BOOK REVIEW

Game On: The All-American Race to Make Champions of Our Children

by Tom Farrey; New York, New York: ESPN Books, 2008; 383-pages, including notes and index.

Reviewed by Jay Coakley
University of Colorado

Sport books often appeal to fans with time on their hands along with a voyeuristic desire to hang out in locker rooms. Game On: The All-American Race to Make Champions of Our Children by ESPN’s Tom Farrey is not such a book.

Farrey has authored many feature stories for ESPN, but his investigative work in this project had special meaning for him as a parent. He did his homework by reading key research on youth sports, and used his resources worldwide to explore various ways of organizing youth sports and developing high level sport skills.

His goal was neither to spectacularize nor demonize youth sports. Instead, Farrey dug deeply into the experiences of young people, their parents, and their coaches to identify what’s right and wrong in today’s youth sports in the United States.

The chapters are presented as stories organized around children’s ages and the developmental issues that are faced at particular ages. When reading these stories, it becomes clear that Farrey used research to inform his provocative and insightful critique of the increasingly organized sports that involve so many young people today. In the process, he extends what we know, raises new questions, and presents a cogent analysis that will resonate with anyone who has invested time, money, and energy into youth sports, or plans to do so in the future.

Academic researchers have exerted only limited influence on the ways that youth sports are organized and played in the United States. Game On may change that by adding additional depth to popular discourse on sports in the lives of children. Farrey engages readers and raises critical issues without provoking defensiveness. He uses his investigative skills and ESPN’s status and reputation to garner interesting data, examples, and quotes from interviews with experts worldwide. He does not provide a recipe for transforming the physical condition and activities of our children, but his recommendations will inspire parents, teachers, youth coaches, and program administrators to think more critically about youth sports and what they could and should be in the United States.

Relatively early in the book, Farrey introduces LTAD—the Long-Term Athlete Development model that was initially described by Dr. Istvan Balyi, a Hungarian sport scientist who has worked in Canada since 1974. The point of LTAD is that those who achieve excellence in sport have generally grown up in contexts where physical activities were consistently in sync with their stage of psycho-social development. Farrey notes that
all successful athletes work remarkably hard, but they do so because they have a deep passion for sport. The seeds of that passion usually are planted and nurtured during childhood in contexts where children have the opportunity, freedom, and support to explore many activities and play whatever is fun for them. As Farrey explains, “Kids must be allowed to play before they can be expected to play hard,” which is a prerequisite for success (p. 98).

Farrey also notes that this passion seldom originates in highly structured, adult-controlled activities that involve early specialization and commitments to long-term achievement goals. Nor is it nurtured by pep talks about hard work and repeated lectures on the need to concentrate, practice, and be serious. Instead, passion grows out of experiences characterized by play, personal expression, and joy. As it grows, young people create, on their own terms, a foundation for emotionally connecting with a sport, claiming it as their own, and then choosing to develop the skills that enable them to continually alter and expand their sport experiences in ways that preserve “ownership” and excitement.

As Farrey talked with people who have consistently developed excellent athletes, he found that the process of developing passion occurs before and through the early teens, so that young people in their mid-teens are ready to specialize in and make commitments to developing their talent in a particular sport. At this point, passion is merged with specialized practice and skill development that leads to pride and personal satisfaction.

During the late-teens and early adulthood, it is this passion that sustains mastery an emerging quest to become an elite performer. Simply being competent is no longer good enough; the goal is to become one of the best. By this time, identity is firmly grounded in one’s talent. Intensive and deliberate practice guided by expert coaches or mentors leads to the internalization of skills and the formation of an “inner coach,” which is a source of critical self-assessments along with strategies for self-improvement. The lines between joy, creativity, and work are blurred so that pleasure is tied to mastering techniques, combining them in creative ways, and meeting high self-expectations. Motivation continues to be primarily intrinsic, even though participation in the activity has become serious and highly focused.

What makes Farrey’s book so engaging is that he explains these things by identifying them in the lives of young people as they interact with their families and friends and participate in sport programs. In the process he enables readers to connect the sport participation of young people to important developmental processes and to issues related to high school and college sports. His discussion of athletic scholarships will have a dramatic impact on many parents and coaches, and enable them to put scholarships in a realistic perspective as they mentor and advocate for young people.

The shortcomings of Game On are few, but they are important to mention. Farrey focuses too much on “elite suburban sports” with their travel teams and high intensity schedules and tournaments, and says little about “recreational” youth sports that leave room for freedom, spontaneity, and joy in physical activities. Farrey also overlooks the impact of the US media, such as ESPN, in promoting and reproducing a sport culture that has
little to do with overall development other than to give it lip service. These are, however, far from fatal flaws in a book that should be read by parents and all coaches who work with young people through high school.