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Conference to Explore Middle Level Sports Concerns, Research

ORONO, Maine – Wedged between controversial youth sports and competitive high school athletics, middle school athletes and their interests are often overlooked. Yet, that’s where many students drop out of sports because of lack of opportunity or negative experiences, according to organizers of a statewide conference that will focus on the concerns and issues of middle level athletics.

The March 5-6 Conference on Middle Level Sports will include presentations on timely topics such as alternatives to cutting kids from sports, pros and cons of tournaments and championships, recruiting and keeping teachers in coaching, school and community teams competing for the same child, and the latest research about the status of middle level sports in Maine and at the national level.

Sponsored by the Maine Center for Coaching Education (MCCE) at the University of Maine and its Middle Level Task Force, the conference will be held at the Augusta Civic Center. The conference is geared for school and community coaches and administrators, parents and everyone interested in the sports experience for students in grades five through eight.

“There are no easy answers, but we hope people will share information at the conference and go home with some new approaches and motivation to explore solutions,” says Keith Lancaster, director of the MCCE.

Two sessions particularly aimed at parents are planned for Wednesday evening, March 5. Bob Bigelow, former NBA/Boston Celtics player, now a popular lecturer and advocate for developmentally appropriate sports for children of all ages, will give a keynote address titled “Adult Dreams, Kids’ Games: What Should Kids, Parents and Coaches Expect from Middle Level Sports Programs.” His 6 p.m. talk will be followed by a session on how parents can make sports positive for their children presented by the UMaine-based National Center for Student Aspirations, as well as a panel of students discussing what kids want from middle level sports programs. The evening activities are free and open to the public.

March 6 events begin at 9 a.m. with a welcome by Robert Cobb, dean of the UMaine College of Education and Human Development, and a keynote address by John Giannini, UMaine men’s basketball coach, exploring where the emphasis should be in middle level sports.

What research indicates about middle level sports will be examined in the afternoon by Professors John Swaim of Otterbein College (Ohio) and Kenneth McEwin of Appalachian State University (NC), who will report the results of their national survey.
In addition, the session will include information from a recent survey of Maine middle schools and their sports programs, conducted by UMaine Professor Edward Brazee. Among the most compelling issues identified by respondents were: finding and keeping qualified coaches; the discrepancy between the middle level developmentally appropriate philosophy and competitive high school-like practices; poor parental support and behavior; and lack of adequate facilities.

The Maine research also found that 96 percent of the approximately 120 middle school responding sponsor interscholastic athletics, but only 42 percent sponsor an intramural program; and that 68 percent of schools allow students to be cut, but only 8 percent have intramural programs in those sports as alternatives.

Brazee, a member of the statewide MCCE Middle Level Task Force, says an important conference goal is to provide an understanding of what middle level athletics can and should be. “Too often, sports seem like a separate stand-alone program to a school philosophy that emphasizes opportunities for students to experience a variety of activities and have fun in a non-competitive environment,” he says.

More information about the conference and registration is available from the MCCE by calling (207) 581-2443; or e-mailing Lancaster at keith.lancaster@umit.maine.edu.

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