

Winners for a Lifetime

A Different Kind of Sports Experience

By Caz McCaslin

IF YOU COMBINE the ever-growing obesity crisis among children in the United States and the win-at-all-costs mentality that most children are exposed to, it is easy to lose hope in a child's desire to participate in sports. However, there is an option that keeps kids active through instructional practices and games that ultimately can improve a child's overall physical health. This same opportunity provides a fun, positive atmosphere for children to grow in a sport they love while also learning about Jesus Christ. Specifically designed for K5 through 6th grade boys and girls, Upward sports leagues provide children in this country, and around the world, with this unique sports experience.

Intense Competition

Everyone agrees that sports and physical activity are good for children. The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports recommends sports and notes that it is an



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important tool to prevent obesity in children. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 16 percent of children in the United States are obese.

However, groups such as the American Association of the Child's Right to Play, the Irish Sports Council, and the Sports Council of Northern Ireland agree that there is an "overemphasis on unhealthy competition and winning at all costs in children's sports." Instead of being an enjoyable, healthy activity, organized sports can become a dreaded, stress-filled experience for children. A joint code of ethics published by the Irish Sports Council and the Sports Council of Northern Ireland states this can be the result of an overemphasis on winning, age-inappropriate expectations, excessive criticism, inappropriate use of discipline, rejection, disapproval of skill level and per-

formance, lack of support for effort and achievement, and use of coarse language.

Unfortunately, these conditions are too common in many of today's children's sports leagues. Frank White, a long-time advocate for sports and recreation in Minnesota says, "There has been a dramatic shift in youth sports away from a sense of enjoyment, physical fitness, and sportsmanship to intense competition."

Winning at All Costs

When participating in any sport, a child may be embarrassed or disappointed if he sits on the bench most (or all) of the time. He may consider himself a "loser" if he thinks he is not good at the sport or does not live up to his parents', coaches', or teammates' expectations.

A winning-at-all-costs attitude also can make some parents and fans become mean-spirited and taunt players on the opposing teams. They may make unkind comments about players on their own team or be disrespectful to the coach. There have even been reports of violence.

Mr. White observes that negative behaviors such as criticism and loss of temper displayed by coaches and spectators can "profoundly impact our youth in a negative manner."

A Different Program

Upward™ Unlimited is an international nonprofit children's sports organization designed to give children and their families a positive sports experience. To fulfill their mission, Upward partners with evangelical churches across the country. By working with and training local churches, over half a million children will participate in Upward this year.

Giving children the opportunity to learn and grow through participating in games they love is one of the most rewarding aspects of conducting a league. Unlike traditional sports programs, Upward programs are structured so children participate in practices and games without league



UPWARD OFFERS:

- Basketball
- Cheerleading
- Soccer
- Flag Football
- Basketball Camp
- Cheerleading Camp
- Soccer Camp



To further the "Every Child Is a Winner" philosophy, Upward coaches encourage each player with a game-day star award following each game that builds self-esteem and team spirit. For example, a red star stands for best defense in basketball, soccer, or football, and gold stands for most spirited in cheerleading. Additionally, instead of focusing on a win/lose strategy, importance is shifted to the attitudes and efforts of each child on the team.

Upward also operates on a one practice, one game a week agenda in an effort to maximize the family schedule, allowing participants to spend more time tending to other family activities. When a new league is formed, Upward provides coaches and volunteers with skills, drills, and practice outlines. Coaches also are prepared with guides containing a Scripture learning verse and devotions for practices and games. In addition, the referee will lead all sports teams in prayer in the center of the field or court at the beginning of each game.

Life Lessons

Children across the country and around the world show a strong desire to learn and play sports. This desire keeps them physically active and healthy. Equally as important, the vehicle of sports provides numerous opportunities to teach lessons in the game of life. It is these life lessons that can minister to each and every child for many years to come. □

RESOURCES

- *Winning Words: Sports Stories and Photographs* by Charles R. Smith, Jr. (Candlewick Press, 2008)
- *Every Child Is a Winner* by Caz McCaslin (B&H, 2002)



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