

# Parents Ruin Sports for Their Kids by Obsessing About Winning

[Lisa Endlich Heffernan](#) Oct 10 2013, 10:46 AM ET

Every sports cliché you can think of, I have uttered: teamwork, respect for the coach, being part of something bigger than yourself, and practice making perfect. But as I look back over a decade and a half watching my sons play sports, I have to confess the dirty truth: I wanted to win. I worked hard, I spent hours in preparation and I wanted to win. I had organized snacks and brought drinks. I scrubbed uniforms and cleats. I drove for miles, arrived an hour early, stood in freezing temperatures, forsaken anything else I might have done with my day. I did not want to return home without a win.

The aching desire to win can be seen on the sidelines of competitions even among the youngest participants. Parents pace the sidelines, twitching at every kick or pitch or shot of the ball, shouting exhortations at their children and the team. I have watched parents cover their eyes, unable to watch, such is the stress they feel. In many cases it becomes clear that it is the parents who want to win. Parents want the dopamine thrill of winning, the heady rush that adults feel with success. Winning, even for spectators (and the research was done only on males), [gives a testosterone surge](#), and losing actually lowers hormone levels. As parents we so identify with our kids that their success quickly becomes our own. As spectators, parents seek confirmation even at the earliest stages that great athletic possibilities exist for their child: a better team, starting spot, varsity experience or college scholarship.

Soccer has kept my family close. Long car trips, weekends away, and a subject of shared interest that does not involve me mentioning the words “homework,” “study,” or “college” has drawn us together. But it is all too easy, after a miserable, long drive, bumper to bumper down the New Jersey and then Pennsylvania turnpikes in foul winter weather, to forget why I have my kids play sports and just think, *They have got to win this game*. It starts so innocently, asking my child, “How is the team training? How good are these teams you are up against this weekend? Have you played them before and did you win? Do you think you guys can win this weekend?” No fake casual tone can hide the message: *I have driven across three states in wretched conditions and am now going to spend a weekend in a noisy hotel looking out over a highway or perhaps the garbage dumpsters, so you better make this worth my while*. No kid needs this pressure. Their coaches want to win, and their teammates want to win. Knowing that they could let down their parents is counterproductive.

