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Beaten to Death on Ice: Out of Control Parents and Youth Sports

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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On Friday forty-four year old Thomas Junta was convicted of involuntary manslaughter in the death of Michael Costin on July 5, 2000 in the Boston suburb of Reading. This piece of news is nothing extraordinary as similar items can be found in most daily newspapers across the country once or twice a year. What made this case of extraordinary interest across America, put it on Court TV, and attracted extensive coverage on the 24/7 news channels was the particular setting and circumstances of the case.

Thomas Junta got into an argument and then a fight with Michael Costin after a practice game of hockey during which Junta complained that referees were allowing too much rough play and that Costin was encouraging his three sons in this style of play. The two men got into a shouting match turned shoving match on the ice and Junta was asked by management to leave the building.

A minute later Junta returned pushing aside a rink attendant. Quickly the two men went at each other again. Junta got Costin down on the ice and while sitting on his chest beat Costin to death. Junta claimed he hit Costin only three times. A former Massachusetts medical examiner said that Costin died when an artery at the base of his brain was severed by a powerful use of force. Costin had injuries in fifteen places on his body.

A majority of jurors initially leaned toward conviction on the charge of voluntary manslaughter, but settled on the lesser charge of involuntary manslaughter, which carries a three to five year sentence. The more serious charge carried an eight to twelve year sentence.

This is the first reported death in an incident involving out-of-control parents at a youth sports event although other cases have produced grave injury including coma. So it is not the first case of out-of-control parents at youth sports, nor will it be the last. One can hope against hope that it will be the last death in such a setting.

Sports Illustrated (see July 24, 2000 issue for one example) has chronicled nearly forty such incidents over the last few years. Indeed anyone who goes to a youth sports event will likely see the seeds of such an incident

in the stands. Emotionally invested in their children, parents, both mothers and fathers, can turn into obnoxious, loud and vulgar people at what seems like only minor provocation.

This is not new. Over thirty years ago when I umpired Little League baseball I saw many a parent who was a disgrace to themselves and an embarrassment to their children. I know of cases of physical threat and verbal harassment, but in all these cases league authorities moved quickly to contain and control the situation. If necessary they banned offending parents from attending the events.

The problem is not with youth sports; it is with parents and adult authorities. It may well be that parents should not be trusted with this aspect of child rearing. In fact the late Ashley Montagu once argued that only licensed humans out to be allowed to reproduce and raise children and licenses be issued only after rigorous testing. I would not take it that far, but I would advocate a strong system of control over parents at any youth sports event. One example of this is the mandatory sportsmanship class for Little League parents in Jupiter, Florida. If that doesn't solve the problem, or is too much trouble, I would simply ban all adults from attendance.

During Mr. Junta's trial there was testimony that both this man and his victim were wonderful people, good fathers, and devoted husbands. I have no way to judge these claims but I can say that their behavior indicated that they were immature adults with very poor judgement. They were bad role models for their children and the children of others. They had no grasp of sportsmanship and very little good sense.

The result is that one father is dead and the other will be removed from his children for a limited amount of time. This should be a reminder that we live in a society where individual physical violence and intimidation are more the rule than the exception, and that these are qualities often fostered in sport. Given the level of gun toting in the United States it seems miraculous that a parental shootout has not occurred at a youth sports venue.

Whether this case will teach any lessons across the society remains to be seen, and if it does what are lessons?

Everyone involved in youth sports ought to be asking themselves that question today.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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