

Pain? No Gain

I know people always appreciate unsolicited advice about how to raise their children, especially when it comes from those who are not parents themselves. So this column should go over great!

Recently, I had to go to physical therapy for the first time. I fell off the stage during an improv performance (I am a gifted physical comedienne) and landed hard on my right ankle. It was a bad sprain, and while it's OK now, it gives me an occasional reminder that I once threw all my weight atop it at an angle that God did not intend. Mostly, it's just embarrassing to say I fell off a stage. More than two injury-free decades of sports, and it's theater that sends me to physical therapy? Lame.

On the upside, I am one of a lucky few who made it to the ripe old age of 28 without requiring medical attention for an injury. At least, that's how I felt after reading "Until It Hurts: America's Obsession with Youth Sports and How it Harms Our Kids" by Mark Hyman. Hyman, a *Business Week* contributor, went down the rabbit hole of the youth sports industrial complex following his son Ben's decision to have Tommy John surgery at the age of 18.

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Even though Hyman is a baseball guy and therefore fundamentally untrustworthy, I swear the book is full of good, useful information that's applicable to all sports. There's even a section about the much-touted Skywalkers girls' club program from the Baltimore area that churns out lots of NCAA lacrosse players, including 25 in the class of 2009 alone.

I read about pitchers, gymnasts, setters and sprinters who are "orthopedic time bombs" thanks to overuse injuries; about the perceived inevitability of the torn ACL for female athletes; about year-round sports calendars and training schedules with enough laps around the field to run to the moon and back.

Afterwards, I felt the same way I did after I read "The Jungle." Upton Sinclair's stomach-turning account of life in Chicago's meatpacking district briefly turned this enthusiastic carnivore into a vegetarian. After "Until It Hurts," I swore as-yet unborn Clare

Jr. would never set foot on a field or court until she is of voting age. But that is not Hyman's intent. It's to give a nudge to parents whose good intentions pave the road to...well, you know.

"Even now I don't feel that I was a horrible sports parent, some kind of monster lunatic parent that you read about in the papers. But that's exactly the point that I was trying to make. These problems are not confined to the lunatic

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fringe," says Hyman.

It's easy to believe that as long as you're not the hockey dad going "Jerry Springer" on a coach after practice, or at least not the most banshee-like mom at the lacrosse game, you're not the part of the problem. But that might not be the case. Behavior that is rooted in good things like pride and well-meaning

encouragement can get off track.

"When I watched my son throw strikes, I went from 5'7½" to 5'9". You can't explain it rationally, but you feel it reflects on you in a very personal way," says Hyman.

That emotional boost can lead to too many camps, teams and wall ball, and not enough hobbies, free time and much-needed rest. Kids' muscles and brains require R&R every so often, which is hard to remember when your daughter has just been invited to join a really exclusive travel team that's going to Florida over Thanksgiving break for a tournament where there will definitely be lots of Division I coaches.

One of the most practical takeaways from the book is to ask your child before each season if she wants to play lacrosse, just to check to make sure it's what she wants to do. (Automatic enrollment works great for savings accounts, not so much for youth sports.) Give it a try on this year's fall leagues.

If you have an enthusiastic athlete on your hands, she will roll her eyes

and look at you like you're nuts for even asking, but as I recall that was pretty much standard operating procedure for every conversation I had with my parents between the years of 1991 and 2002(ish).

However, if she is burnt out, the question gives her an opportunity to speak up about it. No harm in doing that, right? *LM*