

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Time out: What's really best for kids in sports?

Just when I was writing a chirpy little column about tennis, a father was beating another father to death over some minor event in his child's sports game. Another news story on the heels of this one was about a fracas between two fathers, or a father and referee or coach, I don't remember, but one was badly injured.

I have to say I've always been bothered by parents involvement in their children's sports. Maybe it's because my parents didn't attend sporting events. I was a cheerleader for six years and I don't think they ever saw me perform. I didn't think anything about it. I remember being horrified at the fathers attending the Junior High games, where there weren't many spectators, who would yell at their sons and the coaches.

My father loved to play sports and taught me to ice skate, play tennis and golf. He stopped playing golf at age 89 but was an excellent player. He was one of those guys at Midland Country Club, (mid-way between Kewanee and Galva) who had to buy another club when a rule was passed that players must carry a minimum of six clubs. He played with a 1929 putter until the '90s. He could beat almost anybody with a big fancy bag full of clubs.

I learned to play with four clubs; a driver, two iron, five iron and putter. When it was time for a chip shot, my father showed me how to grip the 5 iron lower. You know the old joke, when lightening threatens the golf course, hold up your two iron, because not even God can hit a two iron.

My brother, who is 6'2," had no interest in competitive sports and was asked about every three days if he played basketball. In the 1950's, he was considered to be very tall. My father asked him to try just one year of basketball his freshman year. At the end of the year he gratefully excused himself from the competitive sports scene.

My oldest daughter was occasionally at the home of Mike Owens, whom I believe followed John Thiel as GHS basketball coach. She told me of several incidents of so-called "fans" calling their house and actually threatening coach Owens. In my book, those people need years of therapy, as well as a life.

It's becoming accepted that parents are

too much of a factor in their children's sporting events. One coach was even quoted as saying he didn't have a problem with children of single parents because the mothers are working full time and are too tired and busy to attend many games and the fathers aren't usually around.

My son played organized baseball, basketball and football. When he wanted to join Little League, as a single parent I did tell him I was glad he wanted to, but I thought baseball was really boring to watch and I didn't care to spend my free time at games. He rode his bike across town to practices at Lombard and to the games. Occasionally I would pick him up after dark, throwing the bike in the trunk. One day he said, "Mom, do you suppose you could come to tomorrow's game?"

"Sure, I said, what's going on?"

"We're in the world series and it's the championship game."

So I went to the game and my worst fears were realized. I found myself screaming right along with the other parents, whom I considered fanatics,

"We're number one!" The team won the series, but because the coach was not one of the favored few in the program, about a three line paragraph appeared in the paper. Now at the year-end picnic, when I got to play, that was another story.

So much pressure is put on parents and kids these days. We seem to forget that our job is to try to teach our children to be independent and wellrounded and prepared for life. They are not us. They need to do some things on their own and we shouldn't feel guilty if we don't go to every sports function. I hear parents and even grandparents complaining about their children's hectic sports programs in the summer. I sometimes ask, "then why do you do it?"

Are we really sure this is what the children want to do? Is this how parents and grandparents want to spend their "leisure" time — running from one sporting event to the other? Have we lost sight of why we should encourage our children to participate in the first place? (Have fun and learn to be part of a team.)

I wonder.