

The Unkindest Cut

Youth Sports Are for Everyone, Not Just the 'Talented'

By **BILL GLOVIN**

NUTLEY S there any coach in history with more egg on his face than Michael Jordan's high school basketball coach? Jordan, who was cut in his sophomore year, got over it and then some. But millions of other children — many of them much younger than he was — receive an athletic pink slip each year and never return to organized sports.

In just about any town in New Jersey, 7-to-17-year-olds are cut each year in tryouts that can last just an hour or two. This is less true of recreational leagues than of school leagues, where, as Jeff Carlson, training director for the 1,600-member Marlboro Soccer Association, put it, "either you make the team or get cut; there's no in-between." But in recreational leagues, the level of coaching and commitment is often lacking.

Growing up in Fair Lawn and trying out for Little League or high school teams, my friends and I were shocked each year by some of the names left off the roster by coaches who had sized up my classmates' ability and potential in a single afternoon. And there were times we all knew that the only reason a player had made the team was that he was a friend of the coach's son.

Is it really possible to make a fair and accurate assessment of someone based on 10 cuts at the plate or a couple of shooting drills? Not only did many of those who deserved to make the teams get cut, but I watched many of those who didn't make it develop, both physically and mentally, into fine athletes. Today

Bill Glovin is senior editor of Rutgers Magazine.

they still shake their heads at the absurdity of the experience, or empathize with their children, who must face the same sorry system.

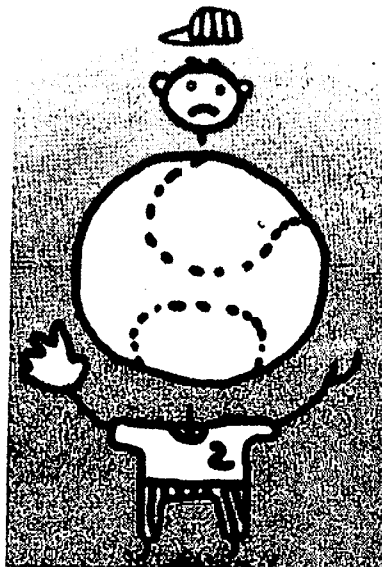
According to David Feigley, a Rutgers University sports psychologist who has conducted research on the impact of sports on the development of children and adolescents, a few months' difference in age can

with hard work, anything is possible, but then cut those without natural talent before giving them a chance to succeed? When your children get older, they'll realize — or their friends will tell them — that there's a difference between talent and effort. Maybe they'll figure that if trying your best makes you look bad, it's better to not try at all.

School administrators and recreation departments need to bend over backward to include more children who want to be included. It's easy to argue that it boils down to economics, that no one wants to see expenses (or property taxes) raised so a few more kids can sit on the end of the bench. But that's the easy way out. Are we being as creative or trying as hard as we should? Let's cut down on the fancy uniforms, turn a field or a gym sideways if space is limited, or hold bake sales or car washes to raise the money to lease an extra bus or buy a few more balls.

The approach will pay dividends. Study after study has found that children involved in sports have higher self-esteem than those who are not; that they are more likely to avoid drugs and alcohol, unwanted pregnancies and all the other problems that come with boredom, and that they develop healthy habits that last into adulthood. If we reject children who want to play, it's a burden they'll carry for the rest of their lives.

Youth sports should be about development, education and fun. Instead, too often our schools and recreational leagues make them about selection and competitiveness. If there's a message in the Games that end in Atlanta today — a worldwide assembly of great athletes who got where they are not just through talent but through effort, dedication and teamwork — it is surely that sports need to be inclusive, not exclusive.



John Cayea

make a major impact in success and failure rates. He cites a Canadian study showing that children born in the first few months of a given year are significantly more likely to succeed in youth sports than those born in the last two months of a year. Those born later were typecast, given inferior coaching or cut — or they simply quit. So much for a level playing field.

Athletics gives children life lessons; it's up to us to make sure they get the right ones. Why preach that