Get Off That Couch and Play!

The presence of competitive sports teams in public schools has come under fire in the media recently. While some argue that competition is damaging to young people and spotlight the rare incidences of sports injuries, the benefits are significant.

First and foremost, when team sports are an important part of a school’s culture, the halo around sports leads more young people to become involved in them, and this is especially important during adolescence when students are developing self-images and social skills. Competitive sports are a great way to get kids active. In a nation with an obesity epidemic and a rate of diabetes that continues to grow, physical activity is becoming more and more important. Participating in teams can teach young people how to live healthy lifestyles.

Competitive sports have other benefits, beyond just building physical strength and influencing a healthy lifestyle. The challenges young people encounter when participating in competitive sports mirror those they will encounter in their lives. Students learn important life skills such as how to accept criticism, how to handle oneself under the pressure of competition, how to work hard toward a goal, how to win and lose graciously.

Many children who compete on sports teams also experience a heightened sense of belonging to something larger, and have shown increased signs of confidence and self-esteem.
If we choose to let him take the field again, we’ll do our best to learn from all of the information that’s come to light. Before the season begins, we’ll take Will to a neurologist for baseline testing. If he takes another hit like the one this season, he’ll go back to the neurologist, who will do a proper examination to determine when, or even if, he’s fit to return.

One day, helmets may come equipped with sensors that measure the impact of each blow a player takes. Perhaps neurologists will populate the sidelines in the same numbers as trainers and those guys who squirt electrolyte-replacement drinks into players’ mouths. Whatever happens, we’ll no doubt remember this era as one of those “before” times, much as we recall automobiles before seat belts and airbags or restaurants before smoking bans.

This Sunday afternoon, I am taking Will and his brother Theo to see our beloved Philadelphia Eagles. Theo will sport a Donovan McNabb jersey, and Will will don Brian Westbrook’s 36. Only Westbrook won’t be playing; he’s out after sustaining a pair of concussions.

When I told Will that I wished Westbrook would play, he shook his head.

“He shouldn’t play until he feels 100 percent better,” Will said. “Because even though football is all he does, he still needs his brain.”

Once again Will reminded me that no matter how many articles parents read, we can still learn plenty by listening to our children.

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