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Athletes, parents an exuberant duo

By Randolph L. Tom

IT JUST SEEMED like yesterday that the LMYA soccer season ended and the attending celebratory award ceremonies took place to the joys of the hard-working participants and to the delight of the shivering, but devoted, parents on the side-lines.

But, no sooner had I finished my Ricola drops to ease my hoarseness, have I been enticed once again to allow my son to participate in the sport of all New Yorkers: basketball. Growing up in Manhattan does not really lend itself to swimming, tennis or golf; golf is not existent in Manhattan and the other two sports are limited in general to private clubs.

In contrast, however, basketball remains fairly simple with only a nine-foot basketball hoop, whether made out of net or wood, and a regulation ball needed to gather up a group of folks to play three on three.

Unfortunately, these boyhood activities of my past have fallen from neighborhood pick-up games to the more organized leagues that are well-represented in this area of Chris-Mullin-disciples. Chris, a graduate of St. John's University and a native New Yorker, if ever there was one, was recently spotted at one of the practices at Diablo Valley College.

Suffice to say, many of the young folks only knew of Chris' prowess as the general manager who brought Baron Davis to the Bay Area, as opposed to us oldies who remember him for his deadly jump shot. In any event, the basketball activities in Lamorinda are extensively organized. In certain instances, first teams are initially selected after careful evaluation to play in the MVP Flight League.

Their season recently ended in preparation for the more elaborate CYO league where there are seemingly an infinite number of teams that my fourth-graders are constantly battling. In fact, the jerseys worn by the players on St. Monica's, my son's team, and the other teams are quite impressive. Anyway, my best guess is that there are at least a couple of hundred boys and girls competing in this wonderful league, who are more than willing to get up as early as 8 a.m. on a Saturday. As you might suspect, parents who make it to these games are somewhat frantic, but dedicated.

Right now, our team appears to have a winning record and is coached by a group of athletic dads who lend their expertise, enthusiasm and valuable time to helping the boys learn the fundamentals of the game and conduct becoming of a student athlete.

Nevertheless, come game time, even at the tender age of nine, there are some brutal battles under the boards for those rebounds. Interestingly, my better half and I find ourselves exhausted after each game and astonished at our inability to control ourselves by not embarrassing our shooting guard son with inane, yet encouraging, phrases of "Get him! Get him!" As my wife explained it to another teammate's mom, we spend most of the years telling our sons to play nicely, only to tell them to grab that loose ball with a vengeance from their opponents.

The games are generally highly competitive and are always much fun for the parents, whether one wins or loses. A good time is had by the players and coaches, as well, but their pleasures are tied more distinctly to a winning score on their side. Most importantly, the teams offer a great chance for community bonding as you meet new parents and hear stories, good and bad, about their children's current or prior plights of athletic grandeur.

It is also a rare opportunity for parents and kids to meet a more diverse group of individuals that represents a more heterogeneous society. The league championships are scheduled to occur in February and we are hopeful that our team will continue its winning plays and secure a spot as one of the playoff contenders.

While the temperature continues to fall below the uncomfortable mark and the days grow shorter, I suspect that I will need to buy a high-powered flashlight and earmuffs in order to continue guarding my son through his Jerry West drills. While I used to win those matches in the past, I expect that I will lose more frequently in the days ahead.

Thankfully, his and his mates' skills will be much improved in a multitude of ways as they listen to their coaches and contend with increased league competition. In this instance, getting older has its benefits, as I delight in his improvement and live vicariously through his drives to the basket. Ultimately, all the players learn the importance of teamwork, competition and good sportsmanship.

For those interested in seeing some fine hoops, the St. Monica team has received an invitation to play during half-time on Jan. 26 at a Cal vs. Washington game. Get your tickets early so you can root for your favorite team.

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