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Athletics & Academics

Debate continues over how to reach balance

By Mike Latona, Staff writer



It starts from the day a Little League coach takes a youngster under his wing and tells the boy he can be a great baseball player ... the boy enrolls in high school, and the coach there sees his potential. He wants the youngster to have the

opportunity to excel. Whether the coach realizes it or not, he starts directing the boy's life — telling him what classes to take, giving him a course of study that doesn't challenge him in the classroom or develop the disciplines of the mind that will best serve him in society.

The parents fall into the trap. They're happy their son is being taken care of. If he really is exceptional in athletics, the townspeople get involved, from the mayor on down. They treat him specially, to the point where he doesn't have a real perspective on life. Things are done for him. No one wants to spoil his chances to make it big ... and he goes willingly.

We do everything but educate him ... soon his entire outlook is distorted.

It can be devastating.

The above comments from current Stanford University Head Football Coach Bill Walsh, which ap-



peared in the May 19, 1980 issue of *Sports Illustrated* magazine, underscore a key paradox in the development of talented young athletes: although it's the youngsters who sprint for touchdowns, blast home runs and score goals, they frequently have little say in determining the limits of devotion to their sports.

Two recent magazine articles addressed Walsh's concerns:

- In the Aug. 10, 1992 issue of *Newsweek* magazine, a story entitled "Old Too Soon, Wise Too Late?" — which included a cover photo of 16-year-old Olympic gymnast Kim Zmeskal — debated how hard exceptional teenage athletes should be pushed.

- *People* magazine ran a feature in its Sept. 7, 1992 issue on 17-year-old tennis professional Mary Pierce. The article focused on the frequently domineering and outrageous behavior displayed by Pierce's father, who also serves as her coach.

While a relatively small percentage of athletes ever go through all the stages of Walsh's scenario, or possess the natural talent of Zmeskal or Pierce, the moral issues raised can be applied universally in the struggle to determine how large a role athletics

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