



Losing our **LATE BLOOMERS**

*Today's youth sports system fails to recognize
that children develop at different rates*

By Michael Jones

Bob Bigelow is the kind of guy you would want on your side in a fight. A tall and imposing man with a booming, resonant voice, he gives you the feeling that he could handle himself in any kind of confrontation – verbal or physical. And that is just as well, since the former professional basketball player has taken on as big a battle as you could imagine within the context of sports.

In fact, for the better part of the last decade Bigelow has been waging his own personal war against sports itself, or at least organized youth sports. Since 1992, when his crusade began, he has delivered more than 400 speeches to parents, coaches and administrators about the dangers of the current youth sports system. He has spent years talking with experts and researching such issues as pediatric development, sports psychology, child psychology and any other subject that has anything remotely to do with how children play sports.

He has even co-authored a book on the subject called "Just Let the Kids Play — How To Stop Other Adults from Ruining Your Child's Fun and Success in Youth Sports." And through all this he has come to the conclusion that the organized youth sports system that has evolved in this country over the past 15 years, including the youth soccer system, needs to be dismantled. He believes it is damaging to children, encourages high drop-out rates among developing athletes and high burnout rates among gifted ones while leaving countless millions of children permanently turned off sports before they even reach their teen-age years.

At first glance, Bigelow would appear to be a product of the very system he seeks to dismantle. A star basketball player at Winchester High School in Massachusetts, he was named one of the country's top 50 high school players as a teen-ager.



Photo courtesy University of Pennsylvania Sports Information Office

Although he didn't take up basketball until the age of 14, Bob Bigelow developed quickly enough to become a star at the University of Pennsylvania and an NBA first-round draft choice. He wonders if the current youth sports system ignores the potential of late bloomers.

He later went on to play for Hall of Fame coach Chuck Daly at the University of Pennsylvania before becoming only the 12th Massachusetts player ever to be taken in the first round of the NBA draft. Not bad for a kid who had barely even picked up a basketball, and certainly never played organized hoops, before the age of 14.

And right there is the crux of Bigelow's current crusade. If he could make it to the NBA when he had never played organized sport before puberty, what possible benefit do today's child athletes get from playing organized youth sports at younger and younger ages? And he questions the motives of parent coaches and administrators who, though they claim to have the best interests of the children at heart, do not realize how much damage they are doing to aspiring child athletes.

"I never played any basketball at all before 14 years old," recalls the former pro, "yet I was in the NBA at 21. And I know children today in America who have played since second grade. They've

played thousands of hours, and not one of them will ever be better than me."

The point is made not out of arrogance, but to illustrate the futility of trying to treat child athletes like miniature pros. Bigelow divides his own sports career into two distinct parts: Up to eighth grade and ninth grade and beyond.

"Everything I had done prior to eighth grade was playgrounds, sand lots, back yards, with other kids and no adults," he remembers. "However, in ninth grade I started playing basketball. Up until that time there had been 12 first round NBA draft picks in the history of the state, and I was one of them. Yet I never played the game until I was in ninth grade. Less than eight years later I was the 13th pick in the country."



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His point is that, up until the time he took up basketball in ninth grade, there was nothing in his athletic endeavors to indicate that he might be a future pro. Yet today he sees thousands of parents and coaches in all sports trying to anoint the future stars in their respective leagues at too early an age.

“A child’s athletic ability prior to puberty is an absolutely meaningless indicator of a child’s athletic ability post puberty,” he explains. “What they are at 8 or 10 is generally not going to mean a thing about what they are at 14, 16 or 18. The whole process of puberty, which in girls and boys in this country can run from age 9 to 17, yields such a different body in so many kids who are even the same age.

“Think of this: two 13-year-old boys, same age, same date of birth. One has reached puberty, the other has not. The 13-year-old boy who has reached puberty quite possibly looks 16. Hair on the legs, hair on the chin, might even try shaving once in a while. The 13-year-old boy who hasn’t looks 10.

“Who is going to be the better athlete of those two boys? The 13-year-old boy who looks 16. Gross motor skills, testosterone, coordination. Ask yourself another question. Who’s going to be the better athlete of the two kids in two years, four years, six years, eight years, 10 years?”

Bigelow’s worry is that, with the youth sports system the way it is now, the 13-year-old boy who looks 10 will have long since given up sports before he even realizes what his athletic potential might have been. He explains:

“What ends up happening, and soccer is just as guilty of this as anything else, is the travel select elitism. Let’s carve out our best at younger and younger ages, because they can’t play in Sandwich any more. Let’s pick out our all stars and go play Harwich. That’s been the biggest change in organized youth sports in the last 15 years.

“So our better athletes, those late-bloomers, will never be identified. And the worst thing is that kids decide early, or their parents decide, ‘oh, you’re not going to be a soccer player’ because the systems are structured like this in fifth grade. And in all these communities, guess what? That fifth grade basketball travel team is going to be the future high school basketball players.”

Bigelow contends that the systems in youth sports have outrun pediatric common sense:

“To carve up 8- and 10-years-olds into A and B teams to me is reprehensible. Because what happens is, if you tell an 8-year-old and his or her parents, they’re on an A team, all of a sudden, the parents buy into this – ‘My kid’s an A.’ Now ask yourself a question. Once those kids make that initial A team, at whatever age that is, what are the chances of that kid not being an A for the rest of his community soccer life? Once an A, always an A. Once a B, always a B.

“Of course this is completely irrespective of how the kids change in bodies, skills, passions and all the other stuff. And I’ll tell you why it doesn’t change – because if you’re the A coach and next season or next year comes along, are you going to call the parents of last year’s A team and tell them that she’s no longer an A, she’s now on the B team? Who’s going to make that political call? And as soon as that phone call ends, do you think the parent is going to be on the phone to the age-group coordinator or the commissioner saying, ‘What,



you've demoted my child?'

"These A parents spend one season standing on the sidelines cheering for their darlings, then when it comes time to break up the team, they say, 'Oh our little darlings are playing so well together. They can't break them up. They're just getting good.'

"So in all these communities around the country, in soccer, basketball and all sports, the A's remain the A's. This is varsity high school syndrome. This is what's done at 15, 16, 17 and 18 years old. And now it is done in some places in this country to 7- to 10-year-olds."

The solution, Bigelow believes, is to break down the structures

and the cultures of organized youth sports. The travel teams in fourth grade, the cutting, the bench sitting of kids when they're 10. It is his belief that it is the cultures and the systems that drive the parental behavior. And it is not just the most negative, headline-grabbing hockey dad aspects of parental behavior that he is talking about. He is talking about ordinary folks, who think they are doing right by the children in their towns, who are actually doing far more harm than they realize.

"We've let it get into the hands of people who don't know better," he laments. "The people in these communities aren't dumb. They know that if little Johnnie or little Jill have got to get on that team, they'll push. They'll say, 'I'll sit on the board, I'll spend these hours so the agenda of my little boy or girl becomes paramount.' They understand the way the system works.

"But if you're a kid and don't have an advocate, a par-

ent who might be a normal person, who doesn't want to spend all his time in youth sports, you could be a marginalized kid very quickly in all these communities.

"What you have on your board are well-meaning people, mostly dads. Butchers, bakers, candlestick makers, truck drivers, lawyers and sales consultants. Where is their background in kids? What do they know about 4-year-olds, 6-year-olds, 8-year-olds and 10-year-olds, and how they act and how they react? I ask every board in every town I go to these questions: Do you have an elementary school Phys. Ed. teacher on your board? No one does. Why not? Do you have a pediatrician on your board? Why not? Do you have a child psychologist

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on your board? Why not?

"You purport to serve kids, yet you have no one on your board who knows kids. Better get one, folks. Get an advocate for the kids on your boards instead of wondering when you can start your third grade travel team."

And the problem, he contends, goes right to the very top of the U.S. Soccer hierarchy.

"You know the little 2010 thing, men are going to win the World Cup and all that fun stuff. They haven't got a snowball's chance in hell. And they think it's because we don't get city kids, black kids and Hispanic kids from the city playing soccer. You know what they're really missing? Late blooming boys.

"USSF wants to know who our best 12-year-olds are now because they think they're going to take those best sixth graders and turn them into our best 22-year-olds. What all these communities do is try to separate and isolate their young stars early, but it goes against the pediatric common sense of the way these kids grow.

"Some of these kids won't be able to show soccer talent until they're 17, 18, 19. The rule is that kids, especially boys, grow later. So what the hell are you doing trying to isolate, separate and anoint your future stars when they're too young to know if they'll ever be future stars?"

Bigelow cites the lengthening of the soccer season from what was essentially a fall activity to a year-round sport as the starting point for this particular problem.

"Before 1980 in this country," he recalls, "even before 1985, there was very little spring soccer. And this is where they went down the tubes. Instead of just spring soccer, it became travel/competitive soccer. It was no longer in town. It was 'Let's take our best and go play their best.' This was when the travel stuff all started. Well, that was the road to hell paved with good intentions.

"What happens is, yes, the kids get to play more soccer. But the longer the season, the more games, the more people take it too seriously.

"At that time, around the mid-'80s, it was U-14 minimum age. And you know what's happened since then? It's what I call soccer creep. U-14 became U-12, which became U-10, which became U-8, which became U-6. As I tell the soccer people all the time, 'You will be the first sport with pre-natal travel teams in this country.' They can't stop themselves."

To critics who contend that, in order to develop high level players, kids need to be playing frequently as well as against players of an equally high caliber, Bigelow insists that the benefits are minimal.

"Until puberty, it's meaningless," he says, "and I don't care how many soccer people think their game is great. If that kid's playing football, playing hockey or running around the yard playing tag, that kid's getting athletic. Just because they don't have a ball at the end of their foot, or they're not heading it, doesn't mean they're not developing.

"Now, will a kid who plays 300 days a year of soccer at age 10 be better than a kid who plays 20 days of soccer at age 10? Yes. But ask yourself a very important question: is the kid who's playing 300 days of soccer at age 10 going to like the freaking game when he's 14?