

A Survey of Youth Sports Finds Winning Isn't the Only Thing

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At a time when sports tutors seem as plentiful as piano teachers and high school games are routinely nationally televised, Peter Barston has learned something important about youth sports.



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Mike Barston, left, with his son Peter, who has toured youth leagues in Darien, Conn., asking youngsters their reasons for playing sports.

Adults may lean toward turning children's games into an approximation of professional sports. But ask young players what they want, and the answer can be disarmingly simple. More than training to be a [Super Bowl](#) star, more than even winning, youngsters play sports for fun — at least they do in Darien, Conn., Barston said.

He has not proved that scientifically. But a research project spearheaded by Barston, a sophomore at Fairfield Prep, makes an intriguing case that while parents dream big, their children focus on the small stuff.

Since August, Barston has toured youth leagues in Darien, asking this question: Why do you play sports?

So far, he has polled about 255 members of the Darien Junior Football League, who range from fourth grade to eighth grade, and 470 boys and girls in the same grades from the Darien [Y.M.C.A.](#) basketball league. Barston, 15, has begun to survey players in the local softball program. Next

up are baseball players and, if he receives permission from league officials, lacrosse players.

The project was born of curiosity — and happenstance. Last summer, his father, Mike, who serves on the board of the junior baseball league, attended a workshop by the [Positive Coaching Alliance](#), a national organization advocating a kinder youth sports culture. The presentation referred to a 20-year-old study by scientists at Michigan State’s [Institute for the Study of Youth Sports](#) who had polled young athletes about their reasons for participating in sports.

Barston and his 12-year-old brother, Stephen, took that survey at their father’s urging. Then, with his father’s encouragement, Barston began pondering a local version.

“I thought it would be really interesting to update it for Darien,” he said.

The survey is a single page listing 11 reasons children might have for playing sports, including the laid-back (to have fun, to make friends) and the purposeful (to win, to earn a college scholarship). Like the Michigan State researchers, Barston instructed the Darien players to assign points based on the importance of the reasons for a total of 100.

From the mound of data he gathered, Barston found a striking pattern. No matter how he categorized the responses, the most important reason youngsters gave for playing sports was the same: to have fun. That was the top response from football and basketball players, from boys and from girls, and from players in each grade from fourth to eighth. In the basketball survey, 95 percent of boys and 98 percent of girls cited fun as a reason for playing, nearly twice the number who mentioned winning.

Barston does not say that his poll is statistically accurate. But it is a window into what offensive linemen and power forwards think about sports and might say to their parents and coaches — if they were asked.

“It shows kids are out there to get away from their lives and have a good time with their friends,” Barston, a recreation league second baseman, said. “They’re not out there just to win.”

His preliminary findings are not far from what the Michigan State researchers Martha Ewing and Vern Seefeldt concluded in 1989. Their study of 28,000 boys and girls around the country asked, Why do you play sports? The top answer then was “fun,” followed by “to do something I’m good at” and “to improve my skills.” “Winning” did not crack the top 10.

When told about Barston’s survey, Ewing said: “It’s a great project. Within communities, parents and sport organizations need to do more of it — talk to the athletes.”

Barston said his initial reason for undertaking the survey was simply to compare the views of young athletes today with those from 20 years ago. He estimated that he had spent more than 100 hours on the project, and now he is thinking bigger.

Barston has been toying with the idea of starting a Web site where he would post data and encourage other young people to start “Why Do You Play?” projects.

“The Web site idea is very preliminary,” he said. “I am trying to think of ways to spread the word and get other people to do this in their hometowns.”

Parents and league officials in Darien have praised Barston’s efforts. Guy Wisinski, a member of the junior football league’s board, said the survey was a “touch of reality” for adults.

“It reminds us why kids play sports in the first place,” he said. “It’s not about winning a championship in the fourth grade and having that be a life achievement.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: February 7, 2010

An article last Sunday about a high school sophomore who surveyed young athletes in Darien, Conn., to find out why they played sports misidentified the sport his father is involved with. Mike Barston, who encouraged his son Peter to update and localize a 20-year-old national study, serves on the board of a youth baseball — not football — league