

# Little League Sports Big League Pressures

by Howard E. Wolin, M.D.

Another school year has begun, and once again the unfulfilled ambitions of countless parents are visited upon countless sons and daughters participating in organized sports.

Strong parental pressure is not just directed toward teenagers competing in high school sports. No matter what the sport or level of play, whether grade

school or summer recreational leagues or even college, there are parents who push their children too hard for too long toward unrealistic goals and an impossible state of "perfection."

It is a serious problem, however, because parents—particularly fathers, but also, increasingly, mothers who played competitive sports—push their children into athletic activities or pursuits which can prove injurious both psychologically and physically to them.

Many of us have chuckled at "Little League fathers," those men who seem to live vicariously through their sons' or daughters' exploits on the diamond. They've taken winning or losing far more seriously than their offspring, regarding victories as somehow emblematic of their "good genes" and considering losses beneath contempt, as affronts to their own self-esteem.

For many of them, of course, baseball is just a game that allows their children to compete and to learn how to be gracious victors and good losers.

For such parents, "good enough" becomes the watchword. As parents, they may not be the best or the worst, but they're certainly "good enough." So, too, can their child's best effort in a sport or other endeavor be just that — "good enough." They can enjoy their children's success, without unrealistic expectations for their children or themselves.

In such cases, the parent-as-cheerleader and child-as-athlete relationship can be positive and healthy, with the child developing, the parent sharing in the development through encouragement and support and the child deriving pleasure through competition, through his mastery of the sport and through any success he may enjoy.

Key to this kind of "good enough" outcome is that a child's aspirations for himself are strong, nurtured by his own wish to develop and his capacity to look to the parents for support. If the parents respond in kind, expecting a "best-possible" effort from the child but nothing more, then there can be a nice mesh, one that often results in successful athletes.