

Youth Sports Culture

Youth sports have long been touted as a valuable experience for young people, promoting physical activity, socialization and teamwork. However, as the culture of youth sports has evolved, concerns have arisen about the unforeseen impacts on young athletes.

Injuries

by Isabella Kunc
staff reporter

According to the President's Council on Sports, Fitness & Nutrition Science Board, 73% of parents believe that youth sports benefit their child's mental health, and 88% of parents believe they benefit their child's physical health. Most research supports these claims. There are numerous studies that prove that participating in organized sports can improve mental health, physical health and school performance. But, like any other activity, taking the training and competitive nature of youth sports to an extreme can have devastating consequences on children.

When parents, coaches and other adults push student athletes to train too intensely, play with injuries and to win at whatever cost, it can lead to increased mental health problems, such as overwhelming stress and long-term physical health problems.

With excessive playing, students can start to break down or over exert themselves. While the wrestling team at Mounds View puts a limit on practice, Dan Engebretson, the Mounds View wrestling coach, notes that this is not true for all teams. "There's teams that'll lift two hours in the morning. They'll have a three hour practice. And then over the holidays, they'll have three or four hour practices. There are sports [at Mounds View] that do that," he said. Long practices may increase fatigue in athletes, which increases the risk of injury, and may also cause athletes to get burned out mentally.

The worst thing an injured athlete can do is continue playing because that can lead to worse injuries and longer-lasting consequences. "My first two concussions, I decided to keep playing and it made them worse, which made me have to stop playing for a longer period of time," said senior soccer player Ashley Arnold.

Although injuries can be scary, there are many stretches and warmups student athletes do to keep their bodies elastic and ready to go. "We do a pretty good job of [keeping safe] because we're always training our bodies, so we don't get a whole lot of injuries," said Engebretson. According to a study by the National Library of Medicine, warmup programs can decrease the risk of injury in child and adolescents sports by about 36%.

Sometimes injuries can occur from playing too much,

even if a player is taking all the necessary precautions. Senior Jessica Eischens, who plays soccer and basketball, explains the fear that comes with being severely injured. "Right when I fell, I knew that it was going to be something really bad. And I was crying on the ground. I couldn't get up. It was very terrifying," said Eischens, who tore her ACL last year on the basketball court.

The process of recovery after receiving such injuries can be long and tiring, and athletes often need lots of support from different people. Sometimes students will be working towards the goal of health, yet not seeing results, which can be discouraging. "The physical therapy and rehab process was horrible, it was long and hard," said Eischens.

Having family, friends, teammates and coaches around while recovering can help encourage injured athletes. "My [basketball] teammates brought me a bunch of goodies and stuff right after my surgery and so did my soccer teammates and all my coaches were very supportive. I felt a lot of support," said Eischens.

Yet, even with all its negative consequences and hardships, injuries can re-motivate athletes by providing a possibly much needed break. It can also help athletes take a step back and reevaluate their relationships with their sports. "Soccer isn't the only part of my identity, and I just kind of had to figure out who I am without soccer," said Arnold.

In the end, the way any athlete deals with an injury and



their journey to recovery is unique to their situation and cannot be compared to others. Sometimes, injuries can cause students to lose interest and give up, and other times, injuries can teach them important lessons. Still, injuries are best avoided, and, when they do occur, it is important to deal with them correctly.

Eating disorders & disordered eating

by Isabella Kunc
staff reporter

Eating disorders in athletes are most common in aesthetic, endurance and weight category sports. According to the National Library of Medicine (NLM), athletes in long-distance running, boxing, wrestling and gymnastics are more likely to develop eating disorders due to weight-limiting categories and the promotion of "aesthetic" body compositions.

Even though the dangerous impacts of eating disorders have become more recognized in recent years, a significant portion of athletes continue to struggle with disordered eating habits. In 2018, a study published in the Journal of Clinical Sports Psychology found that up to 45% of female athletes and 19% of male athletes struggle with eating disorders.

According to the NLM, athletes can also develop eating disorders due to pressures around food or body image, intense competitiveness, early specialization, increases in training or the revealing nature of sports clothing. A female student at Mounds View, who wished to remain anonymous, developed an eating disorder last year through dance, a sport that sometimes promotes slender body types. "There was definitely a certain body type people fit into and, of course I was like, 'Okay, I have to conform with that,'" she said. "I knew [some-

thing was wrong] when I first started trying to throw up."

Eating disorders can have devastating consequences on students. According to the NCAA, eating disorders can lead to depression and anxiety. "I definitely could feel myself zoning out more and more. I just went through the day and there are some times when I didn't remember a day. It was just a stream of blankness," said the student.

Although the stigma around eating disorders has improved recently, with more people trying to help and more resources, it can still be difficult to seek help. "[I thought], 'What are they going to think about me?'" said the student, who never told their friends what she was going through.

Looking back, the student feels a mix of shame, but she is grateful she got help from her parents and others encouraging her to develop healthy eating habits. Although she has definitely gotten better, she sometimes still finds it hard to let go of old feelings. "I will still find myself watching myself. If my parents give me a doughnut or something, I'll only eat half of it," she said.

Lack of food can also destroy physical health for athletes and result in trouble standing for long periods of time, weaker bodies and more injuries. "You could lose focus if you haven't eaten," said Dan Engebretson, Mounds View's head wrestling coach. "Your body gets you — in your match, you get tired

faster, then you could possibly get hurt if you're tired."

However, there are healthy ways to manage one's weight. Those familiar with wrestling may assume that wrestlers must starve themselves to maintain their spot in a weight class. While it is true that some wrestlers use extreme methods to lose weight, such as severe calorie restriction, dehydration and excessive exercise, most wrestling coaches work to prevent disordered eating by promoting healthy methods of weight loss. If a Mounds View wrestler wants to lose weight, Engebretson stresses doing so in a healthy manner. [If someone says] 'Coach, I want to go down,' then we come up with a plan where you don't skip any meals. He'll text me like 'I weighed this,' and then I'll say 'Okay, you can do this, this and this.' So our goal is that you stay hydrated all week and you eat all three meals every single day," said Engebretson.

Eating disorders are a real issue that can affect all aspects of an athlete's life and have devastating and life-changing consequences. However, there are many things that coaches and parents can do to prevent eating disorders in student athletes. According to advice from the National Eating Disorder Association, by encouraging healthy attitudes about different body sizes and promoting healthy eating habits, coaches can help athletes develop positive relationships with food and their bodies.

Not a level playing field

by Maya Gjelhaug
editorials, good question and spread editor

The idea of meritocracy is familiar to most Americans, and this “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” mentality transfers over into the realm of youth sports. Parents, coaches and young athletes continue to believe that the only thing that determines the success of an athlete is their talent and work ethic, yet this belief fails to acknowledge a multitude of factors that come into play when determining the athletic future of a child.

Politics, or biased team selection, are an oft-referenced form of inequality in youth athletics. When athletes already have a connection to the coach of a team,

Senior Sam Gillis explains the harmful impact of politics in high school athletics, criticizing the evermore political nature of youth sports. “Someone with incredible talent or even someone who has worked hard each and every day [is] not seen for who they are because they don’t have the previous connections others have,” she said. “It doesn’t mean that the players with connections aren’t deserving of their spot, rather it’s just the idea that they might not be judged on the same level as others.”

Unnecessary politics in youth sports could partially explain why, according to the National Alliance for Youth Sports, 70% of young athletes quit sports by age 13. “A sport that I have always loved and found a lot of joy in suddenly turned into politics and working to achieve the connections that will propel you forward,” said Gillis. “I know that this idea has definitely decreased my passion for my sport, [especially] for high school sports.”

Coaches have a different perspective on favoritism in high school sports. “My job, as the coach, is to do what is best for the team and not for individual players,” said Scott Sundstrom, tennis coach. “There will always be a level of subjectivity when making decisions, but when coaches are transparent about their process I think it alleviates most accusations of favoritism.”

In addition to politics, wealth can play a significant impact on a child’s athletic development. Household income plays a huge role in determining the outcome of a young athlete, and a very apparent wealth gap has formed in youth sports

over the past few years. In 2017, only 34% of children from families earning less than \$25,000 played a sport compared to 69% of children whose family income was greater than \$100,000.

Just participating in sports can require a hefty investment. Parents of young athletes can expect to spend over \$1,000 in club fees, especially at higher levels. For example, playing soccer for local North Oaks Blast soccer club can cost up to \$2,500 per year.

In addition to club fees, equipment costs and uniforms expenses can add up, and some sports require a greater financial investment than others. “A decent set of race skis brand new would be \$800 for classic and skate skis, \$200 for poles and a couple hundred for clothes,” said junior Will Kelley. This financial burden can lead to inequality in access to sports, as families who cannot afford to pay for their child’s sports may have to forgo the opportunity entirely.

Furthermore, children from more affluent families will inevitably have access to more opportunities for advancement, such as cutting-edge equipment and private trainers. This can lead to a talent gap, where those who can afford to invest in their child’s sports careers are more likely to see success.

While there is certainly a level of inequality in youth sports, many youth sport organizations offer scholarships for disadvantaged children, and some coaches are truly passionate about preventing favoritism in sports. Still, coaches and parents can work on becoming aware of their own biases and work to ensure fairness and equality for all athletes.



whether that is because the coach knew them from a club team or knows their parents, they can gain an advantage over other athletes.

Professionalization of youth sports

conducted by the Aspen Institute, 62% of parents believed that their child had the potential to become a professional athlete.

Students at Mounds View also share similar views on parent’s involvement. “Parents sometimes feel as though it is their job to step in right away when there is any inconvenience or problem that could threaten their child’s athletic career,” said senior Sam Gillis. Many parents see their child’s involvement in sports as a reflection of their own success as a parent. As a result, they may push their child to succeed at all costs, often ignoring the child’s own wishes and needs.

Some parents believe that the only way to ensure that their child is athletically competitive is to have them specialize in a sport early on. However, this approach often has many unforeseen consequences. According to a study published in the National Library of Medicine, specialization has been associated with an increased risk of stress and burnout in athletes.

Additionally, athletes who specialize in one sport are at a greater risk of injury. For example, if a student continues to play baseball all year long, they are at risk of overexerting their shoulder and risk permanent damage. However, if that same student plays baseball for one season, and then tries another sport that does not involve as much throwing, they can give their shoulder a break while meeting new people and growing new skills.

Sports are supposed to introduce children to important values, such as discipline, hard work and sportsmanship, and some coaches and teams really work to focus on promoting teamwork and comradery. “I believe there are very healthy levels of competition here at MV,” said Tim Chang. “It’s just a group of people who really like to play the sport and like winning.”

However, some still believe that these values get overshadowed by the increasingly cut-throat nature of youth sports. Some argue that even if athletes perform well, the majority will get drowned out by the kids who specialized earlier. “I was kept lower in the roster even though I was putting out consistent times that showed my advancement,” said junior Will Kelley.

Schools are also feeding into the early specialization culture. Recently, Vadnais Heights charter school Gentry Academy won the Class 2A girl’s hockey state championship, knocking out Andover 4-1.

Upset parents and coaches have been refusing to schedule games against Gentry Academy due to the controversial training methods the school allows. Instead of requiring a traditional physical education course, Gentry Academy students are allowed to play hockey for one hour a day at a nearby facility. This arguably offers Gentry players a significant advantage over their opponents.

In addition to the Gentry controversy, there has been contention over a dramatic increase in high school basketball transfers, a trend never seen before. According to the Star Tribune, at least 50 boy basketball players played for new teams this season after scoring in double figures last season. Minneapolis South High School is just one school that has lost most of its top-scorers to private or suburban high schools. This seems to be imitating the temporary feel of commitments in professional and even collegiate sports. Even though the MSHSL has extensive rules about transferring, and all transfers are technically ineligible to play until sitting out for a year, there are exceptions. For example, if a family claims residence in another area, athletes can bypass the year-long ineligibility requirement. While transferring can give promising athletes access to a better quality education, this transferring crisis is taking talented athletes away from disadvantaged communities and potentially displacing athletes at the suburban and private schools that basketball players are transferring to.

Ultimately, the professionalization of youth sports is a complex issue that requires careful consideration. While it may lead to the development of elite athletes and high-quality coaching, it can also place undue pressure on young athletes and perpetuate existing inequalities. By fostering a culture that values sportsmanship, personal growth and inclusivity, youth sports can continue to provide a positive and enriching experience for children across the country.

photos by Laurin Isabel



by Nikhil Kulangaroth
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In recent years, youth sports have become increasingly competitive, with a focus on winning and a high level of intensity that was once reserved for professional athletics.

As college admissions become more competitive, and as the cost of higher education continues to rise, many families see sports as a way to secure a scholarship that will help cover the cost of tuition for their child’s education.

Parents want the best for their children, and many see athletics as a method of securing their child’s future. Some parents decide to specialize their young athletes early in hopes of them receiving a college scholarship, and despite the fact that, according to NCAA, less than 2% percent of high school athletes go on to play for a D1 school, many parents believe that their child will be a part of the lucky few if they work hard enough. In fact, according to a survey