

# Beyond Winning

SMART PARENTING IN A TOXIC  
SPORTS ENVIRONMENT

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To all parents who remember the joy of  
unhurried, creative play and wish to give this most  
precious of all gifts to their own children.  
Many blessings on your parenting path.

KJP

For Mary, my guiding light, and for our fabulous five:  
Chai, Isabel, Will, Gabriel and Inigo, who have taught  
me everything I know and don't know about  
parenting and coaching.

LFL

To Xiomara for her love and dedication and making  
every moment of our journey coaching and raising our  
children together precious and special.  
And to my son Justin, who has taught me the most  
important reasons behind participation and sports.

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# Introduction

A child's life unfolds in its own unique, subjective order. Our role as parents is to nurture our children and guide them as they grow into strong, healthy, independent individuals. How then can we shield our children from today's intoxicating youth sports culture, which sweeps us all into its swirling vortex and subjects our kids to too much, too soon? Caught up in a cultural frenzy, we clutter our children's daily lives with too many sporting activities and, though often unwittingly, pressure our "child-athletes" to perform. As a result they grow up too quickly, and often the foundations of our family lives are fractured.

At Whole Child Sports we want to slow things down a bit and give kids the time they need to develop wholesomely. They will thrive and can reach their full potential as athletes and adults if they are taught in developmentally appropriate stages. Ours is a holistic approach to teaching sports to children. To begin with, we, as parents, can train ourselves to change the way we think as a first step toward providing a healthier sports experience for them. If we can abandon our fantasies of vicarious stardom, if we can take a few steps back and give our kids

some space to grow and learn, and if we can temper our expectations and become more mindful, the fog will lift. Then, with clarity, we can create a fun-filled, relatively pressure-free environment in which our children can flourish.

In this book we offer an alternative approach to teaching sports to kids that de-emphasizes short-term goals like winning games and youth championships and discourages the early introduction of adult-oriented, league-structured competition. We recommend that parents learn more about their own sports biographies so that they can temper their influence over their child's sports experiences, which, in the younger years, should include a healthy diet of free play and loosely structured skill-building activities. This approach includes training techniques and coaching strategies aimed at developing core strength, balance, and creativity in aspiring athletes, and it educates parents and coaches alike about our four stages of age-appropriate, healthy play.

What is abundantly clear is that we, as parents, need to take action. That's why Scott Lancaster, Kim John Payne, and I have formed Whole Child Sports. We come from disparate professional and personal backgrounds but are united in our growing alarm at the toxic nature of today's youth sports culture. Increased television coverage, big money sponsorship, and the predominance of a win-at-all-costs mentality, promoted by misguided coaches and overbearing parents, have all contributed to the poisoning of childhood sports experiences, which should be fun, skill building, and stress-free.

Let's take a closer look at today's toxic youth sports mindset. Why do even the most conscientious parents and educators devolve into did-you-win drones when talking to kids about their experiences on the field? Instead of "Was it fun?" it's always, "Did you win?" "What was the score?" "Well, at

least it was close, right?” We’ve all engaged in this conversation or overheard it countless times. And the message to our kids is crystal clear: Winning is the ultimate goal, the answer to everything, the holy grail of athletic pursuit.

When such cultural attitudes are pervasive, sportsmanship, fair play, and, most important, learning—which should be paramount for kids playing sports up to the age of eighteen—are sacrificed at the altar of victory. Parents focus on winning. They make financial and family-time decisions in service to victory. Coaches make team decisions, from participation to player playing time to training priorities, in deference to winning.

As ESPN’s Tom Farrey points out in *Game On: How the Pressure to Win at All Costs Endangers Youth Sports and What Parents Can Do About It*, his eye-opening account of the youth sports landscape, the obsession with early success in a win-at-all-costs culture has created a pressure chamber in which top prospects, even at the age of five or six, are funneled into elite programs while the majority of kids—the “weak ones”—are robbed of the opportunity to discover and develop their talents.

Where’s the fun and athletic development? And what about the steep human cost? In this ultracompetitive culture, the darkest demons of the sports world run rampant. Cheating, physical and emotional abuse, bullying, and violence become endemic. The result is a youth sports landscape pockmarked with children who end up—at age eleven or twelve—with fractured egos, low self-esteem, and, in some cases, severe physical injuries. It’s why millions of American kids quit organized sports just as they become teenagers. And why thousands of parents we’ve spoken to are so anxious and concerned.

The tens of thousands of volunteers who dedicate much, if not all, of their weekends (and many weeknights) to organize,

coach, and support youth sports programs do so with the best of intentions. We all want what's best for our children. But what many of us parents and coaches are unaware of is that there are more dynamic and holistic ways for our children to learn, play, and compete than that old-school approach we were exposed to as kids.

Epictetus once said, "It is impossible for a man to learn what he thinks he already knows." These insightful words help explain why youth sports has evolved so little or—to be candid—devolved so much in the United States over the past twenty-five years. Think about it. What has changed since we were kids? We grew up participating in a system that mimics professional and elite-level sports. It's a setup defined by scheduled practices, league play, and, at its pinnacle, elite travel team competition. The people who run organized sports—let's call them traditionalists—promote the status quo. It's what they know, are comfortable with, and can control.

Late Hall of Fame NFL football coach Bill Walsh argued, "A good coach never stops learning and always keeps an open mind." As parents and coaches we should all take heed. It's time we think about changing the traditional framework of youth sports. We know change doesn't come easily, especially when it threatens a long-standing culture that has established and validated the identities of thousands of individuals—coaches, league administrators, commissioners—within their communities. But our youth sports system is deeply flawed. The kids have made it clear: More than 70 percent quit organized sports by the age of thirteen. It's time to redefine the paradigm.

Our own personal youth sports stories follow, which we've included to give you a clear sense of each of our backgrounds and our collective experience in this field.

## Luis Fernando Llosa

As a former investigative reporter at *Sports Illustrated* and a father of five, I have observed the full gamut of sports experiences at all levels, from elite to peewee. While reporting on age fraud and steroid abuse, I was exposed to the dark underbelly of sports. I wrote about pro athletes who pumped themselves with toxic fluids to play better, train harder, and secure bigger multimillion-dollar contracts, and impressionable children who—driven by pushy parents—imitated their athletic idols, taking performance-enhancing drugs themselves.

One parent I reported on falsified his son's age so that the teenager could dazzle millions with his pitching prowess in the 2001 Little League World Series. Another forced his child to take human growth hormone and testosterone, starting at the age of thirteen, in order to transform him into a world-class inline skater. The first dad was disgraced, the second imprisoned. But what pains and motivates me most is a much more common occurrence. It's what I see again and again when I coach my kids or just goof around with them on a golf course: parents who publicly berate their kids. They put them down for not scoring a goal or not making an aggressive enough tackle. One evening I came upon a child on a putting green, just shy of two years old. As I looked on, his father, unprompted, informed me that his son was a terrible putter, that he couldn't play at all. What I saw was an innocent child who could barely grasp a club, let alone line up a putt. What I foresaw was a life of pressure, guilt, and disappointment, and the stifling of unlimited potential.

It's disturbing to think what outsize expectations can do to hope. Another time, a child came up to me on the first day



of team practice and asked excitedly if she could be our goalie. Before I could respond, her father blurted out, “Don’t let her play in goal. She has terrible hands.” The ten-year-old looked shell-shocked and turned beet red. I put her in goal that very day. Admittedly, she was shaky between the pipes, but by the end of the season she had developed into a confident keeper.

## **Scott Lancaster**

What troubles me most about today’s youth sports culture is that children are not the primary focus. The fields and courts are overrun by self-absorbed coaches who live out fantasies of power and control at the expense of the kids they “coach.” The “adults” get too caught up in the hype of winning games and championships, when they should concentrate solely on training kids to master the fundamentals of the sports they play. Every one of the hundreds of NCAA Division I college football and basketball coaches I’ve interviewed decries the stark decline in skill development in youth sports. The players they coach at the elite college level too often arrive on campus unable to properly execute fundamental skills such as tackling, blocking, rebounding, or pivoting. College coaches are forced to painstakingly “reteach” the fundamentals.

It would help if children in youth sports programs were not treated like adults. They are taught adult versions of sports, with rules created for adults on full-size fields. Skill development should be the aim, not competition. When I worked as director of youth development at the National Football League (NFL), we launched the Junior Player Development (JPD) program. We broke practices down into ten-minute rotating instructional drill segments that taught specific fundamental

skills. We played flag football and seven-on-seven games instead of full-squad scrimmages, because they are much more effective in developing and honing game-sequence skills. Most important, we tailored practices and drills to specific age groups. The kids loved the intensity and diversity of the drill stations and developed into well-rounded athletes. They did not complain about wanting to play on teams in “leagues.” Several JPD program initiates eventually made it to the NFL.

But shortsighted parents fretted that what their kids were learning was not “real football.” They clamored for helmets, pads, tackling, and full-squad games. Since their kids weren’t replicating what they saw the pros do on television, they figured they were not learning *the right stuff*. Can we change our attitudes and expectations as parents? Can we focus on finding the best ways to help our children learn? The endgame of youth sports is not to entertain adults, but to develop children’s athletic skills while fanning their budding passion for the sports they are learning to play.

Change does not come easily. When I coached my nine-year-old son’s local football team, I sought to make minor rule changes to minimize the risk of injuries during kickoffs, punts, and returns. Yet a group of coaches adamantly opposed the modifications. They couldn’t bear to see “the game” adulterated. When I insisted, I was stonewalled and, ultimately, drummed out of the league. Together, we, the parents, can revolutionize youth sports. That’s what the Whole Child Sports approach is about. Our aim is not to fill trophy cases but to work on the long-term development of young athletes. Parent by parent, coach by coach, we can work to change this misguided sports culture from the inside out.

**Kim John Payne**

The shift in parents questioning the too much, too soon, too hard, too young culture has been remarkable. I have been a kind of parenting troubadour, traveling the world giving countless lectures, classes, and workshops on this theme, and I have seen the question of pushing kids too early move from the fringes right into the center of what parents are thinking about.

Something is wrong, very wrong, with what we are being told is “normal” for our kids, and a large number of parents are looking for a way to articulate what is for most a gut instinct. Parents are also looking for a sensible alternative that does not force them to turn their lifestyles upside down, a shift that can flow into their families but nevertheless set a new and much healthier trajectory for their children. After making a change in his family life away from the sensory overwhelm that has become the new normal toward a more considered approach, one parent said recently, “I feel like I am standing on my own ground now. Before, I was feeling pushed around by a bunch of expectations. Everything has gotten easier.” On the other hand, the parents of an elite downhill skiing daughter told me after a workshop that “the whole thing is tearing our family apart. It’s completely out of control, and we need to do something about it.”

When I worked as a volunteer with children in war zones and refugee camps, I came to recognize the look of overwhelm and trauma. I see this same look in the eyes of so many children in North America. While our children are not experiencing the physical privations that come from living in a war zone, of course, they are, nonetheless, in the midst of an undeclared war on childhood, and heading up the list of the potential

aggressors is a sporting experience that is pushing them way too hard when they are way too young.

I rose through the junior sports ranks in my birth country of Australia to an elite national youth level, both in swimming and soccer. Competitive swimming can be fairly described as a national obsession in Australia. How else does this country with a tiny population regularly rank in the top three Olympic medal winners in the world? I personally experienced glimmers of the best that sport can give, and for that I'm grateful, but I was also exposed to the deep darkness of the worst in the harsh overtraining and manipulation of children. Like many other former elite youth athletes, I now live with significant physical injuries caused by the unrelenting grind of training to be the best.

There is something utterly wonderful about play, games, and sport. I have been a high school basketball coach since the 1980s and have shared in amazing results, both in terms of outcomes on the court and the growth of emotional health and social intelligence that are possible when sport is approached in a way that puts the child's development first.

Parents all around the world are looking for ways to navigate child and youth sports. The time for raising Whole Children through sports has arrived, and its potential is vast.



# Navigating This Book

As parents ourselves, we understand that it's virtually impossible to find the time to sit down and read a book from cover to cover, so we've tried to do three things: (1) lay out eight self-contained chapters that explore major sports parenting topics and can be read separately; (2) turn within each chapter to the questions we've heard most often from parents over the years and formulate discussions that examine the various issues and concerns we all have; and (3) then move on to develop practical solutions. That's what makes this book different—the focus on solutions. That's what parents have asked us to provide.

When you look through these chapters, trust your instinct. Go right to where your gut takes you. That's a great place to begin, and perhaps that's where your most urgent sports parenting questions lie. Chances are you will discover something that we really value here at Whole Child Sports: *the small doable change*. Even a tiny change in trajectory, a small initial shift in a direction that feels natural, sets your child's sports life on a new course that will expand as the seasons roll on and she engages in a healthier, more dynamic experience.



# Parenting a Whole Child through Sports

We've all had fun playing sports and watching our children play. We know the positives. But we can't ignore the dark side: the pressure, the bullying, the elitism, the lack of playfulness, and the stifling of creativity. Whole Child Sports speaks directly to the many parents who feel that though today's youth sports culture is toxic, it can be transformed into a better learning and living environment for our children. We are all in this together, and to change how our children experience sports, we must work together.

There are dozens of books that decry the toxic atmosphere of youth sports today and offer good general advice to parents. But most of them take a performance-oriented view. While sports psychologists and coaching experts rightly suggest that parents step back and concentrate more on fun, the underlying dynamic always seems to cycle back to performance. They don't zero in on the heart of the problem—that our culture is steeped in a mind-set that imprisons us and our children in incessant judgment. We are very goal oriented, and that's fine, but our aim should not be to develop performance princes and divas, but rather to provide our children with opportunities



to become more well-rounded, supple, adaptive, and creative. That is what will serve them best in the broader context of their lives, both now and in the future.

We are living in a world in which the first question we ask our children after any game they play is, “Did you win?” and we’re suggesting a somewhat radical shift that can best be summed up by “How did it go?” Because the first question—which is usually followed up by “Did you score?” or “How many points did you make?”—frames their experience too narrowly. It spotlights the short-term outcome. If they have won, they have a positive answer to give you. If they played well and were key contributors, then they’ve shown you that they are worthy of your affection and approval. But if they lost or didn’t contribute much, the conversation—and your connection with them—hits a brick wall.

Why not frame your query more openly, by asking them to share their experiences rather than report performance statistics? In doing that, you redefine both your child’s experience in sports and what you value as most important. It opens up a window through which your children can connect with you and discuss the many facets of their encounters on the field or court with teammates and opponents, as well as off it, in the locker room or on the bus.

This might seem like a minor concern, but it is really a central issue and at the heart of the Whole Child Sports approach. When the question is “Did you win?” it’s a mismatch. We are disconnecting ourselves from their deeper reality. We are closing a door. We risk showing them we just don’t get it: We really don’t understand what’s going on for them, and in them, and why they spend their time and efforts participating in the first place. Because, as we’ll point out in this book, most kids play

sports for fun and friendship. It's personal. They also want to stretch and challenge themselves. They enjoy learning and getting better. It gives them a broader sense of self; it develops their self-esteem and self-definition.

To be clear, we are not antiwinning. What we want is to redefine winning. So let's put the scoreboard in the proper perspective, as one informative yardstick of success. That makes it part of a larger whole, just one among several measures of developmental progress.

With a combined eighty years of coaching experience between us, we are convinced that when you redefine success in this way, you connect with a kid's deepest motivation for playing sports in the first place. There's nothing soft, weak, or "everyone-gets-a-trophy"-ish about Whole Child Sports. By developing the Whole Child—the Whole Athlete—we help young athletes play to the edge of their potential, to reach optimal creative performance. In other words, to enter a state of flow, or what's more commonly known in the sports world as "the zone." That is when they are at their best and, as an indirect benefit, are much more likely to win more often. And they will enter into this mind-set not just in games, but also in practice. As they walk out of the gym or off the field to head home, this sense of flow follows and positively affects so much else going on in their lives.

## **Chapter 2: Your Sports Biography—Does It Hinder or Help?**

In this chapter we examine why parents can become so vested in their child's athletic success that they inadvertently sour his sports experiences. We provide parents with psychological techniques they can use to avoid falling into the trap of identifying

too closely with their kid's performance. We tend to project our hopes and fears onto our children. When we mine the depth of our own childhood sports biographies, we can come to terms with any positive or unpleasant experiences we may have had. If we learn to be more mindful of our influence over our children and take a few steps back, we can create the space that allows them to experience the joys and challenges of sports in their own unique way.

Here are some of the topics you'll encounter:

- Your sports history influences your child
- Why am I so critical after my child's game?
- The most common underlying reasons parents overreact when their kids play sports
- The most common anger triggers
- Why shouldn't we want to win at all costs?

### **Chapter 3: Too Much, Too Soon**

Today's sports culture exposes children to too much, too soon. We want to apply the brakes a bit and give kids time to grow at a more appropriate pace. In this chapter we emphasize free play and loosely structured skill-building activities in the younger years, and we encourage self-discovery as parents learn to mitigate their influence on their children's sports experiences. As they grow older, guided by coaches trained to cultivate the Whole Child—not just the aspiring athlete—they can develop into creative, flexible, healthy young men and women who are confident and well prepared for competitive play on life's many fields.

Here are some of the topics you'll encounter:

- When should my child start organized sports?
- Can competitive sports affect my child's friendships?
- What do I do if my child hates practice?
- Too much pressure too soon
- Faking injuries: a doctor's story

## **Chapter 4: The Power of Play**

Remember when you were a kid and showed up daily at the sandlot or park to play pickup ball with your neighborhood friends? Those days are long gone in most communities. Take a stroll through the fields and parks in your town or city. You'll commonly see toddlers playing freely and happily in and around playgrounds, but most kids five and up are much more likely to be standing in groups listening to an adult jaw about rules, player position, or strategy, or playing their hearts out on a field or court, surrounded by adults screaming "encouragement" or mumbling disappointedly about botched scoring opportunities. Adults have an irresistible urge to organize and control. Children just want to have fun.

We encourage parents to nurture and protect the time and space children need to engage in unstructured free play. It is essential to their physical, emotional, and social growth, and helps them become more adaptive, creative, and dynamic athletes and youngsters as they begin their journey in organized sports at an appropriate age.

Here are some of the topics you'll encounter:

- Are organized sports eroding my child's imagination?
- A team pulls together

- Is there value to free play?
- The double edge of play
- Do boys and girls play differently?

## **Chapter 5: How to Avoid Creating Entitlement Monsters—Bullying, Trash Talk, Elitism, and Other Assorted Sports Ills**

We delve into the subjects of trash talk, bullying, unhealthy competition, team hierarchy, favoritism, and sportsmanship within today's toxic youth sports context and provide suggestions and solutions for creating a healthier setting for your child's athletic development.

Here are some of the topics you'll encounter:

- A coach, a player, and bullying
- What can I do about trash talk?
- Why can't my child be team captain?
- Does it create a sense of entitlement when my kid wears his jersey to school?
- Is it harmful for my child to see so much sports violence on television?

## **Chapter 6: You Are Your Child's First Coach—Freeing Your Child from Oppressive, Hyperorganized Sports**

In this chapter we explore a parent's role in developing and tailoring a child's early sports experiences. Moms and dads are their child's first coaches. We offer suggestions for exercises, activities, and programs that are fun and developmentally appropriate for younger kids. We encourage parents to

introduce children ages five to eleven, and older, to games that develop their movement skills, balance, and coordination. These are not outcome-oriented games. The emphasis is on fun and skill development. We strongly recommend home sports schooling for this age group and offer specific examples of backyard games and park activities that can help develop balance and movement skills, and creative thinking. They are fun focused and don't require too much adult involvement and direction.

Toward the end of the chapter we shift gears a bit to focus more on older kids, ages twelve and up. At this stage organized sports come into play. We offer advice on choosing the best coach for your kid and arm you with a list of signs that your child's coach (or a coach you may be considering for your child) may be driven more by ego fulfillment than by a desire to nurture young athletes.

Here are some of the topics you'll encounter:

- What if I have no prior coaching experience?
- How can I foster my child's athletic potential?
- Sports equipment for your home coaching
- Can moms coach, too?
- Choosing a coach: a parent's checklist

## **Chapter 7: And in All Things . . . Balance and Flow**

Starting in chapter 7 we focus more on children ages twelve and up, and in this chapter you will notice a shift in the terminology we use. We substitute the term *child* with the term *youth*. To clarify, we refer to a child under the age of twelve as a *child* and

a child twelve and up as a *youth* or *young athlete*. So when you see the term *Whole Youth* rather than *Whole Child*, you'll know we are referring to the older age group. This is a great time for kids to segue into organized sports. We explore various facets of balance in youth sports: how parents and youth athletes can juggle family time and school commitments with youth sports schedules, as well as social and emotional balance in relation to sports. We also provide a basic guideline for learning and developing physical balancing skills, speed, and conditioning, which are the cornerstones of a young athlete's physical athletic foundation.

Here are some of the topics you'll encounter:

- How can I manage the financial cost of youth sports?
- What if my kid is too passive?
- The proper balance between training and playing
- Four ways to develop balance and stability in a young athlete
- Ten tenets of a balanced Whole Youth Sports experience

## **Chapter 8: Beyond Winning—A New Paradigm for Youth Sports Competition**

In this chapter we profile parents in an Ossining, New York, football league who have changed the way sports are taught to their children, and we present a new paradigm for youth sports competition that focuses every training session and game on long-term developmental goals and de-emphasizes game results and scores. We offer parents a Whole Youth Sports training and competition blueprint, which includes key principles like

teaching every athlete every position and incorporating small-space training and competitions in every practice; provide a sample alternative scorecard that coaches and parents can use to score a player's performance in a more developmentally focused way; and lay out a sample practice plan, as part of a thematically centered, well-organized guide to training a team holistically throughout a season.

Here are some of the topics you'll encounter:

- A new paradigm for youth sports competition
- A Whole Youth Sports training session blueprint
- Every athlete learns every position
- Measuring games beyond the scoreboard

## **Finding a Road Map to Change with a Focus on Developmental Stages**

Finding a road map to change is a challenging task. Advocates for change have decried the disheartening state of youth sports for decades. In 1981, Fred Engh founded the National Youth Sports Alliance, an organization dedicated to fostering change. In 2002, he wrote *Why Johnny Hates Sports: Why Organized Youth Sports Are Failing Our Children and What We Can Do About It*, a seminal exposé of abuses in youth sports. One year earlier, Bob Bigelow, another champion for change, coauthored *Just Let the Kids Play: How to Stop Other Adults from Ruining Your Child's Fun and Success in Youth Sports*. Both men and many others have worked tirelessly to make a difference.

Yet despite the efforts of grassroots groups like Engh's and the American Youth Sports Organization, which promote fun



and fair play while de-emphasizing winning, the sad truth is that the core problems in youth sports persist on a massive scale.

The first step toward revolutionizing youth sports, toward restoring the sanity and simplicity of its two most basic goals—fun and fundamentals—is to chip away at today’s cultural mindset, to develop a shift in attitude. Then we can focus on the nuts and bolts: developing our children’s movement and balance skills while fostering their creativity and passion for play.

Whole Child Sports discourages the use of adult-structured games, rules, and regulation-size playing areas in youth sports until high school age, because such adult-centric parameters are detrimental to the proper development of young athletes. That’s why we offer a four-stage timeline for the age-appropriate development of a young athlete, based on a child’s physical, psychological, and neurological development, rather than her perceived talents or prospects.

Truth be told, no one can know what a child’s potential is at an early age. You can’t trust a coach who claims that your child has all the talent and tools to become a superstar just because he can shoot ten baskets in a row and clearly outshines his peers. Such a notion is absurd. Children mature physically and athletically at different paces. What you can ensure is that your child has the opportunity to develop a strong athletic foundation in an age-appropriate setting. That way you provide him with the proper nourishment to grow his talent and maximize his athletic potential.

Play/sports development is broken up into four main stages:

1. Stage One: five- to eight-year-olds
2. Stage Two: nine- to eleven-year olds

3. Stage Three: twelve- to fifteen-year-olds
4. Stage Four: sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds

### **Stage One: Balance and Coordination**

In this stage, children ages five to eight are taught engaging games that help develop their movement skills (e.g., running and jumping), balance, and coordination, and are given ample time and space to continue to play freely. Sport-specific skills are not taught at this stage. Once or twice a week a mini-Olympics comprised of games that encourage movement, experimentation, and creativity can be set up. These are not outcome-oriented games. The emphasis is on fun and skill development. We strongly recommend home sports schooling for this age group. In chapter 6 we offer specifics, providing examples of backyard and park activities that help develop balance and movement skills, and creative thinking (also see activities in chapter 4).

### **Stage Two: Fundamental Skills**

During the nine- to eleven-year-old stage, sport-specific skills like catching, throwing, and kicking are incorporated into movement and balance training. Self-measuring competitions can help keep kids excited and engaged as they practice fundamental skills. We find that they enjoy measuring and tracking their own progress. Traditional sports games, which are the norm at this age level, often take up too much time and detract from the development of fundamental skills. Kids should be engaged, not milling about on the sidelines waiting for their turn to play.

We recommend that traditional sports games be introduced at a later age, after the fundamentals have been taught

and practiced for several years. Basic introduction to team play begins with games that are adapted to suit the age group. For example, football is introduced as flag football; soccer is presented in three vs. three format; ice hockey and lacrosse are taught in smaller playing areas (not full-size arenas or fields), with rules adapted to suit the space configuration and age group (see activities in chapters 4 and 6).

### **Stage Three: Sport-Specific Techniques**

At the twelve- to fifteen-year-old stage, children are taught more complex sport-specific techniques like turning a double play, executing a corner kick, or blocking and tackling. They experiment at different positions, work on the interpretation of rules, and are introduced to game strategy. They also continue to take part in short-sided, small-space games and self-measuring skill competitions. Children should play a different sport each season at this stage, as it is still too early to introduce year-round specialization, which is detrimental to well-rounded athletic development. The negative effects of early specialization far outweigh any perceived advantages, as is poignantly underscored in *Until It Hurts*, Mark Hyman's study of pushy sports parents and their physically and emotionally damaged children (see activities in chapters 7 and 8).

### **Stage Four: Training and Competing**

The final stage—ages sixteen to eighteen—is an exciting time for the well-rounded athlete. She now has well-developed movement skills, experience playing multiple sports, and a high level of proficiency in sport-specific skills (like skating, passing, and shooting in hockey). With such a strong, basic physical and cognitive foundation, she can adapt her athletic skills to

any sport(s) and is ready to train and compete in regulation-size playing spaces (fields, courts, rinks) in full-size games. The training focus should continue to be on developing sport- and position-specific techniques through drills and small-sided, small-space games. Then she can be tested and hone her skills in regulation-size competitive team play (see activities in chapters 7 and 8).

We urge parents and sports educators to study how kids learn by observing action-sports athletes. Visit a skate park or mountain half-pipe. Note the activities and interactions of the young athletes who train there. They gather without a pre-scheduled practice time or designated coach. They confer with each other, and no matter what their skill level, ability, or age, they coach each other. Everyone is focused on practicing the execution of fundamentals. Most important: They are all having fun. As Olympic gold medalist snowboarder Hannah Teter says, “We progress faster as athletes because we are having fun, which is the key to success in any sport.” In fact, every action-sports athlete we’ve ever talked to, male or female, has echoed skateboarder Ryan Sheckler’s sentiments: “It’s not about winning. Winning happens when you are having fun. If you are not having fun and your head’s not into it, what’s the point?”

The proof is in the passion. Skateboarders and snowboarders spend not hours or days, but months—years, even—developing and perfecting one technical aspect of a challenging trick. What drives such passion for practice? What fuels such dedication to work over and over to achieve fundamental improvement? Can we infuse organized sports with the same focus and intention? The answer is yes! We can invigorate organized sports by providing kids with a place and space in which they have the freedom to self-discover and develop new skills;

a place where peer mentorship is nurtured and adult guidance is appropriately limited.

Taking a page from the action-sports paradigm, we have designed an athletic development program that can be implemented at home and in your neighborhood. All you need is access to one or more of these resources:

1. At home: backyards, driveways, basements
2. In public parks: fields, courts, open spaces
3. At organized community events throughout your child's play and sports experience

The following chapters will show you how to create a well-rounded approach in your home and beyond, so that your children can thrive and improve their skills while you manage their time and yours more productively. This is not about going “back to basics” in some idealized past. We *value* the basics as we look forward to a more balanced sports environment for children. That's what Whole Child Sports strives to achieve.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Luis Fernando Llosa** is a writer, editor, speaker, and investigative reporter. He joined *Sports Illustrated* as a general reporter in 1998, after working at *Fortune* and *Money* magazines. His first investigation, in 2001, exposed Little Leaguer Danny Almonte's age fraud, ranked among the top ten sports scandals of the past century. In 2004 he reported from Mexico and the Dominican Republic for "Totally Juiced," *Sports Illustrated's* National Magazine Award finalist in the reporting category.

In 2006 Llosa co-wrote "The Mexican Connection" which exposed exposed the largest steroid pipeline in history and detailed the DEA probe of the illegal importation of 80% of the steroids into the U.S. Over the next four years he reported on the pervasive use of steroid use in sports, exposing athletes who received steroids and/or HGH, among them MLB stars Gary Matthews, Jr., David Bell, and Troy Glaus, boxer Evander Holyfield, and two 2008 Jamaican Olympic track stars. Llosa, who also broke stories on boxer Shane Mosley's use of EPO and testosterone and the federal indictment of New York Mets clubhouse employee Kirk Rodomski, was the most sourced journalist in the Mitchell Report on Steroids in Major League Baseball.

Youth sports has been his primary passion, both privately and professionally. Llosa has coached soccer for twenty years, and, in 2008, co-wrote "Sins of a Father" an SI exclusive about a 13-year-old in-line skater injected with HGH and testosterone by his father, who became the first parent ever convicted and jailed for providing his child with steroids.

He has made more than 100 national and local television and radio appearances, including on CBS Evening News,

CNN, CNN en Español, FOX News, FOX & Friends, Greta Van Susteren, Nancy Grace, Univision, NPR, and ESPN Radio to discuss steroid investigations and other sports-related issues.

**Scott Lancaster** has over twenty-five years of experience developing athletic and fitness programs for the National Football League, PGA of America, Arena Football, United Soccer Soccer and Fairmont Hotels & Resorts. He has also development fitness/sports products for Step2, one of the nation's leading toy manufacturers. He has created comprehensive (individual and team) athletic sports curricula and implemented and management those programs at both local and national levels.

Lancaster is the author of two youth athletic and fitness books: *Fair Play: Making Organized Sports a Great Experience for Your Kids* (Prentice House, 2002), and *Athletic Fitness for Kids* (Human Kinetics, 2008), and hosted a national sports talk radio show on SiriusXM that focused on youth and high school sports.

**Kim John Payne, M.ED**, has been a school counselor, adult educator, consultant, researcher, educator and a private family counselor for over thirty years. He regularly gives keynote addresses at international conferences for educators, parents, and therapists and runs workshops around the world. In each role, he has helped children, adolescents and families explore issues such as social difficulties with siblings and classmates, attention and behavioral issues at home and school, and emotional issues such as defiance, aggression, addiction and low self-esteem as well as the vital role living a balanced simple life brings.



He is Founding Director of the Simplicity Project and The Center for Social Sustainability, and the author of *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier and More Secure Kids*, (Ballantine Books/Random House, 2009). He also wrote *The Games Children Play*©, (Hawthorn Press, 1996) and is currently writing *The Soul of Discipline*, (Ballantine Books/Random House, 2014). He has appeared frequently on television (including ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox); on radio with the BBC, Sirius/XM, CBC & NPR and been featured in *Time Magazine*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Parenting*, *Mothering*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. He is a writer for *The Huffington Post*.

Kim strives to deepen understanding and give practical tools for life that arise out of the burning social issues of our time. He is based in Northampton, Massachusetts with his wife and two children. [www.simplicityparenting.com](http://www.simplicityparenting.com)