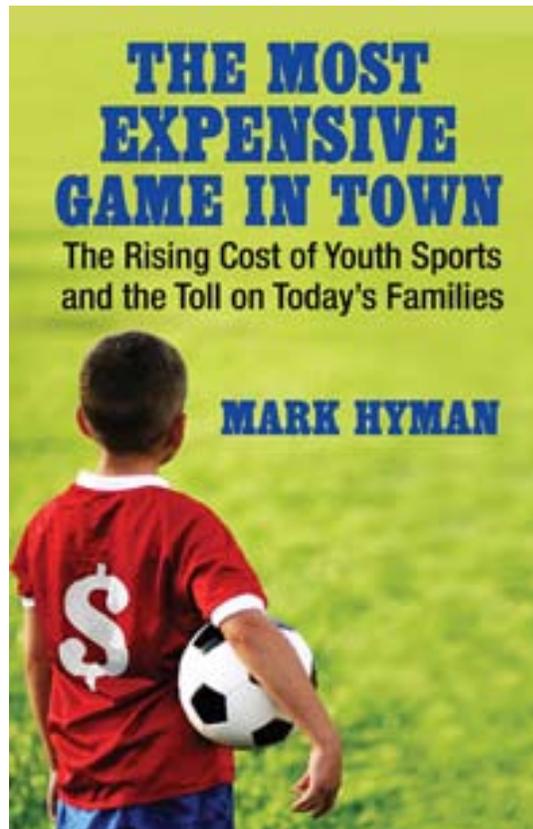


Author Mark Hyman on the commercialization of youth sports

In “Until It Hurts: America’s Obsession with Youth Sports and How It Harms Our Kids” (Beacon Press), author Mark Hyman drew upon his years-long experience as a coach, parent, and journalist to examine the harmful side effects of youth sports. Hyman’s report from the front lines was bluntly honest: “With each passing season youth sports seems to stray further and further from its core mission of providing healthy, safe and character-building recreation for children.”

Now, three years later, Hyman has returned to the topic. His latest book, titled “The Most Expensive Game in Town: The Rising Cost of Youth Sports and the Toll on Today’s Families” (Beacon Press), examines every aspect of the business of youth sports -- including the dizzying array of products designed for kids, the rising cost of travel and club sports, the increased media coverage (driven by ESPN) and corporate sponsorship of high school sports, and the disparity between the financial haves and have-nots.

Hyman notes that, for companies catering to youth athletes and their pocketbook-wielding parents, times are good. More children are playing



organized sports -- an estimated 41 million of them -- than ever before. Hyman writes about the cumulative toll of commercialization: "How is the youth sports economy affecting our kids? And what stresses, financial and otherwise, is it imposing on families? How is the great sloshing of dollars distorting the experience that we want for children when they leap off the starting block or dribble down the lane?"

And, Hyman wonders, "Is there any way to turn off the spigot?"

A longtime journalist, Hyman also teaches at George Washington University in the sports management program, on topics ranging from sports law to sports communications. SportsLetter spoke with Hyman by phone from his home in Baltimore.

--David Davis

SportsLetter: Why did you decide to write a follow-up to "Until It Hurts"?

Mark Hyman: I can't take credit for that. It was proposed to me by my editor at Beacon Press, Helene Atwan. She was intrigued by a brief anecdote in "Until It Hurts" regarding a company called Athletic Baby, which was producing DVDs that introduced infants and young children to sports, and wondered whether the issue was much bigger than that and whether it merited a book. She said, "Do you think there's a book about the commercialization of youth sports?" I said, "Absolutely. There are many more Athletic Baby's out there."

It started with a central idea that there's this tension that exists between the corporate interests involved in youth sports and Joe Consumer, Joe Family Person. On the corporate side, there's this interest in consumption: more, more, more, earlier, earlier, earlier. That's no surprise. That's the way capitalism works and our consumer culture works. But having done some reporting on this, I knew that more and earlier often is not better for kids in the sports world and, in fact, can actually be harmful to kids.

That was the kernel of the idea: the ways in which commercialism has changed youth sports and whether those changes could be considered positive or negative. I tried to find disparate examples of the ways in

which sports for kids had become a big business and then explain how those individual businesses were changing sports for kids.

SL: How would you define the youth sports economy -- and can you quantify it, dollar-wise?

MH: The number that is commonly used is \$5 billion. I think that is a conservative number because it refers to those types of purchases and expenses that are clearly related to youth sports: equipment – your hat, your uniform – registration fees, instruction and camps. But once you get beyond those core expenditures, there are a lot of expenses that are not normally considered to be part of a kid’s sports life. For instance, if your kid is traveling to a tournament, there’s the gas that’s involved to drive there, the overnight stay at a hotel, dinner at Pizza Hut, the Styrofoam Cooler you’re buying and the sports drink that goes inside it. How do we classify all of that? I’ve pretty much decided that whatever the number is, it’s a multiple of \$5 billion.

SL: Former Major League Baseball player Doug Glanville recently wrote in Time Magazine that “nothing opens a parent’s checkbook like guilt and fear.” Do you think he’s accurate in his assessment?

MH: I do. I think it’s kind of like an insurance policy. You think there’s a 12 percent chance that it might work for your child, but who wants to take that chance and pass up the opportunity to help your child excel in sports or stay even with the other kids?

The combination of guilt and fear goes back to themes that I explored in the first book. As parents we all aspire for great things for our kids. We want it for them and, if we’re being honest, we have to acknowledge that we want it for ourselves. When our kids succeed in life, in some respect that is validation of our parenting. As I’ve written, sometimes in painful ways, when you’re focused on how many batters your 12-year-old can strike out, you can make curious decisions.

SL: How can parents avoid this arm’s race of youth sports?

MH: Sports for kids are a valuable activity in many, many ways.

Sometimes, people who hear me speak or read my books think that I'm not supportive of sports for kids. I'm unhappy when they have that impression because I'm very much an advocate. Sports for kids are a great foundation for things like sportsmanship, teamwork, self-esteem, developing habits that lead to being active throughout your life. These are very attainable goals for kids who are playing sports.

I think the problem arises when we lose sight of that and our focus shifts to less attainable goals: college scholarships, living vicariously through your children, the possibility that your child will be a professional athlete. When that becomes the focus, then we're vulnerable to making decisions that aren't always in the best interest of our kid. That's when you see parents start to think about early specialization and their kid becomes a year-round soccer player at age 7 or 8. I don't think that parent is thinking about sportsmanship or teamwork. That parent is thinking about how can my child climb the ladder as rapidly as possible and become a player at USC.

SL: Who do you blame for creating this mindset -- is it the coaches or is it the parents or is it the keep-up-with-the-Jones' youth-sports culture?

MH: It would be great if you could point your finger and identify the source of the problem because then you fix the problem. It's not that simple. The reasons for this change are cultural and subtle and have occurred over many years and would be difficult to reverse. Many of them are the result of commercialization. People talk about the ESPNization of sports and they talk about the influence that Nike and other sporting goods and apparel manufacturers have had on sports. My view is that the distinction between college and professional sports and sports for kids has narrowed significantly. If you turned on the TV 30 years ago and you were watching sports, it was either a professional game or a college game. There was little chance that you were going to be watching a 12-year-old playing sports. Now, ESPN has a very expansive business covering high school sports as if it were a professional sport.

SL: How did we get here -- or, perhaps, why did we get here?

MH: First of all, it's not limited to sports. We're talking about a cultural phenomenon that goes well beyond sports and that has been slowly

gaining momentum for decades. I refer to it as the global warming of youth sports, but I think you can refer to it as the global warming of parenting. Parenting has become a very competitive activity. If your child is a violinist, you want them to be the most expert violinist. If they're taking the SATs, you want them to do as well as they possibly can.

It's this idea that, all things lead to the possibility of a college scholarship. I write a lot about that in this book, that parents feel that their kids' sports lives are a career path and that a college scholarship is a possibility -- if they can get their kids started early enough and give them the proper training.

SL: How does this youth sports economy affect children and what sort of toll does it impose on families?

MH: I think it's distorting youth sports in some ways that are not helpful to kids. One example that is covered prominently in the book is this idea of when kids should get started in organized sports. When I was a kid, it was typical for children to get started in organized sports at age 8 or 9. Now it's common for kids to start at age 3. There's a chapter in the book about sports training for babies, and you have to ask, "Is this necessary?" and "Is this in the best interests of kids?" I think the chapter makes a case that, when your child is introduced to sports at age 3 months, that's about marketing. That's not necessarily about the developmental interest of the child.

SL: What are the implications of this trend?

MH: A number of companies have identified this as a niche, a part of the market where there's demand that can be leveraged. There's a company called GymTrix, which produces DVDs for children who are as young as 6 months. The DVDs are as much for the adults as for the children: they demonstrate to the adults how to take their kids through various exercise programs that, supposedly, are going to give them a head start with their sports career. One DVD is called "Batter Up!". In this DVD, the infant sits on the parent's lap. The parent helps the child grip a paper-towel holder in their hand, and then they drop a balloon toward their child. The idea is that the child is learning how to swing a bat at a ball.

I interviewed the woman who owns the company, Doreen Bolhuis, from Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is very earnest and, I think, sincere in believing that children who go through her programs have an advantage over other kids and will perhaps be better athletes as a result. I also interviewed Dr. Lyle Micheli, who founded the first pediatric sports medicine clinic in the United States, at Children's Hospital in Boston. He takes a very different view and says that there's no evidence that a child this age can benefit from hitting a balloon with a paper towel holder.

Products like this contribute to this belief -- you might even call it paranoia -- that, as a parent, it's important to get your child started right away, as early as possible, or else your child's going to be at a competitive disadvantage. There's really no evidence to suggest that, but I think we're all vulnerable to feeling that our child's going to be left behind if we don't act fast.

SL: You profile several entrepreneurs who have created business ventures in youth sports, many of them with good intentions. What's the upside and what's the downside when business interests and youth sports collide?

MH: Oftentimes, decisions are made purely from the perspective of, what is the business model? Could this venture be successful from a cash-in, cash-out perspective? I don't think there are a lot of child psychologists sitting at the table when ESPN is deciding whether it wants to televise high school football games. I don't think that perspective is represented. As a result, things happen that are good, sound business decisions but may not be in the interest of kids.

This book is filled with examples of that. One example is a company called Youth Sports Live, which posts web-cams at youth athletic fields. The feed from those cameras goes to the Youth Sports Live website, and parents can pay a nominal amount to subscribe to the site and to watch the feeds of their children's games. So, grandparents who live in Burlington, Vt., can watch their 12-year-old grandchildren in Tucson, Ariz., playing softball or baseball. It sounds like a reasonable idea from the perspective of the entrepreneur and from the parents' and the grandparents' perspective.

But nobody seems to be considering the perspective of the kids. I spoke to Frank Smoll, a preeminent professor of child psychology at the University of Washington who's done a lot of research on youth sports. He was concerned about it. He said, we don't have any idea whether this is a positive thing for kids. Potentially, it could create performance anxiety, and the kids could be observed in ways that are not healthy. This is not necessarily a good thing for kids.

SL: Were there any products that you came across that you thought were healthy for kids?

MH: The snap-off jockstrap [invented by Laurie Cronenbold for her business, Cup Check]. To me, that's an example of a parent and an entrepreneur who's thinking, "What would really benefit a kid?" I'm sure she has, at some level, some hope that this will result in a nice profit and a nice business. But her original inspiration was, "My kid is complaining about his athletic supporter. How do I improve life for him?" So, she got an athletic jock out of her kid's dresser drawers and some upholstery thread and worked hard to turn it into a great product. I can't wait to see it in the stores.

SL: One contradiction that you pointed out is that, even as there's been an increase in youth obesity, Mountain Dew is a key corporate sponsor of extreme/adventure sports. How do we reconcile this?

MH: I met with Bill Carter, one of the founding partners of Fuse Marketing, a sports marketing company based in Vermont. One of his clients is Mountain Dew. We had quite a spirited conversation over several hours about whether Mountain Dew's sponsorship of youth sports was a net negative or a net positive. I don't think we solved that problem. Bill's view is that he could not, as a parent and as a responsible citizen, be involved in something that could hurt kids. He's not suggesting that kids drink nothing but Mountain Dew all day. But he does think that he can represent his client: they are doing positive things, and they are throwing a lot of money into youth sports.

I then spent some time with Jay Coakley, a very prominent sports

sociologist. He believes that Mountain Dew is taking advantage of kids by using action sports to pitch their brand of soda. He believes that, if we have to depend on Mountain Dew to underwrite youth sports, then we're in a pretty sad state.

SL: What about media coverage of youth sports?

MH: Every year, I tell myself that I am not going to watch the Little League World Series. I'm not going to watch an 11-year-old kid strike out another 11-year-old kid. I'm going to turn on C-SPAN. But, eventually, I'm watching some kid from Indiana batting against some kid from Central America. It's human nature -- it's fascinating to watch -- and it's great for me. But is it great for the 11-year-old from Indiana?

SL: Now that ESPN has ramped up its coverage of youth sports, what's been the impact of this coverage?

MH: I write a lot about ESPN and the way it's turned high school sports into an industry. They have a regular schedule of high school football games and high school basketball games. The high school basketball season ends with an ESPN national championship tournament at Georgetown Prep, not far from where I live in Baltimore. From ESPN's perspective, it makes a lot of sense. They're able to leverage sponsors like Nike and Gatorade. In fact, Gatorade is the presenting sponsor of the tournament. When I went down to Georgetown Prep to watch the tournament one day, it was astonishing to see how many Swooshes and Gatorade "Gs" there were in that gym. It looked like thousands.

ESPN is in the business of putting on events and generating ratings and sponsorship dollars. Of course this seems like a good idea to them. But if you look a little bit more closely at it, this tournament occurred about a month after the completion of the regular high school basketball season. So, all the kids playing in the tournament had had their seasons extended for about a month. Is that a positive thing? For one thing, it precludes any of them from playing a spring sport. It limits their options in that way. And, for many of them, their season had begun in October -- and they were still playing basketball on April 1. How can that be a good thing for high school kids?

SL: How do the ranking systems affect youth sports?

MH: In addition to all the games that it televises, ESPN has created a high school sports division that it refers to as ESPN Rise. That includes a website in which they're trying to cover the entire high school sports scene, nationwide. They're not covering every game that's played, but they do the best they can. One of the features they have is to rank high school players around the country. They have a ranking for high school seniors, they have a ranking for high school juniors, and they even have a ranking for sophomores. These kids are 14, 15-years-old. Talk to a child psychologist about the pressure on a 14- or 15-year-old kid who's ranked #14 as a sophomore and drops to #16 as a junior: How can that be a positive thing for a 15-year-old kid?

USA Today for many years has had a Top 25 ranking of high school teams in about a half-dozen sports. I have great respect for the sports editor at USA Today, Monte Lorell. I've known him for a number of years. We had a conversation about those rankings and the extent to which they affect the way the games are played around the country for those teams that are in the Top 25 and that are trying to advance in those rankings.

In the book, I cite the example of Yates High School in Houston. In 2010, they were unstoppable. They were winning games by 50 or more points on a regular basis. One night, they were playing Lee High School, one of their rivals, and the halftime score was 100-12. What accounts for that? Why would the coach of Yates be interested in leading by 88 at the half?

To me, there's only one reasonable explanation: in order to climb the rankings, it's not enough to be undefeated, because there are dozens of teams that are undefeated. The only way to distinguish yourself from other teams around the country is to demolish the teams that you're playing. And, in fact, Yates ended up number one in the USA Today poll in 2010.

SL: How does the economic disparity within the nation affect youth sports?

MH: It operates on a couple of levels. On one level is the individual kid

and the kid's access to competition, equipment and fields. There are certain sports where this is particularly problematic. I live in an area of the country where lacrosse is extremely popular. Lacrosse has become almost entirely privatized. Virtually all of the opportunities to play in organized leagues and to develop skills are for affluent kids who have considerable resources. These families can spend thousands, sometimes into the tens of thousands of dollars a year, for private programs and training virtually year-round. And that's for kids who are sixth- and seventh-graders. That's totally unavailable to kids in the inner-city – who might be the best lacrosse players in the country if they had access to similar resources. That's a function of the way youth sports are now structured, where so much of the burden for underwriting the cost of sports falls to the families.

Baseball is another example. The perception is, in order for kids to become the best baseball players they can be, they have to play on travel teams, they have to be swinging \$300 bats, they've got to attend combines and showcases where they can be seen by college coaches. None of that is available to a kid who's learning the game and is playing in an inner-city environment.

That sort of system wasn't in place 30, 40 years ago. We wonder why there are declining numbers of African-American Major League Baseball players, and this is part of the answer. It's very difficult to be a baseball player at a high level unless your parents are able to write checks every week to the private coach and the company that sells the \$300 bat.

SL: What about the challenges that individual municipalities face?

MH: I've seen it operate in several ways. Let's go back to baseball. The facilities that inner-city schools have to deal with are sometimes shocking. As part of the reporting for the book, I had a conversation with a baseball coach at an inner-city high school in Baltimore. He was telling me that his team was quite inexperienced. Of the 30 or so kids who had come out for the team, fewer than half had ever played organized baseball before. That's astonishing: you would never hear of that in a suburban setting, where kids have access to better equipment and fields. With the exception of basketball and other sports that require limited equipment

and facilities, I think kids in the inner-city are at a great disadvantage when it comes to sports.

Jay Coakley points out that before the “Reagan Revolution,” there was a lot more money available for neighborhood rec centers and rec counselors. Forgive the pun, the playing field was more level because a lot of the activity was done in the community with public money. Most of the kids, regardless of income, had access to the same training, the same facilities, and they played in leagues in their communities.

As the public money dried up, that’s when you start seeing the disparity in youth sports. The parents who could afford it start to shoulder the expenses of their kids’ sports lives. The ones who couldn’t afford to, either their kids are not playing anymore or they’re playing basketball on blacktop somewhere. That’s when you see the big differences between the haves and the have-nots.

SL: How about non-profit companies: what is their role in this?

MH: The last chapter in the book deals with the kids who are living outside the bubble of commercialization and yet are participating in sports. In some ways, they’re closer to the ideals of youth sports. There are programs like America SCORES, out in L.A., which provides sports for kids who are from underprivileged backgrounds and have limited resources. These non-profit programs, sometimes with corporate support, are doing amazing things for these kids.

The point is, kids don’t have to have a \$300 baseball bat, they don’t have to live in this world where material things are everything, to get one heckuva lot out of sports. The message of that chapter is, in some ways these are the privileged kids because their worlds have not been invaded by these corporate influences that have changed the way kids play and enjoy sports.

SL: Now that you’ve completed your second book on the topic, how has youth sports changed since you’ve begun researching and writing about it?

MH: Well, I wish it had changed. When you look at youth sports now,

you see all of the excesses and problems and issues that are present in professional sports. I don't think that's an accident. I think our perception of youth sports, our expectations, our desires for what we want from youth sports is shaped by what we see in professional sports. We think of youth sports as adult entertainment now.

My hope was, and my hope remains, that we as parents and coaches are able to have a discussion about this. As I've said before, to me this is good therapy. Coaches and parents need to have more honest conversations about what their goals and their aspirations are, why they're involved, and what they're hoping for for their children. When I speak about this, I find that parents welcome that opportunity because they don't do it very much. They're focused on the next registration day and don't really reflect as much as perhaps they should about what their goals are for their kids. The best outcome I can hope for with these books is that parents take a second to pause and think, "Is the course that I'm on with my kids really the best course for them? Are my kids likely to benefit from the way I'm approaching sports for kids?"

SL: How can parents make sure that their kids' voices are heard in this process?

MH: Every parent that I've ever spoken to wants the best for their kid. Every parent wants their child to reach their potential as an athlete. If they have the potential to be a high school athlete, they want them to reach that goal. If it's college, then that.

The argument that I often make is, the way we've structured youth sports, we've creating obstacles to kids reaching their potential. By age 13, 75 percent of kids have dropped out of youth sports -- because of the intensity of the experience or because the coaches yelled at them or it's just not fun anymore or it's not active enough for them.

So, you have that hurdle to kids reaching their potential. And then, there's the overuse aspect, which I've written a lot about, where 50 percent of all reported youth sports injuries are the result of doing something over and over again, until the kid's body gives out.

In some ways, it's a process of education. Parents have to understand that they benefit when they think about the way we approach youth sports as a society and whether that's in the best interest of their kids. That's a message that parents respond to: if you want your kid to reach his potential as an athlete, this is probably not the best way to do it.

SL: What's next for you? Are you going to continue to write about the topic of youth sports?

MH: I'm still very interested in the issue, and I don't intend to stop reporting on it or writing about it. I've got a book coming out on head trauma in youth sports, co-authored with Dr. Robert Cantu, the neurosurgeon. [The book is titled "Concussions and Our Kids: America's Leading Expert on How to Protect Young Athletes and Keep Sports Safe."] It will be out in September from Houghton Mifflin.

SL: How did that come about?

MH: I was about halfway through this project, when I got a call from a friend of mine, [New York Times reporter] Alan Schwarz. Alan had had some conversations with Dr. Cantu about doing a book about head trauma in youth sports. For a variety of reasons, Alan did not feel that he could be involved in the project. But he knew of my interest in youth sports, and that's how I got involved.