements and the obstacles you overcome.

Although I believe sports can significantly affect a child's self-esteem, at this point I am not ready to say that simply participating in sports can be counted on to boost it. Sports can enhance children's sense of their own overall worth and capability, but it can also detract from it. Comparison—asking oneself, "How do I stack up against others in my group?"—is a major vehicle for determining personal worth. The question that particularly concerns me is this: What happens to the self-esteem of children who don't measure up

well to the accomplishments of other athletes on their team? Also, it gives me pause to see the expressed or unexpressed message (especially in sports for older kids) that no matter who you are, the team comes first, that no one is bigger than the team, that every individual is expendable; you are replaceable and don't forget it. Moreover, consider the common sports credo that no matter how much you accomplish, it will never be enough, so don't get comfortable with your own capabilities or achievements. More than many people imagine, organized sports is frequently a training ground, even for star athletes, for self-effacement ("I'm just one among many," "I'm not good enough") rather than self-esteem.

Parents need to ask: *What exactly is it about a sports experience that enhances participants' self-worth and confidence in themselves?* These concerns will come up again later on. Meanwhile ask yourself: *What is sports doing for my child's self-esteem?*

CHARACTER

There are many definitions of character. They include such personal qualities as responsibility, persistence, courage, self-discipline, honesty, integrity, the willingness to work hard, compassion for others, generosity, independence, and tolerance. I think it is fair to say that nothing more defines a person than the level of his or her character. Childhood and adolescence is, as much as anything, a time of character formation.

Sports has long held a reputation for building character. I will explore the evidence and share my assessment of the relationship between sports and character in Chapter 4. In the meantime, I invite you to think about it: *What effect is sports having, or do I anticipate it having, on my child's character? What effect would I like it to have?*⁸

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Over the course of childhood, children develop as social beings. Social development includes a concern for social skills, sociability, and prosocial and antisocial attitudes. Social development comprises such things as friendship, social ranking, status, power, rejection and acceptance, inclusion and exclusion, dominance and submission, leadership, connection to the group, cooperativeness, aggression and passivity and withdrawal, and conflict. It also includes social insightfulness: the ability to infer the intentions of others and discern why things happen as they do in social contexts.⁹

Defining one's relationship to the social world outside the family involves the resolution of some crucial questions: *What am I like*

socially? Where do I fit? With whom? As children get older and more mobile and mentally better able to take others into account, the peer group becomes an increasingly significant part of their lives. Puberty exacerbates this process. Children take on and are assigned (the individual/context interaction idea again) status and social roles: leader, follower, cool guy, social star, everyone's friend, and so on. Then there are the social identities that are defined by their relation to the group: part of the crowd, outsider-trying-to-get-in, loner, and the rest. In particular, adolescents are at a time in their lives when they are looking for a way to be that will meet with approval and acceptance. As most adults can still recall, issues of inclusion and exclusion are big concerns during early and later adolescence. These are the years when it becomes a big thing to be in the right crowd. *What does the group think of me?* I remember worrying in high school that I wouldn't have anyone to eat lunch with. What a relief when I spotted my sports buddies and they said, "Hey Griff, come on over."

Research has shown that sports is a major determinant of friendship patterns and social standing among children and adolescents. For many youngsters, sports is a—if not *the*—primary context for social development. Sports often determines who children are around and thus what social examples they observe and who responds approvingly and disapprovingly to their social initiatives. Recently I was in a high school cafeteria and remarked to myself how the athletes segregated themselves by sex and by sport at the tables. In school, sports can be a major vehicle for obtaining social rewards such as recognition, praise, and adulation. Studies have shown that both boys and girls think of participation in sports as the best way to achieve popularity. (Interestingly, being on the honor roll is considered the least promising way.)¹⁰ Many children see sports as *the* way to make it socially. You can imagine how high the stakes are for these individuals to be successful at sports, and what the personal costs can be if they aren't.

Like all contexts, sports is not neutral but rather favors certain social ways and arrangements. Ask yourself: *How is my child defined socially in this sports situation? Where is he or she placed in the social scheme of things? What is he or she learning about being with others, with groups, in this sports setting? What are the social models and ideals in this circumstance? What kind of social being is my child there? How does that square with my hopes for my child, and with his or her hopes for him or herself?*

ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

Academic development involves the entire range of things a young person learns or attains in school: particular knowledge and skills, attitudes and orientations toward school and learning and the life of the mind, effectiveness as a student (i.e., how well a youngster can do what it takes to be successful in school), academic achievement (grades, awards, and other scholastic recognition), and the level of encouragement and support the student receives from the school.

As for the connection between sports involvement and a child's academic orientation and success, I explore this in Chapter 3. In Chapter 5, I explore the role of sports in schools and what effect that has on the children who attend them—even those who do not participate in sports. Chapter 9 considers schools in relationship to what I term the *culture of achievement*. For now, reflect on the fact that sports is such a powerful force in the eyes of young people that one study showed that if forced to choose, both high school boys and girls preferred success in sports over success in the classroom. In another study, a majority of young people stated that they wanted to be remembered as athletic stars rather than as brilliant students.¹¹ Still other research reported that boys tend to find failure in sports to be more aversive than failure in academics.¹²

SELF-RESPECT

An issue throughout life, but especially pressing in adolescence, is the achievement of self-respect.¹³ People who are self-respecting are more themselves, more authentic, in their lives. They place stronger demands on themselves to get on with creating a satisfying and honorable life. They avoid negative talk and self-pity and take action stemming from the intention—not just the hope—of achieving their aims in life. Without respect for ourselves, it is tough to be happy in our lives.¹⁴ By happiness I mean a deep, pervasive, lasting sense that "Yes, life is good," in contrast to transitory pleasures or "up" times. As a practical matter, self-respect and happiness go hand and hand. We are a watchful audience to ourselves from the age of 7 or 8 onward, and we can't get away from ourselves no matter how hard some of us try (through alcohol and drugs, amusements, consumption, rationalizations, and the rest). We have to live a life that we can respect, because even if no one else notices, even if others buy our line, we are witnessing ourselves and we won't accept our excuses or get distracted by our act.

My view is that we earn self-respect in certain ways—that is to say, there are rules for attaining self-respect. First, we have to assume

personal responsibility for accomplishing important things. We don't get away with ducking responsibility or holding others accountable for our fate. Second, we have to be productive. We have to achieve positive results when we take on valued undertakings. When we do that, others respect our responsibility and the results we achieve. We note their respect for us as well as observe our own accomplishments and accord ourselves respect. We don't have to be responsible and successful every time or be at the top of the heap to be respected and self-respecting, but we can't fail every time either. If we continually come up short at what we and those who matter to us consider significant tasks, it is extremely difficult to achieve or maintain respect for ourselves.

Sports' contribution to the attainment of self-respect is a crucial matter for thought and investigation. Again, sometimes sports contributes to a child's self-respect and sometimes it doesn't. Given what I have said, is sports a context in which your child is growing in self-respect?

PERSONALITY

Individuals take on or sharpen their personalities during their youth. By personality I mean a person's style, manner, persona, the way he presents himself. I consider personality to be the product of a combination of factors: individual choice, modeling (emulating others), conditioning (training, outside shaping), and one's inherent nature.

Sports is a way to represent oneself to the world. Spend time in any close-knit athletic context and you'll see that a certain kind, or a few kinds, of personality profiles are the most prevalent and most favored there. Athletes feel a push toward being certain ways and receive rewards (approval, acceptance) for doing so. Listen to athletes being interviewed on television and see if you don't notice a similar manner among many of them. Undoubtedly this is due to the fact that certain types of people are drawn to sports in the first place, but it goes beyond that. There is personality-shaping going on; or so it seems, anyway.

If your child is deeply involved in sports and you notice he or she is starting to act differently, it could have something to do with the cues your child is picking up from sports—coaches, fellow players, athletes on television, and so on. Your child may be imitating a professional or college sports hero, or taking on the personality of the star of the team he or she is on: *If it works for him, it might work for me.* Of course, it may be a fleeting phenomenon, but then again childhood is a particularly formative time of life, when even short-lived behaviors have the potential of cementing themselves into one's personality for

a good time to come.

The "sports persona" can take at least three forms. (I'm thinking here of boys.) First, there's the flat, laconic style. It is a kind of a Clint Eastwood approach. Stay detached and don't say anything unless you have to. Keep it brief and don't get too effusive or animated about anything. Just play your position and don't be shooting off your mouth. Then there is the humble, deferring, "no rough edges" manner: "I accept this award on behalf of my teammates, because if it weren't for them . . ." These ways of presenting oneself have a somewhat mechanical, clipped, terse, rehearsed quality. And there is the devil-may-care, Budweiser-commercial, beers-with-the-guys type. Of course athletes reflect the full spectrum of personal styles, but the sports culture does seem to favor certain styles and nudge participants in that direction. I have noticed that verbally expansive, analytical, self-revealing personalities don't often appear in the physically-oriented, no-nonsense sports world. Whether this is because people of this bent are changed by the sports world or simply seldom enter it remains an open question.

PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

As children get older, increasingly they think about what is worth believing in and using to guide the conduct of their lives. Even though it may still be quite primitive, children begin early to develop a philosophy of life—a set of explanations and ideals and priorities that give them direction. Political orientations and allegiances are articulated. Attitudes toward society and art and other people are clarified. Personal aspirations are defined: *This is where I am going in my life*. For some—perhaps too few these days—these are the years of fantasizing about being a hero, or accomplishing great deeds, or being part of a great cause. Personal values are crucial to all these processes. Values answer the questions: *What is preferable? What has merit? What is right?*

Sports is a place where children work through issues of belief and value. And again, sports is not a neutral context. Sports represents certain ideas and ideals, and fosters their acceptance among those who participate in it. Later on, in Chapters 4 and 9 and elsewhere, I will talk more about this.

PERSONAL IDENTITY

In contrast to younger children, teenagers are better able to think abstractly and therefore are more capable of reflecting on what they are like and, most important, what they *should* be like as individuals.

They resolve the questions: *Who am I? What do I do that distinguishes me from others? What makes me special? How can I show people who I am?* The term that is used to refer to this process is *identity formation*.¹⁵ For the most part, *personal identity* is another term for self-concept, except that it has a stronger connotation of one's place in the overall scheme of things, the niche one fills in the world. Central in this process, along with development of *gender identity* as described earlier, the teenage years build on the beginnings of a *work identity* acquired when younger. Early in life, children come to a global sense of the sort of worker they are (*I am a good worker; I do what my parents and the teacher say; I work hard; I am a screw-up*). With adolescence, young people typically give some fairly serious thought and experimentation to the particular kind of work they do, or might do in the future, that can define them as individuals and members of the group: *I do this kind of work and not that kind, and that says who I am*. For some children, sports takes on the nature of work and thereby to a greater or lesser degree helps mold their work identity.

In good part, children learn about who they are from what others in their world and their involvements inform them about themselves. Sports contexts tell the children who participate who they are in relation to what this setting most values in a person. In this way, sports is more than a game to play; it is a lesson in identity. Contributing to the strong influence sports can have is its capacity to become who children are, subsume their being. Some children don't just *play* sports, they *are* athletes. That is who they are to themselves, and that is who they are to others.

All groups encourage their members to minimize their differences with one another. Group members are presumably drawn to the group because they have something in common in the first place, but the dynamic of the group draws them toward even more closely approximating each other, whether it is in appearance, values, or behavior. The individual self becomes depersonalized in deference to the group identity and one's place in the group. Group behaviors, attitudes, and skills and the personal qualities most valued and needed by the group become the norm for the individual to follow. At the same time individuals are pressured to minimize differences with others in the group, they are also encouraged to maximize them with the outgroup, which is to say, everyone else. The result is group think and group polarization, as well as a strong desire for acceptance and status in the group. Insularity grows out of such settings. Whenever there is competition or perceived threat, there will be pressure for members to assume a group identity in contrast to a personal identity and to converge in norms and behavior. They start to take on similar language,

gestures, and dress; individuality is diminished.¹⁶ Clearly, the competitive nature of sports provides an extra push toward commonality among its participants.

Adolescents have dual desires. They seek inclusion and interdependence. And they want—and need—a sense of their own independence and uniqueness. At best, children manage to integrate these goals, but there are times when they remain in contradiction. For example, in sports and elsewhere, personal autonomy can be sacrificed or hindered by the desire to fit in, and individuality can run up against the pressure to play the role that best serves the group. Often I have heard coaches lecture their athletes, "Remember, there is no I in team." There may be no I in team, but there certainly is the need for an I in life if one is to live *his* or *her* own life and not just *a* life.

The balance between the needs of the individual and the interests of the group is a major concern of mine. There is no place where this polarity is more obvious than in children's and adolescents' sports activities. What happens to a young person's sense of individuality and uniqueness when confronted with a setting that tells him he must subordinate his interests to those of the team? Recently I talked with a high school basketball coach who had benched a couple of his senior starters. His rationale was that even though the seniors were better than those who replaced them, the team was having a losing season and the program would be better next year and beyond if the younger players got some experience. I wondered about the rights and welfare of the seniors, what was fair to those kids, and how their needs balanced off against the coach's interests and the welfare of the team as an entity that has a history and that continues after these individuals have gone their separate ways.

It is clear that youngsters look to individuals in their group who are held up as exemplary for answers to questions such as: *Who is truly admirable? Why? How can I become more like that?* Sports, like other groups, holds up examples of individuals for children to admire and emulate. For children caught up in sports, prominent athletes are the people they look up to. Star athletes become heroes, more than doctors or artists or businesspeople or religious leaders. We need to ask ourselves: *Just who are these athletic heroes? What do their lives represent? What are the values of these admired athletes? How are their values related to academics and learning? What is their record of achievement in school? What is their orientation toward work? For that matter, what exactly is the work of playing sports for a living? What does professional sports say about the nature of work? What moral examples do star athletes provide young people? What are their attitudes toward the opposite sex? What does the example of athletics say about how to achieve a good life in this society? What is*

a good life according to these athletes? There is no more important question for a society to explore than whom its children admire and why.

SOCIAL EXCHANGE, FUN, EXCITEMENT, CHALLENGE

Experiencing social exchange, fun, excitement, and personal challenge are major *motivations* of youngsters. As inherently social beings, most children find being around other kids rewarding in itself. Also, children are drawn to anything that provides fun and excitement. Finally, they like a challenge, a hill to climb, figuratively or literally. Children may say they want things to be easy, but they don't, not really, not deep down.

Sports is an activity that serves these motivations. Sports is a way to be with others, and it challenges its participants, and it is often fun and exciting. For some children there is little else other than sports that offers the possibility of these kinds of experiences. So if you want to know why kids get into sports, those are likely to be among the reasons. And if you want to replace sports with something else, you have a guide as to what your task is: either help your children find other involvements that give them a chance to socialize or that are challenging or fun or give them a charge, or help them identify other motivations that can lead to personal satisfaction, such as personal expression or self-improvement or service to others.

RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS

Besides the effect of sports on children's relationships with their peers, it has an impact on their relationships with their parents. Organized sports can bring children and their parents together as they share in the activity, the child playing and the parents watching and supporting, but it can also divide them. If you are the parent of a committed young athlete, you know how athletics can consume a young person's life to the point that it crowds out family life. There are practices and games. There are clinics and off-season leagues. Most sports can be (and to be really good in them, have to be) engaged in year-round. Then there is the study and weight training, and all the sports reading and time spent thinking and talking about sports. Apart from the effect on family life, leading scholars call for the need for diversity in children's lives.¹⁷ When sports gets to the point that it significantly closes off other involvements, it becomes a matter for concern.

Children, and adolescents in particular, want independence, but they also want to please their parents and make their parents proud of

them. In extreme cases, sports can be the way to win the respect and approval of Mom and Dad. Often children feel pressure from their parents to play sports, and more than that, to excel in them. They sometimes feel pressure to perform in sports to the level of their parents' expectations. Some children may actually think that a good relationship with their parents is contingent on their continued involvement in sports and the quality of their play. For some children, it is almost as if they are taking care of their parents by playing sports, providing something they perceive their parents as needing. Some children are in an unenviable bind: if they don't do well in sports, they disappoint their parents; and if they do do well, then they are treated by their parents like budding professional athletes instead of children.

You want the best for your children and that they be happy and well. But you also want to maintain a good relationship with them—and you have a right to want that, and the right to work to create and maintain that. You don't want your children to be alienated from you or disrespectful to you or dismissive of you and what you represent. Even though you want them to be their own people, at the same time you don't want to lose them. Sports has to be assessed in terms of its impact on your relationship with your children. You matter too.

SUMMARY

This, then, is what I consider to be the agenda of childhood. Youngsters are dealing with issues of autonomy and initiative, and mastery. They are confronting questions regarding gender. They are learning how to use their minds, to think. They are establishing a relationship with themselves as physical, corporeal entities. They are defining who they are as individuals, which includes assuming a work identity. They are developing a social identity and social skills and a place in the social world. They are finding beliefs and values to guide them. They are becoming moral beings. They are shaping their personalities and character. They are achieving self-esteem and self-respect (or not). They are finding people to be with and creating some fun and excitement in their lives. They are attending school and developing an academic style and academic skills and compiling an academic record. They are identifying scholastic and career ambitions and laying the groundwork for further education or training. And they are establishing a particular kind of relationship with their parent or parents.

While children work through this agenda of childhood in many venues, including the classroom and the streetcorner, organized sports

is a particularly good vehicle for it. Sports is a public endeavor: people are watching. The fact that people are looking on increases youngsters' self-awareness and self-attention, and this they find rewarding because with all their identity concerns this is a particularly self-referenced time of life. It feels right to children for the light to be shining on them, to be pushed to attend to their developing selves, and, as they act on these developmental issues, to have their actions receive immediate public validation. Also, in sports there are usually clear criteria for success and failure. You know how you are doing and when you are making progress. Add to that the fact that sports is arousing and enjoyable when so much of what is in children's worlds isn't. Researchers have asked children why they participate in sports, and the agenda of childhood is reflected in their responses. Reasons children gave included the following: the opportunity to learn and improve skills; the chance to meet others, to make friends and be part of a group; excitement and personal challenge; achievement and status; fitness, energy and tension release; and fun. Boys tended to be more motivated by achievement and status than girls, who participated more for fun and friendship.¹⁸

It is important to keep in mind that children don't choose sports as a vehicle to serve their needs totally of their own accord. They are socialized into it by their parents, their peers, the media, and their school. Children choose what to do from the options they know about and that seem available. It is as if they carry an album of pictures in their heads, and when they are faced with deciding what to do they call up the album and pick the most appealing picture and then try to bring it to life.¹⁹ Various elements of this society provide pictures for children. A few years ago, the media presented the picture of skater Nancy Kerrigan overcoming a physical assault intended to keep her out of the competition and, amid incredible public interest (including the rapt attention of proud parents—a fantasy for most children), skating to a silver medal in the Winter Olympics. We can only speculate how many little girls put that picture in their mental album and the impact it has had on their lives.

Now, back to my niece and nephews, Erin, Neil, and Leif, and our day in the park. My guess is to the extent that the experience was about more than catching and hitting baseballs, its meaning for them lies somewhere in what I have just discussed. It was a chance to be part of a social experience and to have some fun, but likely it was more than that. For 7-year-old Neil, it could have had to do with being included in the group and autonomy and initiative and personal mastery. For 13-year-old Leif, the activity could have touched on issues of self-definition. It could be that Leif has decided to build an

identity as an athlete. If he has, that will have consequences far beyond the scores of the games in which he participates and his athletic performances. Perhaps for 14-year-old Erin, the afternoon at the park brought up issues regarding gender. As I think about it now, there was no acknowledgment on that occasion that Erin is a girl. It was a unisex world that day. Erin was dressed exactly like the boys, and as far as I could tell there was no difference in expectations for her and the boys. I don't know what difference, if any, it made to her, but it may have made some.

Any of the other factors I have outlined above may have been involved as well. The sports experience could have had an impact on the three as social beings and on their personalities. In a small way it could have had an impact on their self-esteem and self-respect. It could have had an impact on their relationship with others in their family and with me. I don't want to make too much of this occasion, but I think if you add its effect to the outcomes of all the other direct contacts the children have had and will have with sports, in school and on the playground, plus their indirect experiences from reading about sports and watching it on television, it could well amount to something of significance in their lives.

CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF SUCCESS

With the agenda of childhood as the frame of reference, it appears that sports can be both a setting for the successful resolution of the developmental issues of childhood and the venue of the failure to achieve healthy maturation. Sports can build up a child, and it can diminish a child. One significant conclusion I have reached in this regard is that, in general, to the degree a child gets invested in sports, it is important that he or she be successful in them. Not just participate in sports, but *do well* in them. By doing well, I mean matching up to the particular sport's own standards. If its standard is to have a high batting average, then I mean having a high batting average. I devote Chapters 8 and 9 to an exploration of how as a parent you can contribute to your child's success in sports. If sports is a big thing to a parent or child, and the child isn't good at it, I think sports can be damaging to the child. That message doesn't play well to many parents I suppose. It would be a lot easier for me to say, "Go ahead, encourage your children to participate in sports. Sports will be good for them, get them with other kids, teach them about teamwork and sticking with it." But that is not the way I see it. In sports, or school or anywhere else in life, the best circumstance for children to be in is where they confront challenges just beyond their current personal capability and are successful in meeting them. The ideal is

for children to have to work hard, put in their utmost effort, and then achieve measurable improvement and success. And then for the others in that situation to show them that they respect both their hard work and the good results they obtained. A major responsibility of parents is to help their children identify areas where their efforts will meet with success.

I am not optimistic that many young people can imagine or act on criteria for success beyond those inherent in the particular circumstance they are in. Children are new to the world and do not yet have the tools to mediate the forces coming at them. If children see sports as an important part of their lives, then their success and failure in that context, their accomplishments and the degree to which their efforts are appreciated by others, can significantly affect their view of themselves, their aspirational levels, and their achievements in other areas. All of this can affect their future, because everything in life is of a piece: what happens up the line is connected to what happens now; what we are up the line is connected to what we are now. If children are not temperamentally or physically suited to sports, or if they are in a sports environment that thwarts their success, there is the danger that key developmental issues will not be resolved positively and motivational desires will be unfulfilled.

I worry about the child who doesn't measure up to the ideals of his or her sport. How serious the mismatch can be without being harmful I can't say with any precision. It depends on the meaning the individual child attributes to sports. If it is just one among many things he or she does, if it is no big deal to the child, that's one thing. But if sports is a very important or *the* most important activity in a youngster's life, then the discrepancy between the ideals and expectations and the child's performance becomes a matter of concern. I'm not saying a child has to be the star of the team, but I know I worry about the kid who, for example, is only allowed to stand out in right field for the last couple of innings. And frankly, I also worry about the child who is mediocre on the field, about what effect sports is having on that child developmentally.

I have read and heard a great deal about how resilient children are. It is reassuring to hear about how tough kids are, how they get over things, and so on. Children *can* weather adversity, there's no doubt about that. But children are fragile too. They very much need our protection. They need our wisdom and our guidance. Of course, there are some lessons children need to learn about failure. With that said, however, it must be reiterated that at bottom the path to children's positive development is through confronting challenge successfully. Parents aren't all-powerful; they can't control everything in their children's lives. But that reality shouldn't stop parents from setting a

goal to shoot for: to help their children get involved in situations, sports and otherwise, where they can take on manageable challenges. That is what is healthiest for children. That is what growing up is about ideally. I can imagine times when the best thing a parent can do is to caution a child against participating in organized sports and to help the child identify and serve his or her needs and desires in other ways. Parents don't always have to go along with anything their children want to do. They *do* always have to love their children and believe in them and want and work for the best for them. That means taking on the tough job of identifying the times when what the child wants contradicts what the child needs, and then doing something about it.

We want our children to grow up to have pride in themselves, to have a disposition toward curiosity and wonder, to be powerful, and to view the world as a meaningful place that can be understood and mastered. We want our children to be initiators, not reactors, in life, to chart their own course, or, as one author puts it, to be origins and not pawns in the world.²⁰ We want confident children, not fearful children. Sports and everything else in children's lives has to be judged on the basis of its effect on the dreams we have for our children and the dreams they have for themselves.

There is a prevailing sentiment in our culture these days that devalues parents and justifies parental aloofness. All the talk about "quality time" and the dangers of "smother love" has justified parents' distance from children and neutrality toward their endeavors. With children's lives becoming increasingly dominated by the school and peers and the popular culture, it seems to me the time has come for mothers and fathers to move closer to center stage. It is time to affirm the right and obligation of parents to involve themselves more directly with their children and to assert a steady influence on them. I don't mean dictating to children; that wouldn't work in any case. I do mean being authentic and honest with them, letting them know where you stand and what you stand for, and being a continuous and felt presence in their lives. At the very least, you should not defer to every other force that is shaping your children and should not feel compelled to endorse and support your child's whims and interests whatever they might be lest you be an "interfering parent."²¹

I believe what most compels Ken and Melissa Heise's investigation, and yours and mine, into the nature of sports and its effect on children is that it is one place where children play the growing up game, a game where the quality of their lives is on the line. We can talk about children succeeding and failing in the big football or basketball or soccer game and the consequences of that. But we need to remember that Ken and Melissa Heise, and all parents, are in a very

big game themselves—as coaches of their children as they play the game of growing up. The consequences of winning and losing that game are monumental.

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