

Happiness isn't guaranteed - get used to it

What's wrong with America? I'll tell ya what's wrong with America ... my kid's on the bench.

Well, not so much that he's on the bench but the attitude that it's a serious problem bordering on catastrophe if he is. It's not exclusive to the hardcourts of northern Michigan. It's a malady that seems to be sweeping across the country. To sum it up and cut to the chase it's all about the minutes.

Perhaps this entire playing time dilemma started with my generation. Ours was a demographic inhabited by latent and hedonistic dreamers who cried for peace, love and understanding and were out to change the world. Most of us gave up and turned the process inward thinking that if we treated ourselves well and manufactured better self-concepts the world would in turn, treat us better. The "we" generation quickly and without much discussion became the "me" generation. Along with it came an innate sense of entitlement. Thank you, Dr. Spock.

Now, as the spontaneity and joy of youth is replaced with the paperwork

of legal liabilities, lock-stepped organizational protocol, butt-covering due process, and the tip-toeing of politically correct conformity we somehow think our kids deserve more than they get. It's as if there is a code written somewhere that says your child will not only make the team, he will get the opportunity to play and this is how much he will play. We even give them ribbons, medals and other assorted awards celebrating ... well, I'm not sure what we're celebrating. Mediocrity? No one should get an award for being a C student. Perhaps outstanding effort is what we should look for but shouldn't we expect that? Shouldn't we reassure them instead and tell them it's great to be the star, get the adulation and attention but you can contribute in other ways. You don't need a certificate or a ribbon. I'm afraid it's become a public relations triad between the kids, the parents and the schools. As long as everybody's happy, everything is all right. We've become delusional. Believe me, there are no guarantees. Get used to it.

The world is a tough and often cruel place that chews up some and spits out the rest. No one goes unscathed. It would be a mistake to enable a child saying, "you got cheated" just because she didn't get the playing time you thought she deserved. Deep down most adults know it doesn't work that way but being protective is a natural instinct. We will teach our kids something but it's not necessarily the right thing. A child will grow up thinking you will always be there in his stead, making their decisions and paving their path. What a disservice that would be. It's a sad fact that most growth is precipitated by pain. Love and comfort are a resting place. Disappointment and discomfort are great motivators. Don't worry. At this stage of the game most of it's benign.

The limelight is a desirable albeit questionable commodity. The minutes you play in a game, the touches you get from the offense, the calls you get from the coach and cheers you get from the crowd; it's all very vaporous and is good for maybe a few goose bumps and, take it from me, a few dusty memories. As we move up the food chain team participation becomes less about recreation and more about the hard

lessons for life. But let's back track for a moment. A kid doesn't get in a game and no matter if his team wins or loses he doesn't feel a part of it. That's his ego and that is something to be quickly and sharply dismissed. You tell him team effort is not just the players on the floor. You tell him that working in preparation for the game is as important as the game itself. If he is relegated to the bench he has to, number one, be supportive of the team in spirit and in voice and, number two, if he doesn't like the bench, figure out how to get off it. Those are the two lessons parents should relay to their child. It's not tough love .. it's real love.

Sure, you will share some of the hurt and disappointment but kids are more resilient than we give them credit for. Most of the time it's our disappointment that sets them off and they often know the pecking order better than we do.

Maybe that's what's wrong with America. As a nation we are so blessed and more fortunate than the rest of the world we take the good things for granted. Consequently, we tend to think we all deserve more than we get. And when we don't get what we think is fair it's easy to ignore the common good for what we, as individuals, want.

I had to ask my dad what it was like driving to East Lansing for every home game my sophomore year in college knowing that the chances of me getting in the game were pretty slim. His candor really didn't surprise me.

"Well, don't take it wrong, son. I liked to see you play but first and foremost I was there for the team."

Wise words from the greatest generation.