

Objectification of children

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Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Objectification of children
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To say that sport is a central institution in American life would be a gross understatement. The obsessive hold that sport has on Americans is obvious to anyone who spends more than five minutes examining the culture. As we approach the mid-winter festival of the Super Bowl such an obsession seems self-evident.

Beyond Super Sunday and deeply imbedded in the society is the notion that somehow sport leads to the Holy Grail. If only one can succeed at sport the world will be at your feet. Fame, wealth, popularity, and self-fulfillment will be yours. This is the dream of the young, but it seems even more so that it is the dream of parents, who dream these dreams for their children and through their children for themselves. The child as surrogate for the parent has reached pathological levels in sportsworld.

Similar in quality and effect are the dreams of other adults who ride the carousel of sportsworld pursuing dreams of their own on the backs of children and young adults. Coaches, university and secondary school administrators, television executives, product pitchmen, and a vast army of parasites and barnacles have attached themselves to the rich underbelly of sportsworld seeking riches of their own.

This has infected families as well as teams and made willing victims out of young children who learn to dream the dreams of sportsworld and lust for the rewards it dangles before them. In addition, there are the unwilling victims exploited by parents, coaches, and the fantasies of modern sport.

Every now and then incidents of striking and disgusting character are exposed to public view and illustrate, in the most startling and crude fashion, the worst consequences of the various obsessions with sport. These are extreme cases, but it should not be forgotten that they grow directly out of the American sports culture. They are the illogical outcomes of a distorted set of values in a society obsessed with sport, but they should not be dismissed as freakish aberrations. They are harbingers of a deepening malfunction of values in the world of sport.

Two cases involving parents and their children have reached the sporting press in the past few months. In November police were

called to a Gilbertville, Iowa home where a fourteen-year-old boy had assaulted his mother. What they found, in addition to the victim and the assailant, was a forty-four year-old father. Todd Anthony Gerleman had pumped his son with anabolic steroids to make him more competitive in the highly competitive world of Iowa wrestling. Police found 105 pills and syringes in the boy's room.

Todd Gerleman admitted to injecting the boy and supplying him with pills. His aim was to "motivate" his son for sports. Gerleman's son attends Don Bosco High School in Gilbertville, a hotbed of wrestling that even with a small student enrollment has turned out a number of state wrestling champions. Its fans are described as intensely loyal and, as they say in the bowl game business, they travel well. Apparently Gerleman felt his son needed a few "helpers" to succeed in this highly charged sports environment.

A more celebrated case had its genesis in Michigan where Cory Gahan, a promising in-line and speed skater displayed world class skating potential. Corey's father, promoter, trainer, and mentor, Jim Gahan, was driven by a desire to transform his son into a world class winner. When Corey was thirteen his father started him on a drug regimen that ultimately derailed Corey's skating career, destroyed their father-son relationship, and put Jim Gahan in prison.

Corey moved to Florida with his father at age ten to train for in-line skating as a prelude to speed skating. When it appeared to Jim Gahan that Corey was not developing fast enough he changed coaches, Corey's father and his new coach put Corey on a pharmaceutical diet of human growth hormone and steroids. In a good family atmosphere, Jim and his son injected the drugs together, proving that the family that injects together doesn't necessarily stay together.

Corey began to grow and to win championships, moving into prominence in the skating world, breaking records as he went. With things going well Jim Gahan rewarded Corey with an assortment of goodies such as televisions, play-stations, and an American Express Gold Card. An intense workout program took a toll on Corey's body and so pain pills were added to the mix. The rise to the top ended when Corey tested positive for an assortment of drugs. (The full story can be read on-line at the Sports Illustrated website.)

The third story that caught my attention is one that may cast some light on the previous two stories. It came from the NCAA. At its convention the definition of men's basketball "prospects" was changed from "ninth" to "seventh" graders. This will allow the NCAA to regulate camps and the participation of coaches in those camps where parents send their aspiring middle school NBA prospects to develop their cash flow potential.

The idea is to protect the middle school students from college coaches and recruiters, but it also indicates that the blood suckers out there in NCAA basketball land are trying to recruit seventh and eighth grade "prospects." Is it any wonder with this sort of atmosphere surrounding college basketball that parents are also pushing the envelope with steroids and human growth hormone? When you add this to the practice of red-shirting children by holding them back from first grade for a year so that they will be bigger and stronger than their contemporaries as they move through primary to secondary school, you begin to get a feel for the problem.

Joe D'Antonio, chairman of the Division I Legislative Council of the NCAA, which approved the new rule, said, "The fact that we've got to this point is really just a sign of the times." What a happy thought for all those who look to sport to build character and develop leadership.

What all three of these cases share in common is an objectification of children who have been transformed into servants for the ambitions of others.

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