



A MANIFESTO FOR THE REINTRODUCTION OF COMPETITION IN SCHOOLS

● BRING BACK COMPETITIVE MATCHES AND RACES

Inter- and intra-school competition has dwindled dramatically. This is a loss for children, who thrive from the thrill of the race or match. The school sports day has been the most obvious casualty, with many schools replacing individual races with group games.

We should bring back sports days with meaningful, traditional sports, and end meaningless team 'participation games' involving parachutes or sponges. Let's have a race and take pride in the best runners, jumpers and throwers. Let's reward children and bring back prize-giving, certificates and trophies. We should make it a mission to help fund and maintain weekly competitions within and between schools.

●● STOP PUSHING AWAY PARENTS

Sports policy now often demonises the 'pushy parent' on the touchline. Some children's football leagues have even roped off areas to keep parents away from the game, or banned the publishing of league table results.

Parents should be free to enjoy their child's sporting success and pursue it in any way they see fit.

Parents should not be seen as a problem but as positive contributors to children's competition – just look at Raphael Nadal, the Williams' sisters, or other tennis stars coached by a parent or uncle. Allow parents to drive both their own and other children to events and let them sing, scream and shout from the sidelines to their hearts' content.

●●● PLAY SPORT FOR SPORT'S SAKE – NOT FOR 'HEALTH'

A recent government initiative introduced pedometers into schools, trying to encourage children to keep fit by counting their steps. This is the latest in a long line of sport-for-health initiatives, aiming not to play a game for its own sake but to reduce childhood obesity or achieve some other health aim. It is becoming commonplace to only allow sports programmes into schools if they are attached to a healthy-eating scheme or some other health-awareness programme.

Wherever this is done sport becomes bland repetition that does not engage children in any way. Ironically, the fitness levels that children obtain when 'playing for health' are no replacement for the exercise involved in vigorous competitive sports. Sport is a good in itself; by making health the end goal it is robbed of its competitive heart. Competitive sports do far more for children than weight-watching and pedometers.

●●●● REINVIGORATE COMMUNITY SPORT BY ROLLING BACK 'CHILD PROTECTION' BUREAUCRACY

Under the guise of 'child protection', many of the factors essential to the flourishing of children's sports have been restricted. From restrictions on adults driving children to competitions, to the 'no touch' policy in coaching delivery, adults today are put off from becoming involved in community sport.

The indiscriminate introduction of vetting adult coaches has meant that the crucial body of volunteers has dwindled dramatically.

Compulsory vetting of adults who work with children should be abolished. All existing child protection policies should be challenged and abolished where it is found they place needless restrictions on children's sporting events. The day-to-day running of children's sport should be placed in the hands of coaches, teachers and volunteers, and not be determined by outside agencies such as the Child Protection in Sport Unit. Any new policies relating to child protection should be questioned vigorously before they are imposed.

●●●●● 'SELF ESTEEM' IS NOT THE END OF SPORT

The most pernicious factor in the removal of competition has been the supposed threat of 'lowering children's self-esteem'. Raising self-esteem is becoming the therapeutic goal of children's sporting education, and many schools are now introducing co-operative games so there are no real losers, manufacturing results to ensure all children get recognition. It is seen as a good thing that children are shielded from anything that may invoke a sense of failure.

Competitive sport can temporarily lower self-esteem if you lose and raise it if you win. But let it be known that a temporary loss of self-esteem will not cause permanent damage to children. We should challenge the notion of 'inclusivity' whenever it is used to tamper with competitive sports. We need to let the kids get on with the match, and learn to deal with success and failure and treat those two impostors just the same.