



Kids' sports, it's only a game...or is it?

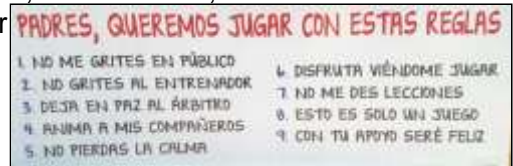
The most popular sport in the world, Venezuela included, is "futbol". That's what soccer is called everywhere except in the United States. What the Vikings down through peewees play in Minnesota is called "futbol americano", a game rather incomprehensible to most Venezuelans who think it looks more like team wrestling.

There are some amazingly huge soccer arenas in the world, the largest being Rungrado Stadium in North Korea which boasts a seating capacity of 150,000...a bit more than double the 73,000 capacity of U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis. Just across the Caroni River from our parish, Polideportivo Cachamay seats 41,600 making it the third largest stadium in Venezuela. A number of other stadiums dot the landscape of our city, but lack of sponsorship due to Venezuela's faltering economy dealt a major blow to organized youth sports, and the coronavirus restrictions put whatever leagues and tournaments that remained on hold.

That doesn't mean no soccer, however. There are matches every evening in outdoor courts and neighborhood streets around our parish, "pick up" games as we used to call them when I was growing up in Minneapolis. No adults needed. Kids organize themselves, choosing up teams from whoever happens to be around. They don't need much in the way of equipment. A few courts have nets, but, on the street, a milk crate or pair of shoes will do just fine and are easier to move out of the way for passing cars. If your soccer ball is a bit flat as many are, that's fine, too. It's easier to retrieve an underinflated ball than one that goes bouncing way down the street. In the hundreds of street games I've seen, I've never seen kids fighting or getting into loud arguments. Left to organize the game themselves, kids can learn more about life than just how to play soccer.

There's a court next to our church, illumined sufficiently by lights from the church for kids to play at night. To fill the void of organized sports, a fellow from the neighborhood took it on himself to train a group of neighborhood kids. I don't know when they'll get to play against other teams, but it's impressive to watch their practices. The coach really pushes them, and, at the end of each practice, brings them together in a huddle for 5 or 10 minutes. I eavesdropped one evening. He had their complete attention, talking not just about the finer points of soccer but about teamwork, discipline, values, and mutual support on and off the court. He ended with a prayer. I reflected back on how my high school basketball coach, Fr. Dick Roedel, had influenced my life in much more ways than basketball. What a great blessing for kids to have such role models in their coaches.

Speaking of the role of adults in kids sports, I was out walking the grounds of a private club where the priests of our diocese were having a day of reflection with Bishop Helizandro. There was a huge swimming pool with slides and fountains, floral gardens, picnic areas shaded by tall palm trees, tennis courts, baseball and soccer fields, a boat launch with 20 or 30 of the biggest speed boats I have ever



seen. It was obviously a different side of Venezuelan life than what we see in our parish! What caught my attention most, however, was a sign at a bocce ball court. I later discovered that a similar sign is posted at many a kids' sports facility in Latin America. Maybe you have similar signs in Minnesota. If not, it would make a good addition. It reads: **Dear parents, we want to play with these rules:** 1. Don't shout at me in public 2. Don't shout at the coach 3. Leave the referee in peace 4. Encourage my teammates 5. Don't lose your cool 6. Enjoy watching me play 7. Don't lecture me 8. This is only a game 9. With your help I will be happy

There are a lot of life lessons to be learned from sports. In addition to athletic skills, kids learn to challenge themselves to achieve their goals, develop the discipline to work toward those goals, learn the value of working together as a team with respect for one another, and not to quit if you don't win every time. Such lessons are far more important and enduring than the game itself. By keeping that in perspective and observing those nine simple rules, coaches and parents can serve as great role models in what makes sports more than a game.

Points to ponder

What sports have you played where people organized themselves or as team sports with coaches? What have you learned or enjoyed from being part of a team (sports, work, music groups, etc.)?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org or 651-368-7324.