

Parents should let kids be kids

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Deseret Morning News

Published: September 24, 2007

Shaun White loved soccer, but there was a moment when he learned it wasn't for him.

"I showed up at the field late one time, and it was intense," he said. "I'm playing on this lower, recreation level, just so I could have fun. Someone else's mom came over and yelled at me, 'You better get out there and you better score!' There is something about someone else's mom yelling at you."

White said he did as he was told and shortly thereafter he quit. Instead of traditional organized sports, he gravitated to nontraditional activities like snowboarding and skateboarding. The 21-year-old, who won an Olympic gold medal in snowboarding in 2006 and an X Games gold medal this summer in skateboarding, said the decision changed his life and his relationship with his parents.

"Instead of my dad yelling at me from the sideline, we were out riding together," he said. "(Snowboarding) really drew our family together."

The professional skateboarder who was in Salt Lake City this week to compete in the AST Dew Tour said he believes a lot of young athletes turn to nontraditional sports because they have more freedom.

"Normally, there are no moms allowed in the parks," he laughed. "It's brutal when you have people always telling you what to do. ... My attraction to skateboarding was that you didn't have that. You could just ask your friends, learn tricks from each other or just figure it out on your own."

That's how all play begins.

Most of us have those memories. Just some neighborhood kids in a field, dividing into teams, making up games and having a good time. We learned to negotiate, cooperate, to employ strategy and to have fun. We rode our bikes everywhere, and on the way we invented tricks, we made up games, we had races and we fed our imaginations.

Then adults got involved.

At some point, our parents set up leagues, they instituted rules and regulations and they stole some of our freedom. In order to develop at a higher level, we had to forfeit some of what drew us to those games in the first place.

Organization isn't always a bad thing, but it does cost us something. And in this age of super development, accelerated leagues and club sports, I am afraid that many of our children don't know anything BUT organized sports.

And that, my fellow sports lovers, is a dangerous thing.

Too much structure is as crippling as not enough. Organized sports teach us many valuable lessons, but they can't teach us everything. I think when children always look to adults for instruction, direction and motivation, they lack what we learned on those sandlots.

We learned to improvise and to run faster because we didn't want to let our friends down. We learned that having fun was every bit as important as winning and that we could find ways to do both.

The lessons we learned from unstructured, random goofing off is easier to feel than it is to describe, but I saw some of it this weekend during the Dew Tour.

The buzzer sounded, but that didn't matter to BMX rider Morgan Lloyd, who was competing in the preliminary round of the BMX Park competition Saturday.

He fell trying to land a breathtaking trick that thrilled the crowd. His time was up, and he'd likely failed to qualify for the finals. But at the urging of the crowd, he tried three more times before landing the trick and bringing the crowd and his fellow competitors to their feet.

"This is what BMX is about," exclaimed one of the announcers. "Not awards, not points. It's about having a good time on your bicycle."

In any other professional arena, he'd have been whistled for delay of game, tagged with a celebration penalty or told to exit quietly so the winners could square off.

But much of action sports still belongs to the riders, which is why it still feels a little unorganized, unofficial and always unpredictable.

It still feels like a bunch of neighborhood kids having a good time while they challenge each other to do what they thought was impossible just last week. Corporate sponsorships and financial success may eventually change action sports. I'm not sure what the future holds for any individual sport.

But after this weekend, I am more certain of one thing: If we continue to micromanage the lives of our children, that future won't be as creative, exciting or joyous.

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