



Youth Sports is a Journey, Not a Destination

September 18, 2020 / [PARENT](#) / By [John O'Sullivan](#)



COVID. Demonstrations and riots. Divisive politics. Home schooling. Wildfires. Smoke.

As a coach for 30 years, and a parent for nearly 15 of those years, I am probably like most of you in that I cannot remember a crazier, more stressful, anxiety inducing year than 2020. It seems every time we take one step forward, we take another step backwards this year. This is especially true as we try and create opportunities for children to move and socialize safely in sports. This past week, the devastating wildfires here in Oregon have destroyed multiple communities, and blanketed the entire state with what is the worst air quality in the world.

This afternoon, as the smoke receded to a measly 200 on the air quality scale (down from 500+ off the scale readings all week), the sun poked through and my virtual learning son expectantly asked "does this mean we can play soccer today?" I had to sadly answer "No, not there yet." He put his head down and wandered off to entertain himself with some drawing for another night. And I sat down to write this.

Why? Because this is all part of the journey.

A few weeks ago on the podcast, legendary author Michael Murphy said to us "Great athletes see the field from above." What he meant by that was that elite athletes do not just see the players in front of them, but they picture where everyone is on the field, they see the spaces and the opportunities to break a big play. Think Messi, Gretzky, Walter Payton, Tom Brady, Lebron James. They don't see what's simply in front of them; they see everything, and that is what makes them great. I think that is what great parents do as well. They see the entire journey, warts and all, and look for the opportunities, stumbling blocks, and teachable moments, not just the wins and accolades. They see the field, the journey, from above.

I have been ruminating over this idea a lot, especially as it pertains to my role as a coach and parent. It caused me to reread this incredible blog about time and relationships from Tim Urban of *Wait But Why* about the time we parents get with our kids (when you're done here please read it, it has some amazing graphic reminders of this journey). **Did you know that if your children move out and head off to college at age 18, and then live in a different town, only visiting two weeks a year, by the time they graduate high school you will have already spent around 90% of all your days with them?** Read that again. It hit me like a ton of bricks. That is my story. My parents are in their mid-eighties, I moved across the country after college, and I just was able to see them for the first time since February. I live 2500 miles away. How many days do we have left together? Are we making the most of the time we have left? Did we make the most of the days past? And what about my own teenagers?

Our children are on a journey and most of our influence happens before their 18th birthday. Youth sports is part of that journey for many children, usually 10-14 years of it. Yet all too often we get stuck and focus only upon the destination (scholarship, college, pro, higher level sports). At other times see only the moment in front of us, especially when something goes wrong, and not the whole field. At this moment, with natural disasters, divisive politics, COVID, you name it, there is so much fear of missing out, so much stress about what might happen with this season, if we even have it, that every one of us can lose sight of this precious journey we are on. It is a journey to develop a human being, not simply an athlete. And if we get too stuck on the "what ifs" and the destination, we may blink and it's over, with little to show for it.

I work with many athletes these days who might see their final high school or college season disappear. I encourage them to focus on the controllables, and be proud of who they became during this time. I know many parents who are gutted that their child's last season of sport may be done. I encourage them to finish this well, no matter how it ends. I know many folks with younger kids, like myself, who have learned not to take "next season" for granted. And since I cannot take next season for granted, what am I doing about it this season, to make sure that I enjoy this moment, and put it into perspective as part of the journey?

The problem with only focusing upon the destination is that once a person gets that elusive scholarship or place on a college team, they often realize they don't love their sport, and their relationship with parents has been irrevocably damaged because of sport. And sadly many of these parents are out there dispensing advice about how to get seen and how to get recruited to the next generation of middle schoolers and their parents, scaring them and taking their focus off what matters – getting better – and putting it on the destination – getting seen. And so they get seen, and check all the boxes, but the motivation never becomes intrinsic.

So what exactly am I saying here?

Youth sports is an amazing journey, and not a destination. Cherish it. See what's in front of you, but then see the field from above. Grasp the role of sports in the big picture. Hug your kids. Tell them you love watching them play, even if it is a local league and not the big showcase tournament. Develop love of the game, and help them focus on getting better, not simply getting noticed. Use these turbulent times as a teachable moment, and maybe even discover some different passions. And if you take one thing from this, take this one tidbit from Tim Urban of *Wait But Why*:

"Quality time matters. If you're in your last 10% of time with someone you love, keep that fact in the front of your mind when you're with them and treat that time as what it actually is: precious."

Enjoy the journey.

You can read more from John O'Sullivan at [ChangingTheGameProject.com](#)

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About the Author John O'Sullivan

John started Changing the Game Project in 2012 after two decades as a soccer player and coach on the youth, high school, college and professional level. He is the author of the #1 bestselling books *Changing the Game: The Parents Guide to Raising Happy, High Performing Athletes*, and *Giving Youth Sports Back to our Kids and Is it Wise to Specialize?*

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