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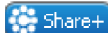
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Former NBA player tells parents to keep the fun in sports

By Colin Gustafson, STAFF WRITER

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Former NBA first-round pick Bob Bigelow has a blunt message for overzealous parents and coaches of youth sports who scream commands at their 10-year-olds during games.

"Shut up!" Bigelow hollered. "You're talking too much. Way too much!"

Bigelow isn't being mean. He's just trying to make a point: Shouting at your kid during a game will not help them develop athletically. They need to learn from their own mistakes on the field, not from the cacophony of voices on the sidelines.

"Ask yourself: Why the hell are you saying this? What

good is it doing? What are you adding to the process?" he told parents. "Most of what you say is absolutely freaking worthless."

Those were some of his frank words of advice for about 30 Greenwich parents and youth coaches during a more than hour-long lecture Tuesday night at the Greenwich Civic Center.

The author of the 2001 book, "Just Let the Kids Play," Bigelow, 56, was a first-round pick of the Kansas City Kings in 1975 after playing at the University of Pennsylvania. The 6-foot-7 athlete played for four years in the NBA, including a 10-day stint with the Boston Celtics, before leaving and earning a business degree at Babson College.

Bigelow said parents and coaches put too much pressure on young athletes, often expecting them to perform at a level beyond their natural capability.

He pointed to his own experience in struggling to teach fourth-grade boys how to "pick and roll" -- a maneuver that may seem fundamental to most adults but can be too advanced for 10-year-olds still learning basic ball-handling.

"I realized I had tried to teach them a bunch of skills that they could not possibly ever learn" at their age, he recalled. "I would have had an easier time with Swahili and trigonometry than to try to run the pick and roll."

When parents voice frustration about how their kids are performing, it takes the fun out of the game for the kids. That defeats the purpose of youth athletics, Bigelow said. "Kids play sports to have fun -- by their definition, not yours," he told the parents.

Parents, on the other hand, are overly focused on winning and losing, even though these concepts don't resonate with the youngest athletes, he said.

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Another problem is when parents reward athletes who have succeeded at an early age because they have matured early. The truth is that athletic ability at age 10 is rarely a reliable predictor of ability at age 17 and beyond, so talent should be fostered over the long term, Bigelow said.

Michael Jordan, after all, was cut from his varsity basketball team when he first tried out as a 5-foot, 9-inch sophomore, he noted.

"The absolute biggest crock and myth in youth sports is (that) younger, younger, younger, means better, better, better."

Greenwich father Kirk Schubert, who attended the lecture, agreed that it's important to foster athletic talent by putting fun first.

"The important thing is trying to keep your kids on the field playing because they want to play," Schubert said.

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