

## Sideline Saddams

### – Are you cheering for your children when they play their games - or bullying them?

**By Timothy Harper**

*Published: April 1997, Sky Magazine*

Brian Hannigan has always tried to make it to his children's games. Soccer, softball, basketball - he's been right there rooting for them. Sometimes loudly. At first Hannigan told himself he was just encouraging his children, a boy who's now 14 and a girl who's 9. He was pointing out things they should be doing, reminding them, helping them.

No, he realized. He was yelling at them. He was trying to micromanage them from the sidelines. His comments were more negative than positive. He was one of those parents - though certainly not among the worst at his children's games.

"I needed to be saved from myself," says Hannigan, a managing director in the Washington, D.C., office of Hill and Knowlton, the global public relations firm. So he began to look for "quasi-official" roles. At soccer, he became the guy who trots up and down the sideline with the flag, signaling which team gets the throw-in after and out-of-bounds. In basketball, he runs the game clock. In softball, he keeps the scorebook.

In roles that require fairness and integrity, Hannigan no longer shouts instructions or criticism. "It's made the whole experience more enjoyable and positive for me," he says, "and, I'm sure, for my kids too."

More than 20 million American children - nearly half of the total - play on organized teams. In contrast to the sandlot pickup games when we were children, adults now select rosters, set rules, supply uniforms, drive minivans, bring snacks, volunteer as coaches, and watch practices and games. And we holler at our children. Take a mild-mannered couch potato, put his child in a uniform and watch him morph into a Sideline Saddam. The roughly 10 million of us with children in sports have learned that humankind's strongest natural urges - to find food, shelter and a mate - pale compared with the urge to shout at our offspring from the sidelines.

We just want our children to do well, we protest. Playing sports is good for them, body and soul. Young athletes are more likely to do well academically and socially, it has been found, as well as find success in college and beyond. Moreover, we want our children to be winners. Winning is a reward for their effort, and it makes them happy.

Winning also makes us adults happy. The problem is that many of us care too much about it. "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing" is the only message we constantly hear from professional athletes, coaches and commentators - and we believe it. But that's not how our children think.

Over the past two decades, surveys of children consistently show that the No. 1 reason they play sports is to have fun. Also ranking high: getting exercise, learning a skill, being with friends. Winning is always far down the list. A USA Today survey found seven in 10 youths wouldn't care if no one kept score at their games. Four in 10 wished parents were not allowed at games.

A big problem is that many of us parents learned what we know about sports from watching professional games on television. We want and expect our children to use the same sort of strategy and tactics the pros do. See the whole field. Hit the open man. Give and go. Pick and roll. Run fast. Jump high. Get the ball now.

"We try to get our kids to act like miniature adults," says Bob Bigelow, a former NBA first-round draft choice who now coaches children and lectures parent groups. "But that's not what they are. They're just children.

"The games do not belong to you," Bigelow told a recent audience of parents, including many from the sports-mad suburbs of New York. As they began to squirm uncomfortably in their seats, he insisted that the purpose of youth athletics should not be to develop athletes: "The purpose should be to develop youth."

Diane Moyer, a bronze medallist in field hockey at the 1984 Summer Olympic games and now a clinical psychologist, says sports present a terrific parenting opportunity. "Sports can bring a parent and child together. Your goal, after all, is to have a closer relationship with your child."