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Give back to the kids who keep industry alive

RICK BURTON

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I frequently use this column to sound warnings for our industry or worry about societal trends. Baseball is in trouble. Kids don't play outside enough. Technology is changing the world. I'm sure some of you think I see the glass as half empty. If that's the case, let me pour in some Gatorade or Powerade.

Our oldest daughter graduated from high school this spring. She's been swimming competitively for 10 years and plans to continue her athletic career at Syracuse this fall. As she accepted her diploma, my thoughts went back to all the benefits sport has provided in her young life.

Preparedness (Father: "If you don't bring your suit, you can't swim.")

Discipline (Mother: "Getting up for 5 a.m. practices is your responsibility. We're not waking you.")

Elation (PA Announcer: "That relay victory will make them state champions.")

Dejection (Daughter: "I missed qualifying for Junior Nationals by four-tenths of a second.")

Hard work (Coach: "We're doing 10,000 yards this morning and I don't want to hear any whining.")

Along the way, we paid swim club fees, bought suits, goggles, towels, T-shirts, sweatshirts, meals, stayed in hotels, bought airline tickets, bought gas, went to afternoon movies (waiting for evening swims), raised money and worked meets. We watched as various children moved from an inability to swim 50 yards into college scholarship recipients.

Our story is not unique. Many of you have seen the same thing with soccer, gymnastics, baseball, softball, volleyball, tennis, golf, basketball and hockey. Our children have represented a nice little industry for tourism, equipment manufacturers, facility managers and coaches.

That's why, as we looked down at our daughter (flanked by a son and daughter who played junior varsity lacrosse and ran junior high track), we were so pleased with the benefits sport provides our family.

We've encouraged our kids to reach for their own accomplishments and have been lucky enough to participate in those athletic endeavors.

Still, there are some constructive thoughts to add:

If you can afford it, support a less fortunate child. Pay their registration fee or help them get the right equipment to compete. Our industry depends on everyone getting the chance to play, including kids with disabilities or handicaps.

Support good coaches, but don't meddle in their coaching. Abusive parents and stressed coaches (trying to accommodate your ego or scholarship dreams) burn kids out. Our industry needs kids going to NCAA Division I -AA, II and III schools, the NAIA and junior colleges and community colleges.

Make sure your community has a civic agenda that encourages sport. As schools cut back on organized sports and mandatory physical education, your vote for parks, lifeguards, good lighting and playground supervisors is more meaningful than ever.

Take your child to a college, high school or junior high game. We read about the pros, their large contracts and their notable legal issues, but it is amateur sport where the games still make a difference. The same holds for women's pro sports.

Our industry needs to be reminded of the good we do. Play a role in supporting our business by giving back to the kids who keep our respective flames lit.

Rick Burton is the executive director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center in the University of Oregon's Lundquist College of Business.

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