It’s All for the Kids: Gender, Families, and Youth Sports
Michael Messner

Reviewed by Jennifer VanSickle, University of Indianapolis

If you want to understand why there are few women in head coaching and administrative positions in American youth sports, then read It’s All For the Kids: Gender, Families, and Youth Sports by Michael A. Messner. Through a series of parent and volunteer interviews and his own personal observations of youth soccer and Little League baseball and softball programs in one California town, Messner explains how youth sport organizations channel women into the role of team mom, exclude them from head coaching positions, limit them to coaching only the youngest athletes, and shut them out of organizational decision-making positions. Additionally Messner shows how the cultural values of this particular community not only keep women in these roles but also engrain these values into the participants of this youth league thus perpetuating a gender inequality belief system that builds barriers to change.

In the book Messner explains that, although youth sport coaches are “volunteers”, women essentially are not given a choice as to which role they want to fulfill. Women are encouraged to be “team moms” while men are recruited as head and assistant coaches. In their own words, women describe how this process occurs:

“I always wanted to help out. I loved the sport, so anything I could do to help out [my son’s] baseball, I was more than willing. The first year, when he was in kindergarten, he was on the t-ball team and I volunteered to be manager, and of course the league did not choose me, but they did allow me to be assistant coach. And I was so excited, and of course I showed up in heels for the first practice because it was right after work, and the coach looked at me and I informed him that, “I’m your new assistant.” And he looked at me-and he went out of his way to ask parents who were there watching their children if there was anyone who wanted to volunteer, even though I was there. So there was this male who did kind of rise to the occasion, and so that was the end. He demoted me without informing me of his decision- I was really enthused, because my son was in kindergarten, so I really wanted to be coach-or an assistant coach at least- and it didn’t happen. So after that I didn’t feel comfortable to volunteer to coach. I just thought, okay, then I can do team mom” (p.35, 36).

It’s All For the Kids also details the plight of women who persist through the “covert exclusionary practices” which intimidate and marginalize them and do coach their sons or daughters (p. 52). In this case these women face high levels of scrutiny, especially from players’ fathers, umpires/referees, and other coaches, find that their authority is constantly challenged, experience subtle forms of sexual harassment, and are locked out of the good old boy network that is the primary decision-making body for the league. Joan relates:
I remember I called up one family - you have to call them first and contact them - and the dad says, “So what are your qualifications?” You know? “Oh! Um I played one year in college.” ..Actually in three years I coached [my son], [there was] another...he would question things I would do even though I don’t think he knew anything about soccer. Like, if I ran a drill, he'd say “Are you sure that’s in the drill book? “ or “Is that a real drill?” (p.69)

Additionally, Messner says, when people think coach they automatically think man, a simplistic indicator of the obstacles faced by the women of this youth league program. Interestingly, these and other barriers reported by the women in this book are reminiscent of the same struggles faced by women all over the United States after the passage of Title IX as they sought to break into the coaching ranks at the high school and college level.

While It's All For the Kids also discusses the types of knowledge that both male and female coaches bring to the table, how they use that knowledge in coaching situations, and how the levels of play dictate the style of coaching that male coaches employ, the strength of the book lies in its ability to draw the reader into asking three important questions: First, how does marginalization of women in youth sport happen in today’s society? Second, what inequities are produced as a result of this process? And third, what effect does this marginalization have in reinforcing sex-stereotyping in children? Messner readily admits that his experiences in writing this book caused him to see different things, ask new questions, and become desensitized to the reoccurring marginalization of women and a few men in this youth sports program. Because of this, this reviewer recommends It's All For the Kids, especially to males and females born in the 1980's and 1990's who have grown up in a post Title IX world. Those who do read it may find themselves asking the same questions.