

By Cliff Suttle

Choosing the right sport for your child can be the most important thing you can do for your young athlete. All sports have things in common. Competition, effort, concentration, are mutual skills needed for most sports. However, the differences among desired abilities in sports can be vast. In all my years of coaching, I have seen many children have a miserable sports experience only because they were in the wrong sport. Each child's natural mental and physical abilities, as well as their temperament, will often cause them to flounder in one sport, where they might excel in another. Selecting the right sport, especially in the early years between five and ten years old, can be critical. Whether your child stays in sports, or even walks away feeling like a winner, can come down to the simple act of choosing the right game.

There are many factors to consider when selecting a sport for a young person. Not all factors will be as important to all parents and their children. However, please read them all and consider each point carefully. This should aid you in selecting a future sport for your child. You may find that they are not in the correct sport currently and want to make a change.

1) Leave Your Ego At The Door

Your child is NOT you. You may have been a great football player in your day, this does not mean your child will be. He may hate football. Perhaps he likes swimming. Pressing your child into a sport they are not ready for, or don't like, is the quickest way to have them quit, hate sports, or even resent you. Be open minded and non-judgmental about the sports in which your child may have a natural gift for or interest in.

Many of us have predefined opinions about a particular sport that may or not be true. Soccer isn't tough enough. Fencing is too dangerous. Volleyball is for girls. I hear comments like this from parents all the time. The fact is, none of these statements are true. You had better be pretty rough and tumble, if you are going to play soccer for long or at higher levels of competition. In spite of the swords, fencing is one of the safest contact sports you can play. Fencing injuries are rare and are normally confined to sprained ankles. Volleyball is a great sport and is played at the college, Olympic, and professional levels by both men and women. In Europe, especially Eastern Europe, volleyball is the game of choice for many young men. Don't let your prejudgement limit your child's choices. Any sport can be a good one and provide your child with years of exercise, fun, excitement and success. Before you decide that a sport is too dangerous, too expensive, too easy, not gender appropriate, etc., do your research. A good way to do this is to speak with a champion or coach in the sport and get their opinion. Most of the time, these people will be more than happy to speak with you at length. Come prepared with questions and don't be afraid to ask them.

Children are fascinating. Its like they have a mind of their own (and they do). Get your child's input when selecting a sport. You can bring up ideas, but don't pressure them to agree with you. There is nothing wrong with pushing a child to at least try a new sport, however, there is a fine line

here between a nudge and a shove. Often, especially with young children, they may not know what type of sports they really like. Signing a child up for new experiences is a great idea. The more things a child is exposed to, the more well rounded they will be, and the better prepared they are to make an informed decision on their own. Pushing your child to try a sport is reasonable. If, however, after a fair amount of time, if they still dislike the sport, let them find something else. A fair amount of time is normally a season or set of classes.

My Father gave me a nudge on my thirteenth birthday. He gave me tennis lessons as a birthday gift. TENNIS LESSONS?!? I was furious. What kind of birthday present was that. I didn't even play tennis. Who wants to play tennis? They dragged me to the lessons anyway. I was not happy about it at first. Half way through the sessions, I bought my own racquet and I was hooked. Tennis was my sport for the next five years. In this case, the nudge worked and I was glad my parents forced me to try it.

On the other hand, I signed my ten year old son up for fencing lessons. I had been a fencing champion when I was younger and I loved the sport. I was sure he would too. He was very good at it pretty much right from the start. I dreamt of coaching him to a Junior Olympic medal by age fourteen. In a year he was the best young fencer at the club and took second place in the club's men's tournament. This was doubly impressive because he was the youngest competitor by six years. The next day after the tournament, he quit. It seems he liked basketball. I like basketball too, but I was never very good at it. It broke my heart the day he stopped fencing, but I let him find his own way. Two years later he made the Junior High basketball team and seemed much happier with basketball than he ever was at fencing. Sometimes its hard to let go, but you have to let your child find their own way.

Even if your child decides not to play sports at all, this may be a decision you will need to except. Not everyone is born to be an athlete. There are many other things in the world that teach the same lesson as sports. The best you can do is guide your child, and let them decide the rest. The most important thing to keep in their lives is exercise. Evidence shows that children who exercise regularly, are far more likely to be healthy adults. There are many ways to get exercise that have nothing to do with competitive sports. Walking, bike riding, jump rope, playing frisbee in the back yard, are all perfectly acceptable forms of exercise. If your child decides not to play a competitive sport, find some other way to keep them active and moving.

2) To Team or Not to Team

Team sports are great. They teach interpersonal skills and cooperation. However, team sports can also be filled with power struggles, politics, favoritism and unsportsmen like behavior. I have coached baseball, soccer and basketball. These are all great sports, but I have found they all have the same problem. The good get better, the bad get worse. On a basketball court, the good players get all the passes and hence the majority of the experience. A child who is athletically challenged, starting in the sport later than his peers, or is not physically built for the sport often feels left out.

This can soon lead to a lack of self confidence, self worth, and withdrawal not only from the game, but also from his friends. It was sad for me to see children not trying because they barely ever gets the ball. As a coach, I tried everything I could to give everyone equal experience, but even the best of coaches will have a hard time with this. The kids want to win, so they pass the ball to the players most likely to make that happen. Soon, the weaker players don't even want the ball in their hands. If they miss a shot or get the ball stolen by the other team, they feel bad about themselves. Many times I would see a weaker players finally get the ball, only to quickly pass it to someone else. It becomes a endless spiral toward low self esteem.

There are alternatives to team sports that can be just as rewarding. Individual sports can provide a great place for athletically challenged youngsters to find there coordination, skills, and competitive spirit. When no one has to pass you the ball, or is counting on you to make a good play, the pressure is off. The child now has time to grow at their own pace. This is not to say that individual sports are for lesser athletes. Some of the greatest athletes ever have played individual sports. Jimmy Connors, Mark Spits, Muhammad Ali, Nadia Comaneci, Lance Armstong, and Billy Jean King are just a hand full of the many amazing athletes that have found individual sports their calling. The great part of individual sport is you don't need anyone else's assistance to gain experience.

When Scott Hamilton was a young boy he was plagued with illness. The doctors were wondering if he would even survive to adulthood. By the time we was a young teenager, he was small and frail. Placing Scott into any team sport at that point would have been a serious mistake. Luckily, Scott took up figure skating and became one of the all time great skaters, including world and Olympic championships. In my own case, I was a late bloomer. I was young for my grade and not big or strong compared to my peers. The popular sport when I was a kid was baseball. Boy, I was bad at that. I was the one always picked last. If you have ever had this experience, you know the painful and frustration a child can feel. So, I tried not to play baseball much, which of course made me even worse at the game. My lack of athletic abilities continued until I found bicycle racing. This sport gave me the time to develop the strength and speed that became my trademarks in sports later. Eventually, I tried playing softball again and was pretty good at it. That was after I was allowed time to improve my hand to eye coordination in several other individual sports.

Sports like tennis, golf, karate, gymnastics, wrestling, racquetball, boxing, track and field, and bowling all fall into the category of individual sports. However, some of these sports are more individual than others. For instance track and field is normally played on a team, yet the sport is still mainly individual effort. This type of sport is perfect for children who need that team emotional support. Their friends are close by, while they still are enjoying the benefits of single effort. Other sports, like racquetball, are individual games in the truest sense of the word. There is no one on the court, but you and your opponent.

On the other hand, team sports can to the perfect place for the right type of child. Naturally athletically gifted or early developing children will usually thrive in the team environment. The

constant support and feedback that they receive from a team is often just what these children need to succeed and reach their potential. Many children also desire this close connection to team mates and actually see this as the best part of playing the sport. Friendships made during sports seasons often last a life time. Even for children that do not excel in team sports, this factor should not be overlooked. The solo nature of individual sports might be lonely for certain children to participate in. Often, just being part of the team is all some children need to feel like winners. Being a team player is a highly desired skill among adults in our society. Team sports teach this much better than the individual sports, which should be self apparent. The ability to work with others can help you all your life.

Sometimes a team personality child just needs time to find their self confidence. An individual sport may be great at first, while the young athlete is developing. This doesn't mean they have to play that sport all their lives. Once a child's self esteem, strength, and coordination is built up, returning to team sports may be the best course of action.

3) Combat or Self Reliant Sports

Combat sports don't necessarily have anything to do with warfare. Combat sports place your child in direct competition with other children. Sports like football, volleyball, tennis, soccer, baseball, and judo are examples of combat sports. Self reliant sports, call for the competitor to excel over there own limitations. Sports like track, golf, gymnastic, skating, and bicycling are examples of self reliant sports. This may be a little confusing at first, since in golf tournaments you compete against other people to win. Golf is a self reliant sport, because while you are driving off the tee no one is rushing up to block the shot. In self reliant sports, you are mainly trying to defeat your own limitations. The goal is to play better than you did yesterday, not to defeat another player. Most team sports are combat in nature, which fits in well with the type of child that would excel in team sports. Individual sports vary widely in this regard. Some individual sports like boxing or fencing are very combative, while long distance running, bowling, or swimming are not combative.

Deciding which type of sport would be best for your child can be a difficult decision. Your child's own natural instincts are probably the best way to judge. Swimming lap after lap, alone in a chilly pool, is no problem for some athletes. Other children would hate the self motivative nature of this type of practice. These children would not be in a self reliant sport for long. They need the stimulation of being constantly pressed by another individual to strive above and beyond their self imposed limits. While combat sport children will find self reliant sports slower or boring, self reliant children may find combat sports too aggressive or stressful. If your child is exhibiting boredom or stress, perhaps they have just chosen the wrong type of sport. However, don't be surprised if your child enjoys both types of sports. Some children don't have a predisposition to either type of sport and will excel at both.

4) Born to Play

Laffit Pincay is the greatest champion to ever participate in his sport. He has won over 9000 races and has lead the sports money makers in seven individual years. Certainly he is one of the greatest athletes to ever play the sport and has been inducted into the Hall of Fame. If you're not familiar with Mr. Pincay, he is America's most winning thoroughbred horse racing jockey. Hard to argue with winning stats like these, but how good an athlete would Pincay have been if he had decided to play basketball? In a sport where a short player is six foot two, I don't think Pincay's short, light body frame (perfect for a jockey), would have made him a tough competitor in basketball. Likewise, a six foot five, 250 pound man is going to make a poor jockey. Pincay's naturally born physical attributes made him a perfect jockey, but would have limited him in other sports. Is this a problem for Pincay? Not at all. He loves horse racing and given the choice would not change his physical traits.

Choosing a sport that is physically compatible with your child's height, weight, bone structure, and natural physical abilities, can really help create a champion. However, as stated before, being a champion is not always the goal in sports. It's about being a winner, which you can do without becoming a champion. Be that as it may, many children have dreams of being a champion. Setting up dreams in a sport that does not match your child's natural gifts is setting that child up for a fall.

There are always exceptions to any rule. Spud Web was a professional basketball player at a height of only five foot seven. Spud Web even won slam dunk contests. On the other hand, how many NBA players are under six feet tall? Not many. The odds can be beaten, but it makes the task more difficult. On the other end of the spectrum, Manute Bol was selected to be a professional basketball player and he had barely ever played the game before. At seven foot, seven inches tall, his coach stated, "you can't teach height." His natural born gifts were a benefit that served him well in this sport, making the task easier.

Selecting a sport suited to your child is not as hard as it may seem. The beautiful thing about athletics, is that there is a sport for everyone. Tall, short, thin, stocky, powerful, wirier, no matter how you are built, you can find a sport that gives you an advantage. Finding such a sport can be as simple as talking to a coach or trainer. They can usually tell you quickly what type of athletes make the best players.

This factor is the least important for the four listed here so far. Often a child can feel like a winner by simply playing the game. If your daughter is six foot tall at age 11 and still wants to try gymnastics (a sport where shorter, smaller champions reign), let her try. The worst thing in life is to look back and say, "I wish I had." Better to try and fail, then not to try at all. Your daughter may enjoy the experience or decide that this is not the best sport for her, when she has to struggle to do what others find easy.

5) A Head for the Game

Winning Kids/Winning Parents

What is a Winner? - Part Two

Temperament can really make or break a sport for a child. Understanding what makes a certain athlete tick in their sport is important. My father was a very good golfer. He would have loved to have seen me be a good golfer as well. Not a good plan for me. To be a good golfer you need great concentration, patience, and control over your emotions. I had the concentration, but the other two attributes were nowhere to be seen when I was young. I would slice a shot into the water and totally lose my concentration (not to mention my temper). Although I could hit the ball well, I was never a good golfer, or wanted to be. It is the “wanted to,” part of the equation that is the most important. Because the game didn’t match my temperament, I didn’t enjoy the game. I never felt connected to the sport. The more I tried, the more my temper got in the way. If you look at many of the great golf champions, you will notice that they are clam and collected under pressure.

In some sports, being able to get your adrenal pumping through emotions is actually a plus. Football, wrestling, and rugby come to mind. In such sports, the ability to be aggressive is almost a necessity for succeeding at the game.

Once again, listen to your child’s natural instincts. However, a child’s judgement can sometimes become clouded by the glimmer and glitz of a sport. This is often true for commercial sports such as Hockey or Baseball. They see it on television. They make heroes of big stars with shoe contracts, money, and fame. Worshiping these heroes can lead children into a sport that doesn’t fit them. A quiet, introspective child, may have a bad time of it on a Hockey team. In fact, their lack of aggression may even get them hurt.

Taking the time to evaluate the child and the sport, will lead you to a more enjoyable sports experience.