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Survey takes snapshot of Ohio youth sports

By Jill Riepenhoff, The Columbus Dispatch | 11.09.2010

In the unregulated world of youth sports, about 40 million young athletes are competing outside of school contests. But little data exists about the risks to children.

No one exclusively tracks injuries suffered outside school sports, use of supplements among young athletes or bad influences on the game.

While there are data about the number of college athletic scholarships available, there is little information about the number of young athletes chasing the dream.

Last fall, reporters Todd Jones, Mike Wagner and I set out to explore the world of youth sports. As parents of young athletes, we each had witnessed the darker side of youth sports. We knew of out-of-control or obsessive parents and coaches, burned-out or injured children and the misguided motivations of many who pushed athletes to succeed at all costs.

The question was, were these incidents anomalies or a growing threat to children's games?

We decided that one way to confirm and quantify what we had seen anecdotally was to survey kids and coaches.

With no roster of children who play youth sports, we decided to enlist high-school students and coaches from the 88 school districts and private schools in the seven-county central Ohio area to participate in an online survey.

We also called officials at Ohio's eight largest universities seeking to survey their athletes and coaches.

Contacting officials at 96 schools by phone was no small task. It took three reporters about a month. But once we were able to catch the principal, superintendent or spokesman on the phone, they all seemed keenly interested in our project. Some offered their opinions of what was right or wrong with youth sports; they told outrageous stories of children they knew who traveled great distances to compete. They applauded our efforts to quantify the state of youth sports in our area.

All but a handful agreed to participate.

We left it up to each individual school to decide how they would circulate the letter we had crafted explaining the project and the URLs to the survey. Some emailed the link to students and/or their parents. Some posted it on their websites, while others distributed paper copies to students.

Columbus City Schools, the largest school district in Ohio, said it had no way to communicate with its 14,000 high-school students. So we made paper copies of our letter for each student and delivered them ourselves to its 16 high schools.

We collaborated with *Dispatch* Public Affairs Editor Darrel Rowland to help write unbiased questions for the survey. His years of polling experience helped us strengthen the questions and ranges for answers.

For example, our first draft of questions often had two choices as an answer: yes or no. He said there almost always is a third choice: "I don't know;" "I don't care;" "Neither;" "Sometimes," and so on.

His advice led to some powerful questions and surprising answers. For example, consider this question posed to high-school coaches: Do you think supplements or protein drinks help high-school-aged athletes reach peak performance? Nearly 30 percent of coaches answered "not sure." That was a shocking finding, considering that nearly all experts in child development preach the dangers of giving unregulated products to anyone under age 18.

The multiple-choice questionnaires focused on all aspects of youth sports: sport specialization, scholarships, injuries, performance-enhancing drug use, finances and coaching quality, behavior of parents and coaches, and more.

The *Dispatch* marketing staff built the online survey with Snap Survey software. They created different URLs for each school in an attempt to control any sabotage, because we had no way to track individual emails. (Due to the federal student privacy law, FERPA, we were unable to secure high-school students email addresses. They are not considered directory information.) When the links went live, we called all the schools and colleges again to encourage participation. As results trickled in, we continued to call the schools.

In the end, more than 1,000 students and 218 coaches from 39 schools participated in the survey. At the college level, only students and coaches from Ohio State participated. But to us, their opinions mattered most among college athletes because they had reached one of the highest pinnacles in amateur sports by competing at one of the most elite programs in the country. (In central Ohio, almost all children are indoctrinated to be Buckeyes.)

Respondents represented a cross section of central Ohio, including students and coaches from suburban, rural and urban communities.

Our marketing department compiled the results in 42 Microsoft Excel spreadsheets – 39 spreadsheets tallied responses from students participating high schools (one for each school), one for the all responses from high school coaches, one for OSU coaches' responses, and one of OSU athletes' responses. We segregated each population in the spreadsheets as a way to protect the integrity of the survey. We decided early on that we would eliminate results from an entire school if too responses seemed suspicious.

I examined each record. About 30 responses from high-school students were deleted because of suspicious answers, including one who used an expletive as an email address and another who played every sport — both girls and boys. All of the coaches and college students' responses appeared legitimate. Everyone had the option of including their names and contact information. Many did.

I made a master table for each subset — high-school students, high-school coaches, OSU coaches and OSU athletes — in Microsoft Access database manager. Once I completed tidying up the data, SPSS statistical software took over. The *Dispatch* hosted IRE Training Director Doug Haddix for a crash course on the analytical software, which I was familiar but hardly comfortable using.

But with fresh training, I ran frequencies and cross tabulations, which created handy and easy-to-read reports for editors and team members.

The results became the backbone to our five-day series, Little Leagues, Big Costs, that found, among other things:

Half of the high-school athletes said they started playing sports as young as 6 and quickly felt the need to press on if they wanted to someday earn a spot on the high-school varsity team or win a college scholarship.
More than 40 percent said their parents pressured them to play, and 10 percent said their parents' behavior during games embarrassed them.
Nearly 80 percent of Ohio State coaches said youth-sports venues provide the most fertile recruiting ground. And they coach sports most favored by youth: basketball, ice hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball and volleyball.
Nearly 90 percent of the high-school coaches, most of whom also coach youth-sports teams, said they fear that youth sports cause burnout, injuries and bad athletic habits. Their concern is so great that two-thirds of the coaches said that youth sports needs a governing body similar to the Ohio High School Athletic Association or the NCAA.

Reaction to the series was overwhelmingly positive. Even before the series ended, Ohio State Athletics Director Gene Smith called the newspaper to talk about solutions, namely, that the Ohio High School Athletic Association, the governing body of high-school sports, should take control of youth sports in Ohio. Ironically, top officials at OHSAA also had been sketching out a plan to bring youth sports under its umbrella and provide uniformity after reading the series. Their efforts to rein in youth sports continue.

One of the series' greatest compliments came from Daniel Gould, director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at the Michigan State University.

"It's one of the best things I've ever seen. It's a public service. What I liked about it is that it was thorough and in-depth on a very important topic that I don't think we pay enough attention to when you look at the number of children participating in sports in America," Gould said.

"It did a really nice job of having depth," he said, "but it was written so regular people could understand it. I liked how it pointed out the problems without indicting all the people who volunteer their time to make kids' lives better. It was not a witch hunt."