

Travel Baseball and Burnout

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I'm the father of three boys, all who play or played baseball. My oldest is now in college, middle is in high school, and youngest is 11. Every step of the way, I've seen it: **Kids burn out.**

Burnout doesn't just happen to the kids who can't keep up. Burnout doesn't discriminate. It happens to the best players, too.

I've seen kids burn out as young as 10 all the way into high school. It's often a shock when it happens. You never expect "that kid" to quit.

Kids fall out of love with the game. It's no longer fun for them. It's no longer worth the time, energy, and effort that they put into it. They quit, and they never look back.

Why? What is it about travel ball that leads to burnout? And what can we do about it?

Why Do Kids Burn Out?

Even kids who get into the game because they have a passion for it can burn out. Let's cover a few of the reasons why...

1. Parental Pressure and Expectations. This is a big one. Dad is living vicariously through his child or wants his son to be as good as he was. Screams at and coaches his son from the stands. Difficult rides home. And if that parental pressure also comes as a coach? Increase the odds of burnout 10-fold.

2. Physical Exhaustion. This is one of the potential drawbacks of travel ball. Too many practices. Too many games. Private lessons and camps year-round. No downtime. Late nights and early mornings, often combined with school. It all adds up.

3. Specialization. Travel ball players don't have to be limited to baseball, but it is difficult to play other sports at a high level. And when you do, it makes for an insanely busy schedule that can become too much. If you do specialize, a kid can start to get sick of it if that's all they do.

4. Mental Fatigue. The expectations. The pressure. The competition. The drama. It can stop being a game for them.

5. Team Hopping. There are many reasons why this happens, and it's not always the fault of the child or parent. These things happen. But if you're joining a new group of kids every year, saying good-bye, and then trying to establish yourself with a new group, it can become overwhelming.

6. Abusive Coach. The coach can make an enormous impact on a child's love of the game. I see it as my responsibility to nurture a player's love for the game, not extinguish it.

7. No Longer Fun. A combination of the factors above all lead us here. It's a game, but it's just not fun anymore. So why keep doing it?

How Can Coaches Help Prevent Burnout?

The coach is one of the primary reasons why players burn out. So, what can we do to help prevent it?

1. Be Aware of the Schedule. There are times when there could be a practice or game every day of the week. It's getting hot. You sense the exhaustion. Take a day off. Make sure that kids get a break.

2. Keep it Fun. Find ways to make practice fun. Game-ify whenever possible. Make sure that big wins are fun, and not business as usual. Have team building events outside of games and practices.

3. Be Positive. This is an area where I've done my best to change and grow over the years. It's easy to focus on the negative. You will have time for that. But balance it out with positive, too. Don't assume everyone knows what was done well. Highlight it. Encourage it. Celebrate it.

4. Focus on Creating Memories. "Wasn't that awesome!? You'll remember that forever! You're going to tell your kids and grandkids about that" game or play or at bat. Help them appreciate the really good moments so that they'll remember them when times are tough. For years, I'd end pre-game pep talks (especially for big games) with "Let's create some memories!" Maybe I should revisit that.

5. It's Just Baseball. Sometimes, things don't go your way. When they give their all and lose a big game or it seems nothing is going right, remind them that it's just a game. It's not life or death. You'll be okay. The coaches may need this reminder, too!

6. Know Your Role in Burnout. You can assure a player will keep playing for years or you can be the reason they never play again. Notice when they are struggling, and help them keep their head up. Know when your tough love is becoming too much and is no longer effective. Create a bond when possible. Recognize each individual player's hard work and performance by name.

How Can Parents Help Prevent Burnout?

I'm not going to tell parents how to parent. All I can do is explain that we have a role in this. Kids burn out because of us, and that's not something I ever want to live with.

Take these things as friendly suggestions...

1. Don't Coach From the Stands. You mean well. But it adds unnecessary stress for your son. Cheer him on. Cheer him on loudly! He needs your support during the game, not instruction. Leave the instruction to coaches.

2. "I Love Watching You Play." We are quick to correct and criticize and coach. Sometimes, they only need to hear one thing.

3. The Ride Home. Make sure that you [read my post on this](#), but the ride home itself can ruin a kid's love for playing. Refrain from negativity about the game on the ride home. Talk about something else entirely. If you do talk about the game, let him guide the conversation. Ask what he learned. Ask what his favorite part was, or what he was proudest of. Do your best to keep it positive.

Your Turn

What is your experience with burnout and youth baseball? Any other suggestions on how we can help young players avoid it?

Let me know in the comments below!

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