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Conference to Explore Concerns, Challenges of Youth Sports

ORONO, Maine -- The most controversial issues and best practices in youth sports are on the agenda for scrutiny and discussion at a statewide conference which organizers are describing as long overdue.

Sponsored by the Maine Center for Coaching Education, in cooperation with the Maine Recreation and Park Association, the Friday, Nov. 14 conference will examine the increasingly competitive, high-pressure nature of youth sports and the role and responsibilities of coaches, parents and league sponsors in making sports a positive experience for all youngsters who want to participate. The focus will be on children in kindergarten through middle school, the major developmental years and, starting around fourth grade, the time that selective youth leagues enter the picture.

Gary Thorne, ESPN broadcaster and voice of the New York Mets, will be the keynote speaker at the conference, running from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Augusta Civic Center. He will join some of Maine's most experienced coaches, sports psychologists, child development experts, representatives of national coaching education programs, school administrators, parents and other presenters who will conduct a variety of sessions on issues and best practice in youth sports.

The intent is to bring together everyone involved in youth sports to discuss concerns such as the exclusion of youngsters by elite teams, coaches' training, parental pressure, the growing emphasis on winning rather than participation, and unrealistic expectations for children and coaches, in addition to what's working well in Maine communities, according to Keith Lancaster, coordinator of the Maine Center for Coaching Education (MCCE) at the University of Maine, and Deborah Bowker, director of the Skowhegan Parks and Recreation Department. Bowker also is president of the Maine Recreation and Park Association and chairs the MCCE's Youth Sports Committee. They encourage the participation of coaches, youth sports organization leaders, parents and school administrators. The goal of the conference, "Competition and the Child: Challenges Confronting Youth Sports," is to provide greater understanding and awareness of concerns and issues, and promote making sports accessible and a positive experience.

A similar conference 20 years ago addressed many of the same concerns. "These are common sense issues, but they're still with us," says Bowker.

Although a number of issues will be presented and discussed, the organizers say the most controversial and troublesome topics are specialization in one sport at an early age and selective teams that cut and exclude participation of children.

There's a growing trend for parents to concentrate training and practice on one sport with the unrealistic expectation of a child gaining widespread recognition and winning major
scholarships, according to Bowker and Lancaster. In addition, they say, as youth sports programs grow more competitive and parents and coaches put greater emphasis on winning, there is an increasing tendency toward selection by ability rather than broad participation.

Children are being rejected at far too early an age, according to Lancaster and Bowker who point out that the experience of a fourth grader being told he or she isn't good enough for the team can have damaging consequences and discourage further participation in sports. Parents and coaches should be encouraging participation in a variety of sports with the intent of having a good time and learning new skills and the value of teamwork, they emphasize.

Schools and community organizations need to take a good look at their philosophy about participation, according to Bowker. "The overriding belief is that all children can participate and have fun, but when only a certain number of kids can be involved on a team or when exclusionary teams use public facilities and receive town funding, that's not adhering to the principle of broad participation," she says.

Initiated by the MCCE's Youth Sports Committee, the conference is being planned by a committee that includes a cross-section of interested organizations such as the Maine Principals' Association, Maine Recreation and Park Association, the American Sport Education Program, the National Youth Sports Coaches' Association and others.

We all know that the problems and pressures of coaching, managing programs, and dealing with aggressive parents are tremendous, and we agree that education is the key to help coaches and parents understand that sports should be about letting kids have fun and experience all the benefits of a good sports experience," says Lancaster. "We hope the conference will help make that job easier and result in a better experience for all the children and young adolescents who want to be included in youth sports."

The conference cost, including lunch, is $20 per person. Registration is required. More information and registration are available by calling the Maine Center for Coaching Education at UMaine's College of Education & Human Development, (207) 581-2443. (Media note: Keith Lancaster can be reached at the Maine Center for Coaching Education, (207) 581-2443; Deborah Bowker's phone number is (207) 634-4598).