

The Tipping Point in Youth Sports



by John O'Sullivan - November 2016

"What happens to us parents and coaches," I often get asked, "that turns us from sensible, relaxed people to stressed out adults roaming up and down sports sidelines and screaming at every play?"

It is a question I ponder a lot, especially as I often get to watch my young children's games played side by side with "competitive" youth soccer games. The parents on our sideline look next door and ask me "what is going on over there, why are they freaking out?"

The other day over a cup of coffee, I discussed this question with my longtime friend Paul, the father of 2 college-age athletes. We discussed what makes youth sports tip (the word used by Malcolm Gladwell in his book **The Tipping Point**) from a relaxed, child centered environment to the ultra-competitive, win at all costs one we see far too often these days. This environment contributes a great deal to the 70% dropout rate in youth sports by age 13, yet it persists, and continues to expand. Paul had some interesting insight.

"It is the balance of patience and expectations," he said. "When our kids start off in sports, we have loads of patience, we know they will make mistakes, and that's OK. Our expectation for them to be successful at something they have just started doing is very low, so we don't get too worked up when they make errors, or when they lose. But that doesn't last long.

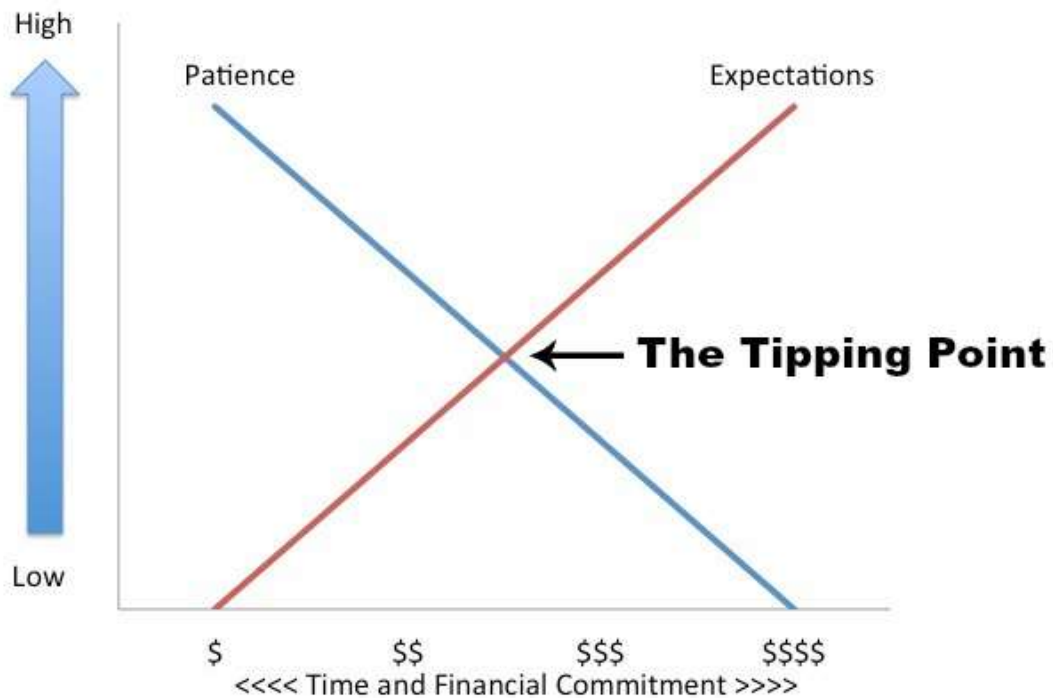
I believe Paul hit the nail on the head. As parents begin to invest more time and money in youth sports, very quickly their patience for development begins to dwindle, often must faster than it should. They see 11 year olds on ESPN and worry that their kid is falling behind, or go into panic mode when their team loses a few games.

They forget that development is not a sprint; it's a marathon.

At the same time, we see adult expectations rise too fast. We want instant success, abundant victories, and perfection on every play. We want focus on long-term goals, instead of the moment. **We forget that these are not mini-adults; they are kids. They do not value the same things we do, nor should they.**

Pretty soon, we reach the youth sports tipping point, where all of a sudden our expectations for our children's success and playing ability surpasses our patience and understanding of development. We reach a tipping point, as shown by the image below. That's when it all starts to get a little nutty.

Patience vs. Expectations in Sport



Sadly, I see this tipping point moving younger and younger. Parents are enrolling their kids in all star programs and high-cost travel teams in 2nd or 3rd grade. We have cuts being made at age 7 or 8, and youth sports organizations promising more competitive training, more tournaments, higher level games, and better outcomes if you just enroll the child in this year round program as soon as possible. We are told to pay more money, invest more time, and expect more results.

But no one asked the kids if this is what they want. Sure, they like competitive games, but they want to also play with their friends. Sure travel is fun, but every weekend? Yes, they understand they need to practice, but it still MUST BE FUN. Yes, they want to win, but they still want the freedom to be creative, explore, try new things, and yes, even make mistakes!

They never said they wanted to stop playing sports and turn it into a job!

Across many youth sports, I see the tipping point often reached by age 10 or 11. The fees have been high for a few years. The team is told it needs better results to get into more prestigious events and leagues.

Soon, youth sports tips from being a child-driven, child-focused activity to an adultified version of kids' games that is outcome driven, and focused upon practice instead of play, and results instead of development.

Our patience is gone!

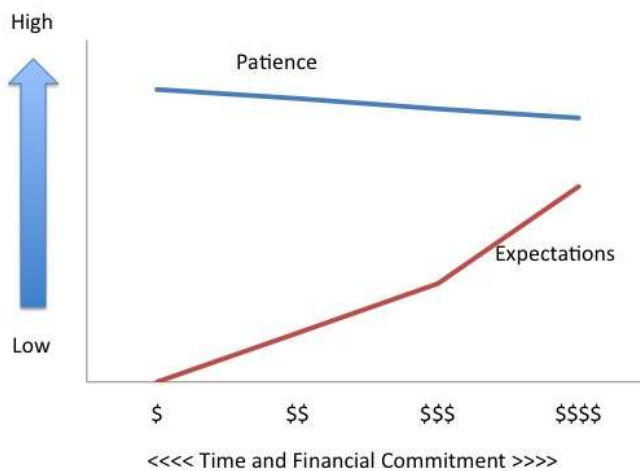
As a result, parents worry more about every loss or bad game. Coaches worry that kids will jump ship to the team that won. The adults on the sideline get anxious over results, angry with officials, and stressed out when their "investment" is not paying off. **Expectations are sky high, patience is low, and we reach the tipping point.**

Everything changes. Well, almost everything.

The one thing that has not changed at the tipping point is the fact that the athletes are still only kids. They are kids who want to play, and not sit the bench because of some misplaced emphasis on winning! They are kids who want to enjoy themselves, and have the games belong to them, and not the adults who incessantly yell, scream and micromanage every play. They are kids who want to learn, and not fear getting yelled at and criticized for every mistake. They are kids who have not yet grown, or are growing and trying to figure out how to move in their new body. Some of them are even kids who care more about the post game snack than the result! We have lost patience with them too!

If we want to take some of the madness out of youth sports we must rebalance patience and expectations. It should look more like this:

Patience vs. Expectations: What it Should Look Like



We must maintain a high level of patience, and keep our expectations in check. **In fact, perhaps our patience should never go below our expectations.** That should only happen in the hearts and minds of our kids. When they expect more than they can give, and they no longer have the patience and persistence to keep plugging away, perhaps they will step away. But it should be their decision.

We need all the adults involved in youth sports to take a stand on behalf of our kids, and we can do this by keeping patience and expectations in their proper perspective. Here are three ways to make this happen:

1. Have patience for the process:

Paying more money does not change the fact that talent development is a long drawn out process. You cannot buy success and you cannot take a shortcut, nor should you!

Think about it this way; do you want your child to win every single game they play this season? That can be arranged. Just play against inferior teams, in a lower league, or against younger and less experienced kids, and voila, undefeated!

But why? The competition is not good, the players will not be challenged, improve as quickly, and will eventually get bored. Winning all their games or matches is NOT CONDUCIVE to developing an athlete for the long term. They need challenge, failure, tight losses, tight wins, some easy games, some difficult ones, but always they need a carrot dangled ahead that says, "good, now do this."

So if we can agree that winning all games from here to eternity is not a good thing, then why do we get so freaked out when we lose a few? Why do we lose patience when our kids have a bad game, or a bad week, or a bad month? This is not only supposed to happen, it is a great thing when it happens! Embrace this!

2. Have high expectations for the right things

Instead of expecting instant development, abundant wins, and flawless performances from our kids, how about we start expecting a few things that sports should be delivering, **namely coaches who are positive role models and organizations that emphasize character, good values, proper long term athletic development, and put winning in its rightful place!**

I am consistently amazed that well-intentioned adults put their kids with "winning" coaches that treat their children poorly, do not display any positive character traits, and do not act in a way that they would ever allow their child to act. Bad sportsmanship, poor role models and trying to shortcut player development are things we should have little patience for, but often I see parents turning their backs on this type of behavior if the team wins.

Parents should expect more character development and positive life lessons from their coaches and sports organizations, because they are capable of delivering those in abundance. **If your coach tells you that is not his or her job, run, and run fast. That is not the type of coach you want for your child.** Far too many coaches simply choose not to teach character through sport because it is hard, and hide behind the façade of "developing winners" and being in the "pre-super elite league." It is total BS they are feeding parents, and if parents start focusing and expecting the right things, coaches will start delivering.

3. After every event, always ask “What’s good about this?”

Whether your child’s team wins or loses, ask “why is this a good thing, what did we learn?” If your child makes a mistake, or misses the game winning shot, there is a laundry list of items that can be positive about that experience if you help them frame it correctly. When you start finding the good, you start lowering your expectations of perfection and your fear of the bad. When you start finding the good, you will feel your patience rising and stress level dropping.

Most importantly, when you start finding the good in every situation, and help your child do the same, you develop your child’s character, grit, persistence, integrity, gratitude, and more. You reduce fear of failure. You build confidence. And you make your child optimistic, one of the greatest gifts you can give a child, and one of the characteristics of the world’s best athletes.

It’s high time to demand more of the right things (values, role models, character, and development on and off the field), and less of the wrong ones (immediate linear development and weekly success). Its time for more patience, and tempered expectations.

Let’s push that tipping point much further down the road, and keep our sidelines behaving in a way that actually helps, instead of hurts our children’s development and love of sports.

In fact, why not get rid of that tipping point all together. If we do that, it will keep more kids in sports. It will develop more athletes who perform better and enjoy themselves while playing. It will reduce our stress level as parent and coaches. And it will return youth sports to its rightful owners, the youth!