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Industry's work plan: Let the kids play

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My best childhood friend died the other day. His name was Mark and we grew up in Springfield, Mass., playing touch football in our street, basketball in his driveway and baseball down in an empty lot a few streets away. He couldn't skate, so I was the only one who played hockey down on the ponds.

That was back when parents kicked the kids out of the house after breakfast and said, "Don't come home until dinner." That was code for: play ball, don't break any windows and have someone else's mother feed you lunch.

Mark's widow told me her 47-year-old husband was hoping they could build a playground with his memorial funds. Neither of them were into flowers, she said.

How fitting, I thought. Even in death this guy wants to keep the kids outside. Keep them playing. Keep showing them what sport and physical fun can offer.

The problem he foresaw was this: In developed countries like America and Australia, children increasingly are being shrink-wrapped in protective bubble-wrap by their parents. Let no child skin his knee or hyperextend her elbow. Let no child invent rules to a traditional sport to fit the space and talent availability.

The reason for this enigma is less easily presented. As parents, we now regularly fear child molesters, kids at the playground on drugs, unsupervised play, plus all cuts, bruises or pain. We savor the opportunity to sue someone if we see blood. Our attitude seems to reflect the belief that if a child gets hurt playing sport, the city, the ball manufacturer, the coach, the sport association or the weatherman should have to pay.

So we compromise and sign our kids up for supervised soccer, T-ball and gymnastics. Everyone plays and we give out orange slices at halftime.

The problem as I see it, though, and I'm currently viewing the problem from Oz, is that no one's long-term agenda is about giving kids the freedom to experiment with sports. We've labeled obesity a national epidemic (and we'll combat it the way we fought smoking and the absence of seat belts) but no one is showing kids how to have unsupervised fun.

Do you remember Springfield's very own Dr. Seuss? He wrote "The Cat in the Hat." The cat tried to teach those two unsupervised housebound kids how to have fun that was funny. Our generation has supported a weird

notion that we should teach kids how to play overcoached sports with lots of supervised yelling. I doubt the cat would have been impressed.

And I'm not either.

Because what we need is youth sports centers where the parents drop kids off at a location knowing the child won't get snatched or assaulted. A place where kids can play pickup basketball, football or lacrosse. My idea would be to take the NBA's Reading Centers concept and throw in some jungle gyms.

And you know who should fund my crazy idea? All the corporate entities that sponsor pro sports. And all the sports properties that sell sponsorships. Why? Because we're funding pro sports at the expense of foundational cement. As the costs have gone up at the pro level, I wonder whether we've contributed to the diminishment of grassroot developments that we all talk about.

Many of you won't be able to take action on my concern or may not even care about the youth sport agenda. But if you do, a good place to start is to have your corporate affairs group send a check to the Mark Rourke Playground Fund, 37 Chestnut St., Springfield, MA 01103.

If 100 more kids in Massachusetts get outside and play, then you can rest assured you and your company made the future world a better place. If you want to start somewhere else, by all means do so. From my point of view, it's one of the ways we can all keep our industry vibrant in this new millennium.

Rick Burton is commissioner of the National Basketball League, a 12-team league with teams stretching from Auckland, New Zealand, to Perth, Australia.

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