

Weston AYSO Region 644



Welcome back to our AYSO Region 644 bi-weekly newsletter.

In this week's edition, Section 1 is designated as the AYSO Region 644 roundup which will highlight what has been going on in our region over the past two weeks and what is up-coming.

Section 2- Jeff Vennell from the NSCAA National Academy Staff gives quick training tips such as the preference of using targets as opposed to small goals, tips on shooting on net as well as the adequate length of practices for a particular age group.

In Sections 3-6 we have four articles outlining different aspects and activities related to the game of youth soccer. In the Keepers Corner we discuss breakaways and more directly how to defend on a breakaway. In Section 4 titled "Soccer Strategy" we discuss the role of the outside midfielder in a 4-4-2 formation. Section 5- Soccer Activities- we offer up a fun activity which incorporates combination play with finishing and goalkeeper activities. Section 6 is titled "Overcoming a Bad Day". This article gives coaches techniques on how to handle a player who is just plain having a bad day. It is as simple as the "Kiss" method- Keeping it simple.

Section 7 is our Soccer News Articles From Around the Country. The first article is from Hoya.com (Georgetown University) and is about the brother combination of Jim and Jeff Curtin. Jim plays professionally for the Chicago Fire, while Jeff is looking to enter the pro ranks after a stellar collegiate career at Georgetown University. The second article is from Canada.com "Former Soccer Great George Best off Ventilator according to Doctor". George Best, one of the best and most flamboyant players to ever lace them up has been ill for quite some time. Here is an update on the condition of the former Manchester United great. The final article from the Salt Lake City Tribune "Youth Sports: Chasm between youth sports, old-school tradition widening" discusses the disturbing phenomenon of sport specialization of our young athletes. Should our kids be specializing at such an early age? Read the article and you decide.

Section 8- Today's health and youth sports development article is from Rob Zaleski of the Capital Times in Madison Wisconsin. Mr. Zaleski's article "Are organized athletics taking away from kids childhoods?" delves into how healthy it is to enroll our children in organized sports at such and early age and then demand perfection from them. Gone are the days of first base being the light pole, second base being the manhole cover and third base being the door handle of the pinto. Are we better off for it?

I hope that you enjoy this edition of the AYSO 644 Newsletter. Everything we do here in AYSO is ever evolving. If you have any comments or suggestions, please do not hesitate to email to me at Strikersoccer1@aol.com.

The Mission of Laser Metals Inc:

*To meet our present and future customer's needs
for high quality steel delivered on time*



Laser Metals Inc.
1300 N.W. 65 Place
Ft .Lauderdale Fl. 33309
Office (954) 935-5565
(800) 783-9443 Fax (954) 935-5565
Email info@lasermetals.com

Laser Metals was founded in 1991 in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

The owners have extensive experience in servicing the Florida market since 1975.

Our commitment to our customers:

- * *prompt, personal support*
- * *immediate response time*
- * *quality products*
- * *customized service*

We specialize in:

- * *Galvanized*
- * *Galvannealed*
- * *Acrylume (galvalume plus)*
- * *Cold Rolled*
- * *Hot Rolled P&O*

Sheets	HD Galvanized	Acrylume	Galvannealed	Cold Rolled	Hot Rolled P+O
Gauges	12ga(.097) thru 32ga(.010)	24ga(.024) and 26ga(.019)	12ga(.097) thru 26ga(.019)	14ga(.070) thru 26ga(.035)	12ga(.095) thru 16ga(.056)
Width	36" thru 60"	36" thru 48"	48"	36" thru 48"	36" thru 48"

Lengths available in 96", 120", 144" or to customer requirements

Section 1- AYSO 644 Roundup

Welcome back to our first bi-weekly newsletter since the last week of July, 2005. Since we have had a suspension of league play due to the closing of the Weston Regional Park we will resume distribution of this newsletter instead of waiting until the end of the season.

Hurricane Wilma created a great deal of damage to our community including the Weston Regional Park . The damage has caused the Weston Regional Park to be closed indefinitely and therefore a suspension of our fall 2005 league with seven regular season games remaining. City of Weston personnel have indicated that it will take weeks to get the fields back into operation and, more than likely, the lights won't be operable for an even greater period of time. The board of directors met on Saturday October 29, 2005 to discuss the situation. We have decided that we will continue the season once the Regional Park reopens. In the meantime we realize that it is important to keep the kids involved and to offer the kids a distraction from the difficult times that our community is going through right now. To this end, we have decided to move our operations to the soccer fields which are adjacent to the West Broward Community Church on Griffin Road between Bonaventure Boulevard and Weston Road. We will continue the U-5 and U-6 divisions regular seasons beginning Saturday November 5, 2005. All U-5 teams will play their games beginning at 9am while all U-6 games will begin at 9:45am. We have released the revised game schedules to the division directors who should have emailed them to the coaches. We are also in the process of posting these revised schedules on our website at www.ayso644.org and your team homepage at sportslogictech.com. We will also have 3v3 games and clinics for those participants in the U-7 through U-19 divisions. These games will also be played at the church fields. Game times for each division each week are as follows: U-7 Boys- Saturdays 11am-11:45am, U-7 Girls- Saturdays 11:45am-12:30pm, U-8 Boys- Saturdays 1pm-1:45pm, U-8 Girls- Saturdays 1:45pm-2:30pm, U-10 Boys- Saturdays 3pm-3:45pm, U-10 Girls- Saturdays 3:45pm-4:30pm, U-12 Boys- Sundays 1pm-1:45pm, U-12 Girls- Sundays 1:45pm-2:30pm, U-14 Boys and U-19 Boys- Sundays 3:00pm-3:45pm and U-14 Girls and U-19 Girls- Sundays 3:45pm-4:30pm.

We have had to reschedule the tryouts for the 2006 AYSO Florida State Games. Tryouts will take place on Sunday November 13, 2005 and Sunday November 20, 2005. Tryouts for the boy teams will take place at Country Isles Elementary while the girls tryouts out will take place at the soccer field adjacent to Everglades Elementary on Bonaventure Boulevard. Tryout time for each of the days are as follows: U10 division 9am-11am, U12 division 11am-1pm. U14 division 1pm-3pm, U19 division 3pm-5pm. Each player has to have their parents fill out a tournament medical release form as well as bringing an updated wallet sized picture of the child to the tryouts. The 2006 AYSO Florida State Games will be played in Ocala, Florida on Martin Luther King Jr. weekend January 14-16, 2006.

Registrations for the spring 2006 season will take place in the next couple weeks and will be announced on our website www.ayso644.org as well as on sportslogictech.com. The league should begin in late March and run through the end of May 2006. We will ask you to request a preferred practice day which we will try to honor. Each player will have one practice with their coach and one with our trainers per week. Games will be played at the Weston Regional Park on Saturdays.

Our region is always in need of good volunteers. Experience is not necessary and we will train. Please consider giving back to the community either as a coach, referee, team parent or board member. Our kids need you.

Section 2-Quick Training Tips by Jeff Vennell, NSCAA National Academy Staff

Use of Targets versus Small Goals

Small number games to targets offer a more realistic representation of match conditions than do games attacking small goals (2-4 yards). This is particularly the case when the practice theme is small number tactics (e.g. 2v2). How often in your practices when using small goals do the defenders drop in front and stand in front of the small goal while the attackers play "catch" versus exhibiting the principles of attack and defending principles? Goals are few and repetitions of the tactical coaching points are often fewer. Try playing 2v2 with a target player at each end of the area (20x20yds) who can move just as a player in a match would move who serves as the target to whom the attackers are trying to penetrate towards as the other two players defend. Require a combination, e.g. a wall pass, before penetrating to the target player. If your groups of two are evenly matched, play "scorers keep" where if the penetration is successful those two players get the ball back and attack towards the target at the other end. In some exercises, a target line is sufficient (e.g. dribble or pass under control over a line). Match play requires realistic match conditions during practices. Try targets (players or lines). My guess is that you find as I have that using targets better simulates match conditions.

Shooting on Net

In the end, where a player contacts the ball will determine in what direction a shot will travel. One way to help keep a player's shot on target and not over the top of the goal is to watch the player who consistently hits the ball high to confirm why they are contacting the ball below its center (therefore causing the ball to sail high). One coaching tip is to be sure that the player's last longer stride into the ball does not serve as a braking action to their movement through the ball. Often a player who takes this longer stride slows down as the foot is planted which slows the body's momentum through the ball. Watch the player's speed into the shot and be sure they are maintaining their speed through the kicking action.

Practice Length

At our NSCAA non-residential courses, numerous youth level coaches ask the question "How long should my team's practice sessions last?" The NSCAA's staff recommends a coach conduct practice for the length of time equal to the time of their team's matches. And don't forget to start and, most importantly, end your practices on time. Plan before you arrive and adjust the practice plan as needed. Remember that players are at practice to play so end your youth practices with a small-sided soccer game.

Section 3- Keepers Corner

Today's issue edition will deal with the technique and decision-making involved in breakaways. Of all of the things I have written about, this is one of the most difficult to explain. In this case, a picture really is worth a thousand words (but since I can't include pictures, you'll have to settle for my 1000 words).

Now on to the issue of breakaways. The first thing to realize is that if you as a keeper are doing your job properly, you can avert most breakaway situations. If a player comes through unmarked, that is because you as a keeper did not do an adequate job of assigning marks (defensive positioning) and ensuring that there is proper coverage. However, assuming that you are in a breakaway situation, the first objective is to try to beat the attacking player to the ball. Assuming you can't do that, the next objective is to meet the oncoming player at the top of the 18. As the player is dribbling at you, you want to take advantage of some factors that you can always count upon. When players are dribbling on a breakaway, they do not dribble with the ball at their feet. Rather they push the ball out in front of them and run after it (some of you are going to say that some of their opponents are so good that they don't do this, trust me, I don't care what level you are referring to, this is the way people dribble on breakaways). As soon as the ball is pushed far in front of the oncoming player, this is when you can afford to steal ground by charging at them as quickly as possible. When the ball gets closer

to their feet, you have to slow down and prepare for the possible shot. As you get closer to the opponent, you will look for the opportunity to attack the ball. One of the ideas I teach is to have a very slight bend on your run as you approach the opponent. The idea here is to encourage the opponent to think he has one side open. When you do this, you are able to take the decision away from the attacker and you are now in control. You want to force the attacker to the near post because that will take away as much of the angle as possible. Remember that this must be a very slight curve or else you will be giving up a very easy goal. The next key is to attack immediately after the ball has left the opponent's foot on his last touch. The reason for this is if you attack when the ball is at the player's foot, he can very easily pull the ball back or cut it to the side. As soon as the ball is played away from his foot, you will take a step directly in the direction the ball is heading with your nearest foot (if you are forcing the player to your right, the last step will be with your right foot). Have your right hand in front of your right foot when you are taking this step and almost on the ground. You want to be very low when taking this step. Next, while forcing your body forward, extend into a dive that will allow as much of your body to be covering the goalmouth as possible. Get your hands on the ball and then pull it in and cover it up as quickly as possible. Once you have possession, it is then recommended that you make yourself as small as possible in order to protect yourself. If you have done properly, you will have had control of the situation from the very beginning by making the decision of when to meet the oncoming player, then you would have determined when they will shoot by attacking quickly and even where they will shoot by bending your run. With experience, breakaways become easier and easier. The one thing I really want to emphasize is that you must not go out on a breakaway feet first. This is the best way to get injured as well as to injure someone else. The other thing to remember is lead with your body and not with your head. That is the best way as a keeper to get injured.

To reemphasize the important points on breakaways, control timing, determine which side you want to defend, lead with your hand and inside foot, cover the goal with your body and be in control at all times. Realize that once you make a save, your job is not done until the ball is safely in your hands. Just blocking the ball and thinking your job is done is not enough. Stay with the play until it's truly over.

Section 4- Soccer Strategy

Today's topic deals with the defensive responsibilities of the outside midfielder in a 4-4-2.

Not only is the outside midfielder responsible for the man she is marking (most likely the outside on the opposing team) but she is also responsible for providing support across the back. This means that when the ball is on the opposite side of the field with the opposing team, you as the defending outside mid must come back and toward the middle of the field. You actually take on the role of a sweeper by giving support (both physical as well as verbal) from your deep position. By getting this far back and toward the middle you will also be able to see the player you are marking while being the sweeper as well. You won't have to worry about the player you are marking receiving the ball out wide with you in the middle because that would require a 60-70 yard switching ball which you will be able to close down very easily. The one negative to getting into the proper position and providing support is that you have to make a lot of long hard runs to get back that far and still be able to get into the attack, however, that is part of being an outside midfielder (and why I elected to be a keeper!).

Section 5-Soccer Activities

This is an interesting series of drills I saw this week and thought you might be interested in. It initially works on combination play, finishing and goalkeeping and ends in an interesting game.

Set up a field that goes from one sideline to the other and from the end line to the mid line. Make a goal using either cones or corner flags in the middle of the field. Have three X's one one side of the field and three O's on the other.

A keeper should be in the goal. He plays the ball out to the middle O1 who then plays a one touch pass to O2 and overlaps around O2. O2 plays a one touch ball to O3 and then O3 finds the overlapping O1 who can either shoot on goal or cross the ball to O2 and O3 who are making near post far post runs. If the keeper saves the ball, he turns and throws the ball to X1 who then starts the same routine on the opposite side of the field. If the shot is missed high or wide, then the X's have to work the ball to X1 to start this rotation.

After the O's have done this once, O1 rotates to O2, O2, rotates to O3 and O3 goes to O1.

In case of terrible shots or passes, there should be some spare balls on the sides to keep everyone moving.

Done properly, this can be a quite fast moving drill that works on passing, overlaps, crossing, finishing, and goalkeeping with some conditioning thrown in for fun. The two sides can also compete to see who can score more goals in a certain time period.

Section 6- Overcoming a Bad Day

Today's subject will address having a bad day.

I was involved in a training session this afternoon and one of our better players was having a terrible day. Most of his passes were a tad too early or a tad too late. Or, his pass was a yard too far in front of his intended target or a yard behind. The more he tried to do things, the worse he seemed to get. His problem wasn't lack of effort or lack of attempted focus. To be honest with you, I really don't know what his problem was but I did know how to help him.

In many cases when a player is having a bad day, the coach starts to yell at him in order to "make" him do better. Instead of doing this, I called the player to the side and simply asked him to try to simplify his game. Once he realized he wasn't going to be yelled at, he relaxed some and took my advice. The very next time he received the ball, he saw an opportunity to try to hit a long diagonal ball that might work but would require a perfect pass. Rather than doing this, he decided to hit a simple ball to an open player (who was able to make an early serve that resulted in a goal). As soon as this happened, the player who had been struggling realized that when all else fails, try something simple. The rest of the training session he looked simple first and played much better.

This is a great lesson to learn for any players. When you are having a rough time (whether it be in a game or training session) look to simplify things and work yourself back into a rhythm. This is true for an individual player or an entire team.

The neat thing about getting out of a slump by playing simple is not only will it help you regain your confidence but the truth of the matter is, sometimes simple is the truly the best way to play.

Section 7- Soccer News From Around the World

Two of a Kind

Soccer Bonds Brothers Jeff and Jimmy Curtin

By Brenna McGee

Hoya Staff Writer

Tuesday, November 1, 2005; Page B1

It's fitting that Jimmy and Jeff Curtin hail from Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. For this duo of defenders who do not know the meaning of sibling rivalry, it's as if they took the motto personally.

"Jeff's a very talented kid," says Jimmy, an all-star for Major League Soccer's Chicago Fire and the older brother.

"Jimmy's a mentor to me," counters Jeff (MSB '06), an all-American senior captain for the Hoyas and the little brother.

Where other brothers who share the same sport — and the same position — might feel the need to compete, the Curtins are nothing but encouraging to each other.

"We're very, very close," Jimmy says. "We definitely support each other. We grew up having a lot of battles in the backyard — beating each other up, playing soccer — that's for sure. But we're very close."

For Jeff and Jimmy, part of that closeness stems from the similar paths they have followed. Jimmy, the older brother by five years, played Big East soccer for Villanova, taking home Rookie of the Year honors as a starting center back in 1997. He was a two-time first team all-Big East selection his junior and senior seasons and then was selected by the Fire in the 2001 draft.

"I don't want to sound cocky, but he's had some tough things to live up to," Jimmy says of his collegiate accomplishments. "He's a competitive person just like I am, and I'm sure he sees any success that I have — I know he's happy for me — but he also sees it as a goal he would like to reach himself. And so far, he's done everything and then more."

Doing everything and more includes being named the Big East Rookie of the Year as a central defender in 2002, and then going on to be a three-time second-team selection. This preseason Jeff was tagged an all-American, and the Big East coaches selected him as the league's Defensive Player of the Year, two awards Jimmy never earned.

"I hate to admit it, but he's the better soccer player," Jimmy says. "He has more of the natural talent, and I'm kind of the rugged, more physical player. He has more talent, kind of more of a finesse game than I do. But I'd say he's definitely the better player."

Jeff disagrees.

"He's a proven player, an all-star in his league," he says. "You can't get much better than that. So I'd have to say [Jimmy's the better player] right now."

No matter which Curtin brother is better, both are clearly very talented. Jim has become a cornerstone of the Fire's defense, and Jeff has been the anchor of the Hoyas' defense this season.

In recent weeks Jeff has been sidelined with a nagging injury, and his playing time has been cut in an effort to get him back at full health for the playoffs. It is not the way Jeff envisioned his senior season, but his absence has only highlighted how important he is to his team.

"He's pretty much our most important part," senior midfielder and co-captain Brent Plumley says of Jeff. "All the other guys have been stepping up, but it is a noticeable spot that hasn't been filled by anybody else."

Junior defender Tim Convey — who has known Jeff since elementary school when Jeff played on the same club team as his brother Bobby — has been the player to whom the team has turned to fill in.

"With him on the field, it's obviously just another leader, and it's just great for our team because I think it lifts the other guys' spirits a lot when he's on the field," Convey says.

Georgetown Head Coach Keith Tabatznik also knows the key role Jeff plays for the Hoyas.

"Jeff makes everyone else better," he says. "With his organization, with his presence, there's a great deal of confidence you have when Jeff's in there."

Jeff's talent has not gone unnoticed, as he is preparing to leave Georgetown a semester early to join Major League Soccer in the spring. With advice from Tabatznik and his brother, Jeff is ready to make the jump from college to professional soccer.

Jimmy hopes he can make the move from the Big East to the MLS a little bit easier for Jeff than it was for him. Now an all-star and a leader on the Fire, Jimmy was one of only five players in the league to play every minute of the 2004 season and he is widely considered one of the top central backs in the game. Jimmy is eager to share his knowledge about the MLS with his little brother and — for the first time — play with him on the same field.

"I think it'll be beneficial when he does come to Major League Soccer because I can hand down some of my knowledge," Jimmy says. "He'll have a nice advantage that I didn't have when I cracked into the league."

Both brothers admit that the prospect of playing with — or against — one another is strange. Because they are five years apart, Jimmy and Jeff never got to play organized sports together while growing up, and their battles were always limited to the backyard. Now they will certainly see one another and the stage will be much grander.

"I've thought about it a lot," Jimmy says of playing on the same team as Jeff, "and it would be tough and draining everyday because I feel like I'd be watching out for two people — myself and him — all the time. ... But playing against him would just feel weird. I think if we ever ran into each other on the field in a pro game we would both just look at each other and laugh."

Jeff brought up a different scenario.

"If we ever got in a scuffle or anything, I wouldn't really know who to choose," he says. "Would I fight him or the fight the guy who is hitting him? It's a tough situation, but I guess we'll have to see how that works out."

When the MLS draft takes place in January, Jeff will wait and listen to learn his fate. A projected first-round draft pick, he will probably not have to wait very long. While Tabatznik hopes that Jeff will end up with his hometown D.C. United, Jimmy hopes that Jeff will join him in the Windy City.

"Someday, the possibility of us playing together on the same team would be a dream come true," Jimmy says. "Maybe we'll end up in the same city and that'd be pretty awesome."

Jeff insists that he has no preference for any team but admits that he would enjoy staying on the East Coast.

"I know a lot of people in the league," Jeff says, "and I wouldn't have a problem getting along with any team, but I'm kind of an East Coast guy and I'd love to stay on the East Coast."

But professional soccer can wait, at least a little longer. For now Jeff and the Hoyas are focused on the Big East tournament, which begins Thursday at Villanova. In the three years that Jeff has been on the Hilltop the Hoyas have never made it past the second round of the tournament. He hopes that will change this year.

"We haven't really gotten over that hump yet," Jeff says. "We're borderline, on the verge of being a very good team, but I think we are pushing toward that right now."

Again, the Curtin brothers find themselves on parallel paths. As Jeff prepares for the Wildcats, his brother is getting ready to take on the New England Revolution in the MLS conference championships. On Sunday afternoon Jimmy's Fire crushed the D.C. United 4-0 to advance, and with the defending champions behind them the Fire are looking for their chance to take home another title.

If all goes well, both Jeff and Jimmy will be playing on Nov. 13 — Jeff in Connecticut for the Big East title and Jimmy in Texas for the MLS Cup.

And whether they are playing or watching, one thing is clear: They will be cheering for each other.

Former soccer great George Best off ventilator according to doctor

October 31, 2005

LONDON (AP) - Former Manchester United star George Best was taken off a ventilator Sunday, breathing on his own as his condition improves.

The 59-year-old Best is trying to recover from a series of life-threatening infections that have spread to his kidneys and other organs. He has been in intensive care for a month.

"He's a little better and he's now off the ventilator, which is very good news," his physician, Dr. Roger Williams, told reporters outside the Cromwell Hospital in west London.

"He's recognizing people. He's better in that respect, but please don't run away with thinking he's fantastic because there's still a long way to go."

Best's condition deteriorated dramatically Wednesday before he was sedated and put on a ventilator.

Doctors said the spread of a chest infection and internal bleeding was probably related to drugs Best has taken since receiving a lifesaving liver transplant three years ago.

Best has been battling chronic alcoholism for decades and returned to hard drinking shortly after the transplant.

"He's a little better," his agent, Phil Hughes, said.

His agent even offered a joke. He said he hadn't told Best about Manchester United's 4-1 loss on Saturday against Middlesbrough.

"That will upset him," Hughes said.

Williams said he expected the former Northern Ireland star to remain in intensive care for several more days.

"It's the long haul when somebody has been as ill as this," Williams said. "After all he was very, very ill on Friday. He's still very ill but he's not so ill as he was on Friday. There's lots of improvement and there's an increasing degree of hope among the team that he will see through this terrible illness he's had."

One of the game's all-time greats, Best ended his career at 28 and turned to a celebrity lifestyle.

After 180 goals in 465 appearances for Manchester United, he walked away from daily training and playing for United and Northern Ireland to pursue business and show business interests, but his lifestyle led to more heavy drinking.

In March 2000, Best collapsed and found that he was effectively dying of liver failure. In 2002, he underwent a 10-hour liver transplant.

Youth Sports: Chasm between youth sports, old-school tradition widening

KIDS INC.: Solutions?

As a former coach and now executive director of the Utah High School Activities Association, Evan Excell has watched sports evolve from a pastime to a business.

Teenagers may be going retro and old school with their clothing and choice of music, but in Excell's eyes, sports will never again be something just for kids to enjoy.

"I don't see it calming down," he said. "We talk every day in this office how it has exploded and every parent seems to think theirs is 'the one.' "

More than anything, Excell is disturbed by the now commonplace trend of specialization.

"Students should have well-rounded activities and not specialize because the odds are, most aren't going to get scholarships, so enjoy it while you can," Excell said. "Kids need time to develop all their skills. Who is to say a 5-year-old who is specializing in soccer couldn't be a great artist? But he may never get the opportunities to explore those things."

Excell's concern comes out of a love for high school sports. Parents' concerns come out of love for their children, and wanting to do everything they can to support them, and out of the financial strain such supportive love brings.

Take the Jackson family, who have four children involved in sports. When the oldest, Jenessa, became interested in tennis, the family poured thousands of dollars into her hobby between buying equipment, lessons, traveling and tournament fees.

"We had so many people telling us we needed to get these lessons or go to this tournament because otherwise [college] coaches wouldn't see her," said Jenessa's mother, Jill Jackson. "It has turned into a business, and parents get caught up in it."

The Jacksons, in a sense, are still caught up in the whirlwind, but they are much more careful now. Another daughter, Jenacee, is a professional wakeboarder and another, Genteal, is a rising basketball player and golfer at Skyline High. The lone boy, sixth-grader Jaden, is one of the top young golfers in the state.

But instead of writing checks without asking and sending their children to every tournament like they did with Jenessa, the Jacksons are more selective.

"We say, 'Wait a minute, is it really that important to go to this one tournament?' Because you get there, and there might only be one or two college coaches there," Jill Jackson said. "The biggest thing is all about keeping it in perspective. It's about what the child wants and not what I want. I've been to games where parents freak out when their child makes a mistake when it should be about just having fun. You want your children to be successful and do what you can for them, but still be in a budget."

Many others share Excell's and Jill Jackson's concerns and are determined to change society's way of thinking about youth sports.

The National Institute of Sports Reform, founded by Bruce Svare in 2003, is a nonprofit organization intent on promoting safe and healthy sports activities. Svare, a professor of psychology at the State University of New York at Albany, believes young athletes are being exploited.

"It's going to take a massive education effort and an alternative way of thinking," Svare said of changing America's conscience. "We're trying to satisfy parents more than kids."

Svare is just one of many who is concerned about the direction sports are moving. Brooke deLench formed her own Web site, MomsTeam.com, which provides parents with information about youth sports.

Much like Svare, deLench's drive comes from her own experience as a mother of triplets who was concerned over the competitive atmosphere in her sons' games.

"I was devastated," she said. "I'd been an athlete in high school, but I had no idea how much sports

have changed. We're in deep trouble."

DeLench said her site receives six million hits a month.

"We're very busy here," deLench said. "Parents are concerned about how much playing time their children get, to how their children are not treated fairly and to how to talk to a coach."

Getting

Involved, and not just taking every bit of advice to heart is some of the advice Jill Jackson has for other parents.

"We've learned a lot by trial and error," Jackson said. "We've said, 'No,' to more things this year than we ever have."

As a coach and an administrator, Kim Norman, the CEO of the Intermountain Volleyball Association, said parents must become more aggressive in finding out who is coaching their children, particularly if a parent is using a private or club coach.

Coaches who aren't members of coaching associations or a national governing body such as USA Basketball or USA Volleyball should be considered suspect, and normally are the ones looking to make a buck rather than wanting to help the children, Norman said.

"We're trying to get rid of all the bad people by doing background checks and holding them to codes of ethics," Norman said of her organization and other national governing bodies. "We've taken some personal heat for holding the line on ethics, but we're concerned with how kids are being educated. It's exhausting the things I've dealt with in the last year that 10 years ago I never imagined I'd be dealing with."

So what is it about sports that attracts us, and why mess with them to begin with if they're such a business?

An innocent allure still exists, and many parents still see more positives than negatives when their children pull on a uniform.

"It helps keep them busy and sports teaches them discipline," explained Jill Jackson on why her family is so active. "It teaches them time management, and how to make decisions that will help them later in life. I figure, too, they're not going to the mall, doing drugs or getting into trouble. They're too busy."

For those who still insist their child can get a "free" education through sports or become the next Tiger Woods by pouring money into him or her, Bigelow has more blunt advice.

"When someone tells me their child is developing into a special player, I tell them they are just whistling Dixie," Bigelow said. "They need to put him in a library, instead of another soccer tournament."

Section 8- Youth Sports Health Issues

Are organized athletics taking away from kids' childhoods?

By Rob Zaleski
October 29, 2005

There were days this summer when Pat Richter would gaze out the window of his Maple Bluff home and - for a few heart-warming moments - swear he was back in the 1950s.

A group of kids in the 8- to 10-year-old range would gather in a small park just across the street and engage in pickup baseball games, much like Richter, the recently retired University of Wisconsin athletic director, did while growing up on Madison's east side a half-century ago.

"They actually took a hammer and nails and some old plywood they must have found and tried to make a dugout," Richter laughs. "And they put a pole out in left field, with a tennis ball on top, as a foul line. I was just amazed."

Still, Richter doesn't believe for a moment that it signifies a trend. On the contrary, he knows the days of sandlot pickup games are long gone and that most kids today - practically from the moment they shed their Pampers - are engaged in activities that are strictly monitored and controlled by their parents and other adults.

Richter, the UW's last nine-time letter winner, is among those who question if this is a good thing. He worries that instead of building the leaders of tomorrow, we're stifling kids' creativity and transforming them into obedient little robots.

And he wonders if perhaps we'd be better off "just letting kids be kids" and saving the organized games for middle school and later.

Told that Madison School & Community Recreation now has a soccer league for 3-year-olds - actually, it's been around for five years - Richter groaned.

"That's just crazy," he said.

But it's not just soccer that's starting them early. The Dane County YMCA has a 4-year-old T-ball league. And there are various hockey, basketball, softball, flag football and swimming programs in the Madison area where the competitors are 5 and 6.

Of course, this isn't exactly a new development.

Fueled in part by the belief that our parks and playgrounds are no longer safe for unsupervised play, organized youth sports programs have mushroomed in popularity over the last two decades, to the point where an estimated 20 million American kids now participate in some sort of organized athletic activity.

Parents and sports organizers say the exercise and camaraderie are great, but ask many academics, pediatricians, youth psychologists and ex-jocks like Richter, and they'll list concerns about what they see as the downsides of youngsters participating in organized sports: too much regimentation, not enough fun and, in some cases, far too great an emphasis on winning.

'It's all about the treat': It should be noted that none of those interviewed for this story opposed the idea of kids playing sports at a young age.

In fact, with the nation in the midst of an obesity epidemic, all felt it's essential that parents encourage kids to do some sort of physical activity on a regular basis. But, as several people pointed out, that can mean hiking, biking or even a simple game of one-on-one basketball in the driveway.

"Parents need to remember the movie 'Field of Dreams' and understand that sometimes kids just want to play catch with them," says Greg Landry, a professor of pediatrics and sports medicine at UW-Madison. "And this isn't just a father-son thing. It can be a father-daughter thing, a mother-son thing or whatever. The main thing is the activity itself - and that the kid's enjoying it."

Like Richter, Landry wishes we could somehow turn back the clock to the days of sandlot football and baseball, back when kids themselves set the agenda and "learned to negotiate on their own."

But many parents say that, much as they'd like to send their kids to the park or playground alone to join up with their peers, no responsible parent would do such a thing today. They see too many predators and other potential dangers lurking in the shadows.

"I suppose some people would argue that there were creeps out there 20 and 30 years ago, too, but that we're just more aware of the possibilities," says John Reddan, soccer director for the Madison 56ers soccer club. "But I do think the fears are justified."

So, not about to take chances, most parents insist that their kids stay put upon returning home from school. Or they sign them up for a soccer or basketball league, knowing full well that, if left on their own, they'll plop themselves in front of the TV, play video games, surf the Internet or engage in mindless chatter on their cell phones.

"If I asked my son (Mayank, 5) if he wanted to watch TV or play soccer, what do you think he'd choose? TV - every time," says Ram Dornala, a senior program analyst for American Family Insurance. "So to require him to play on a soccer team one day a week for one hour I do not think is a bad thing."

Still, even Dornala, who grew up in southern India and didn't participate in soccer until age 10, believes that 3 is probably too young for kids to be playing an organized sport.

So does soccer dad Bill Shager, although he quickly adds that "it all depends on what they're trying to accomplish."

Shager's son, Elliott, plays in the MSCR's 5-year-old league, and he says he's been pleasantly surprised at how laid-back the competition is.

"It's all about the treat at the end of the game - as it should be," says Shager, who is vice president of SARIS Cycling Group.

But Erika Treichel, who co-coaches the Blue Monsters in MSCR's soccer league for 3- and 4-year-olds, says she and her husband, Erich, have discovered there are benefits to having their son, Otto, participate in soccer at such a young age. Mostly, it's the opportunity to make new friends.

However, a few players have left the team after bad experiences, she notes.

With 3-year-olds, "we're always talking about cooperation and sharing, and I think to have a sort of competitive sport is too much for some of the kids. They just can't comprehend that yet," Treichel says.

"And if somebody takes a ball away from them - well, that just isn't any good."

The 56ers' Reddan says he certainly doesn't want to come across "as someone who thinks 3-year-olds need to go out and get personal trainers," but he says most youth soccer leagues in Madison are low-key affairs, with no standings and an emphasis on fundamentals and having a good time.

"So I'm not sure what the harm is," he says.

Neither is Chad Thom, soccer supervisor for MSCR, who seemed surprised that anyone would question the value of organized sports for young kids - especially with childhood obesity rates being what they are.

"If I saw harm in what we were doing, we wouldn't do it," he says. "I think some people take the worst-case scenarios and then figure that it applies to all children.

"I think each family has to decide if their 3-year-old is ready for this. And I agree that some aren't ready - physically, psychologically, whatever. So I tell parents if it doesn't work, I'll give you a refund and you can try it again next year."

What does a 3-year-old gain from organized competition?

"Friendship, exercise, being in a healthy environment," Thom says. "We're out there to educate kids on how to play the game. To me, it's almost like doing after-school day care."

Thom says he especially proud that about 25 percent of the 2,200 kids who participate in MSCR's soccer programs are minorities, many from low-income families.

"And hopefully some of these kids will stay in soccer and become involved in the larger soccer organizations," he says. "Basically, we're a feeder program for those organizations."

Burnout: Most critics of kids' early involvement in organized sports don't deny that there are benefits to the structured activities - such as a boost in a child's self-esteem and a chance to develop social skills. But they say many adults who run such programs don't even want to acknowledge there are also problems.

For instance, between 30 and 40 percent of kids drop out of organized sports each year, according to a study by Ron Smith, a child psychologist and professor at the University of Washington - with many citing the pressure to win as a major factor.

And nearly 80 percent of those who participate in organized sports before age 6 will drop out by the time they're 15, says Vern Seefeldt, former director of Michigan State's Institute for the Study of Youth Sports.

Studies have shown that the main reason 4- to 7-year-olds join a team is to be with friends. But too often, critics say, their parents have a different objective: to mold the kids into super athletes, in the hope that one day they'll win a college scholarship or perhaps even a six-figure pro contract.

Seefeldt, who has a master's degree and a Ph.D. in motor development from UW-Madison, says that for most young kids, the benefits of organized sports do outweigh the negatives.

But it's the top 20 percent - the elite athletes who play on "travel teams" as early as the fourth and fifth grade - that he worries about. Those kids, he maintains, often pay a stiff emotional price "because the intensity of the competition has increased and the involvement of parents and coaches also has intensified."

In too many cases, he says, "parents get involved vicariously and the emphasis becomes winning and then, very quickly, overexposure. And I think the high dropout rates we see are products of that."

But there are other problems as well, Seefeldt says.

Chief among those, he says, is that only about 10 percent of the adults who coach children's sports are qualified to do so. The solution? Seefeldt favors mandatory certification of coaches throughout the country.

But that's not about to happen any time soon, he says, because nobody at the national level is willing to fund such a program.

Even more troubling, critics say, is the big increase in overuse injuries among young teens - a situation pediatricians say is directly linked to specialization.

Instead of playing football in the fall, basketball in the winter and baseball in the spring - as kids did years ago - some youngsters are being pressured to play one sport year-round. As a result, they're using the same muscles and other body parts over and over, which is causing a wide range of injuries, including stress fractures, back problems, cracked kneecaps, frayed heel tendons and tendinitis in the elbows, ankles and knees.

In simple terms, kids are being pushed too hard.

"Their bodies just can't take it," says the UW's Landry.

The problem is so serious that the National Athletic Trainers' Association and the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons are waging a public service campaign to alert coaches and parents about the potential for such injuries. "What will they have longer, their trophies or their injuries?" one campaign poster asks pointedly.

Absolute bunk: Seefeldt says there's no question that a fear of predators - reasonable or not - and visions of future stardom are two of the biggest reasons parents have taken a more active role in their kids' extracurricular activities. Another factor, he says, is the abdication of financially strapped recreation departments to special interest groups.

"Many times the rec departments are all too eager to let these individuals take over the programs, foot the costs and so forth," he says. "That's also led to the greater involvement of parents in children's sports."

Whatever is fueling it, Seefeldt rejects the notion that kids who don't engage in organized sports at an early age risk falling behind their peers.

So does Landry, who calls the theory absolute bunk.

"Show me the evidence," he says. "There's no evidence that early involvement in a particular sport will lead to excellence.

"And think about Michael Jordan, to cite just one example. He didn't play a lot of basketball until relatively late in life."

Even Chris McGill, sports director for the West YMCA, thinks it's largely a myth and notes that "kids develop differently at different levels."

Although he believes that organized sports "when done in moderation" are a wonderful thing for young kids, McGill does worry about the long-term effects of specialization.

"I think ultimately those kids lose out because they don't get a chance to experience the other sports," he says.
"And those are usually the cases where you see a kid getting burned out and turned off to a sport."